



Checking in on Modernization and Reforms in the People's Liberation Army

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Nearly a decade ago, in a study guide of his collected writings for the military, Chinese leader XI Jinping asserted the crucial need for a quality military force from the “grassroots” up: “Without grassroots officers and soldiers, no matter how grand the strategy, it cannot be realized, and no matter how advanced the weapons and equipment, they are useless.”¹ After nine years of corruption purges, modernization initiatives, and substantial reforms, Xi and China’s military leaders remain concerned. Significant portions of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and cross-military and local (civilian) efforts are not moving fast enough, or in the right direction. In less than three years, Xi expects his military to be capable of forcefully annexing Taiwan and to successfully deter, if not, defeat, the U.S. military and its allies. The progress of reforms and modernizations is, however, insufficient, according to PLA senior leadership.

On August 9, 2024, eight days after the 97th anniversary of the founding of the PLA, the highest-ranking uniformed officer in the PLA and senior Vice-Chairman of the PLA Central Military Commission (CMC), General Zhang Youxia (张又侠), published an essay in the state-run *People’s Daily* urging the PLA to deepen its commitment to military reform.^{i,2} The timing was likely not a coincidence. The article came just three years before the August 2027 deadline to be able to successfully annex Taiwan and nearly one year before the end of the 14th Five-year Plan (14th FYP).

Zhang’s essay also came on the heels of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Congress’ Third Plenum,ⁱⁱ which ran from July 15-18, 2024 and adopted the *Decision of the CCP Central*

ⁱ Zhang’s essay appeared on Page 6 of the state media outlet, People’s Daily. There is no known significance of Page 6, which like Pages 1-4 and 7 were all tagged as the “front-page story” sections of the paper for that day. Page 5 was marked “commentary.”

ⁱⁱ The CCP convenes a major congress twice a decade (approximately every five years), during which the members of the Central Committee are elected. The Central Committee is the largest of the CCP’s top decision-making bodies. During the October 2022 congress, the current, 20th Central Committee was chosen. In the five years between congresses, the Central Committee convenes seven plenums attended by all current and alternate members (at this time, 205 and 107 respectively). The first, second and seventh plenums typically focus on continuity and the

Committee on Further Comprehensively Deepening Reform and Promoting Chinese-Style Modernization (aka *the Decision*).³ Although the Third Plenum historically focuses on social and economic policy, Zhang’s article means the *Decision* should also be seen as a programmatic document of the PLA.

Zhang cites numerous areas requiring further improvement to meet modernization and reform goals, including leadership, “cross-military and local government work” (跨军地工作), and the ability to conduct both joint operations and information domain operations to enable joint operations. Zhang’s call for urgency in taking on Xi Jinping’s goals for military modernization firmly suggests he is concerned reforms are not proceeding at the desired pace or may veer from President Xi’s original intentions and that the PLA still has much work to do before achieving its goals.

PLA Goals

Zhang’s essay stands at the confluence of China’s military history, major national policy revisions, and a fast-approaching terminus date for completing these significant military reforms. In its 14th FYP the CCP set for the PLA a timeline of modernization goals out to 2049 (see Figure 1). In 2021, the CCP established the “2027 centenary goal of the People’s Liberation Army” (*2027 Goal*), a series of objectives to be met by the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PLA on August 1, 2027.⁴ The *2027 Goal* is the first step in Xi’s “*Three-Step*” *Strategy for Modernization* that also includes achieving national defense modernization by 2035 and developing a “world-class military” by 2049.⁵

<i>The 2027 Goals</i>	<i>"Three-Step" Strategy for Modernization</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ Accelerate integrated development of mechanization, informationization, and intelligence. ★ Accelerate military theory, organization, personnel, and weapons and equipment modernization. ★ Insist on quality first and efficiency foremost. ★ Promote the simultaneous growth of national defense strength and economic strength. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ★ The <i>2027 Goal</i>, and; ★ By 2035, basically realize the modernization of national defense and the army; and, ★ By the middle of the 21st century, comprehensively modernize China’s national defense and army into a “world-class military.”

Figure 1. Stated Modernization Goals for the PLA

transition of power between Central Committees. Party ideology is the focus of the fourth and sixth plenums. Since the late 70s, the third plenum has typically focused on long-term social and economic policy and reforms. Finally, the fifth plenum typically focuses on China’s five-year development plans, which covers all aspects of society, defense, finance, technology, governance, etc. The current five-year plan ends in December 2025.

The PLA is making steady but uneven progress toward military modernization benchmarks that align with the *2027 Goal*.⁶ These modernizations are advancing the types of military capabilities China would require to seize Taiwan by force and deter or defeat third-party intervention by the U.S. military and its allies. To its credit, the PLA has made significant improvements, particularly in its force structure, and to a lesser degree and with less consistency in readiness, and training.⁷ It also continues to improve critical areas to achieve its combat objectives, such as mobile bridge vessels and other amphibious assault technologies, modernizing key ground forces, fielding new and diverse missile systems, and advanced electronic warfare capabilities.⁸

These developments are happening as China exerts increasingly persistent pressure on Taiwan, intensifying the scope, size, and pace of operations around Taiwan.⁹ Such operations have included two named cross-Strait campaign exercises, Joint Sword-2024A in May and Joint Sword-2024B in October, which were followed up by an unnamed exercise in mid-March 2025 proceeded quickly by a surprise large-scale exercise on April 1, 2025, dubbed Strait Thunder-2025A by the PLA.¹⁰ The inclusion of “A” in the April exercise name implies that future “B” or “C” iterations are possible if not probable this year. All of these activities seek to normalize the chronic presence of the PLA and its activities in and around the Taiwan Strait.



Figure 2. Images above were posted by the China Coast Guard (CCG) on its Weibo account around October 14, 2024 depicting the CCG’s participation and circumnavigation of Taiwan during Joint Sword-2024B.^{iii,11}

ⁱⁱⁱ The image on the left shows the CCG’s patrol route as a heart, with the words “Shanghai Sweetheart” (海派甜心) on the left and “Cruise in the shape of love for you” (巡航都是爱你的形状). The image on the right shows a heavily altered image of two CCG patrol vessels flanking Taiwan with the words “One super good-looking, super big [boat]” on the top left and underneath that is written “10,000-tonnage that’s also super speed.” The vessel on the bottom, CCG 2901, is one of China’s two Zhaotou-class vessels which are the largest coast guard vessels in the world, dwarfing even the U.S. Navy’s Arleigh Berkley-class destroyer. Note also the use of the long-form characters and younger Taiwan / Hong Kong slang with the use of 派. Hi-res images can be found here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20250428173511/https://imgcdn.scol.com.cn/media/2024/10/14/162832194637.jpg>; and here:

Running Out of Time?

Zhang appears concerned the PLA has not moved quickly enough to meet the *2027 Goal* and warns of dire consequences. According to Zhang, the 14th FYP, which ends on December 31, 2025, has entered a “critical period.”¹² Zhang writes, “[if we] seize the opportunity, we will be able to seize the initiative, but if we fail to seize it, we may fall into passivity and miss an entire era.”¹³ Zhang appears to understand China’s situation as follows: in this era of Great Power Competition, a term invoked often in China, efforts may have diminishing returns, advantages go away, and the PLA risks sacrificing China’s opportunities to determine its long-term future. To that end, Zhang states the PLA “must seize the strategic commanding heights of international military competition.”¹⁴

Zhang wants to better position the PLA to achieve established goals on schedule. He wants a high-quality, high-efficiency, cost-effective, and sustainable path of military development. Furthermore, he wants modern management concepts and improved systems and effective coordination across all aspects of China’s national security apparatus. Zhang writes, however, that the PLA continues to struggle with numerous challenges that threaten modernization goals. These include systemic obstructions across organizational and materiel systems, a rudderless focus on jointness, slow progress improving training and readiness, ineffective military governance, inefficient resource management, slow onboarding of new weapons, and corruption.¹⁵ Furthermore, Zhang states that “the supply of talents is not fully matched with the demand for fighting,” and warns the PLA does not adequately cultivate and manage talent.¹⁶ Zhang’s August 2024 characterization was more recently confirmed in March 2025 by Xi Jinping at a plenary meeting on military reforms, where Xi’s voiced concerns mirrored Zhang’s.¹⁷

Military Governance

Zhang sees governance of the military as both a contributing factor to the PLA’s problems and as a solution. His writing appears to address all levels of policy and procedures that touch on standards, continuity, and accountability. He also obliquely but clearly addresses corruption in the military.

Since 2023, the PLA has experienced a new wave of corruption-related investigations and removals of senior leaders which may have disrupted its progress toward the *2027 Goal*. Between July and December 2023, at least 15 high-ranking military officers and defense industry executives were removed from their posts. Several leaders investigated or removed for

<https://web.archive.org/web/20250428173720/https://imgcdn.scol.com.cn/media/2024/10/14/162833324506.jpg>. The original image of CCG 2901 and 2502 is from over nine years ago and can be found here: <https://china-defense.blogspot.com/2016/01/photos-of-day-charge-of-10000-ton-china.html>

corruption oversaw equipment development projects related to ground-based nuclear and conventional missiles modernization.¹⁸

Intended or not, Zhang's characterizations implicate PLA leadership. Corruption continues to be endemic.¹⁹ The years 2023 and 2024 saw purges of PLA leadership in the Southern Theater Command, the PLA Rocket Force, and others on corruption charges, including the November 2024 suspension of CMC member and Director of the Political Works Department, Admiral Miao Hua.²⁰ Miao's fall occurred after Zhang's article was published, which serves to reinforce Zhang's prescient warnings. The case of Miao Hua is particularly relevant as he oversaw all senior leadership promotions and was viewed as one of Xi Jinping's protégés.²¹ It should be noted that as of this publication, Miao Hua is still listed as a CMC member.²² Additionally, General Wei Fenghe and his successor General Li Shangfu, who served consecutively as Ministers of National Defense and members of the CMC, were both investigated in 2023 and eventually expelled from the CCP on corruption charges in June 2024.²³

Zhang demands the PLA zero-in on improving mechanisms for reporting, supervision and inspection, meaning these functions are deficient to a concerning degree. Zhang connects these functions to the military's "rule of law" and asserts that the PLA must "legalize," "standardize," and "proceduralize" management mechanisms, so that they are enforceable, consistent, and have a logical process.²⁴ Zhang returns to this point several times in his writing, which indicates that without mechanisms for reporting, supervision, and inspection, other improvements and reforms are essentially non-starters.

Improving Joint Operations through Informationization

In Zhang's assessment, the PLA continues to suffer in its pursuit of joint combat capabilities because it does not focus enough on the information domain. Joint combat and the information domain are inextricably linked, according to Zhang, and the PLA has yet to achieve sufficient information support proficiency to realize its joint aspirations. Joint combat is dependent on the information domain so it follows that information systems are the lynchpin of joint capability, it is where joint coordination and communication occurs. Zhang stresses command and control (C2) is a "decisive combat factor" and improving network connectivity and interoperability is a capabilities-multiplier.²⁵ For Zhang and the PLA, information dominance is at the core of combat effectiveness and military victory.²⁶ The PLA's focus on the information domain cannot be overstated, which it sees as equal to the physical domains of land, maritime, and air.²⁷

The PLA has long pursued "jointness." Their doctrinal concept of "Integrated Joint Operations" is characterized by seamlessly blending capabilities across all military services under a unified C2 structure.²⁸ This provides the ability to leverage strengths and mitigate weaknesses across all domains, and is predicated on an informationized force.²⁹ Despite the

PLA's appreciation of these warfighting ideals, it has yet to realize joint operations as defined by its own concepts.

Zhang asserts the PLA will improve a litany of key functions through the effective use of the information domain. These include improving CMC Joint Operations Command Center (JOCC) functions, optimizing the composition of the theater JOCCs, and optimizing force layouts and coordination for deployments “in various strategic directions.”³⁰ As Zhang explains it, these improvements and optimizations will clarify the actual development needs of the force. This implies the PLA currently struggles to understand its actual development needs, and reinforces his previous emphasis on rectifying reporting, supervision, and inspection mechanisms.

Zhang asserts, however, “the most important thing at present is to reshape network information systems to promote the realization of a new leap in the empowerment of joint operations through the use of networks and information.”³¹ To this end, the recently established Information Support Force (ISF) is part of the solution. The ISF was created on April 19, 2024 when the former Strategic Support Force was disaggregated functionally into the Aerospace Force (ASF) Cyberspace Force (CSF), and ISF. The ISF supports joint capability development through its functions related to the information domain. According to Zhang, the PLA “must deeply understand Chairman Xi's determination and intention, build [the ISF] well, reconstruct the organizational form of networks and informationization, and drive the joint combat capability to achieve a qualitative leap.”³²

Additionally, Zhang describes the ISF as a development-accelerator for new combat capabilities. According to Zhang, the ISF is part of the effort to optimize existing programs by strategically pre-positioning key players in emerging fields to help cultivate new capabilities. In addition to being a branch with its own mission, the ISF is a support function and a force enabler. Zhang states the ISF enables the PLA to focus on integrated development of mechanization, informationization, and intelligence, and to expand new areas that advance combat effectiveness.³³ It is part of the effort to accelerate new technology development and increase the proportion of new types of combat forces.

Cross-Military and Local Government Work

In no uncertain terms, Zhang bluntly states “cross-military and local government work” reform is a “major project,” implying there are significant issues with its current state. Specifically, when and how to coordinate issues at the intersection of military and civilian domains.

“Cross-military and local government work” describes the partnering and planning of military-civil activities across China. It covers everything from national mobilization and

readiness to air traffic control and policy coordination. The Ministry of Defense (MoD) described it as “efforts to achieve unity of economic, social, and national defense benefits” and the necessity for local government and installation leaders to consider the other’s needs and context.

This will help avoid issues like the one described by the MoD of interference with troop combat readiness and travel due to frequent stops and U-turns at a bus terminal in Huanggang City, Hubei Province which was adjacent to a PLA pontoon bridge unit’s access gate.³⁴ The PLA, for its part, when developing plans and projects should “try to avoid ecological protection red lines, nature reserves, local economic construction hotspots, and areas with dense civilian facilities.”³⁵

Cross-military and local government work is in line with “Military-Civil Fusion” (MCF/军民融合) and is at the very least a parallel effort, though MCF is much more technically focused.

Zhang calls out many areas which are falling short of meeting national defense goals, asserting everyone, including the people, military, and Party, must work together and adopt a “combination of goal orientation and problem orientation.”³⁶ Zhang describes disparate processes, functions, and entities not working as they should under the banner of cross-military and local government work. The problems are profuse and fall into four categories: inefficiency, problems with feedback/coordination, outdatedness, and policy/processes (see Table 1).^{iv}

<i>Problem areas</i>	<i>Specifics</i>
<i>Efficiency</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic resources and use of strategic forces are not integrated. • Defense science and technology industry layout is not optimized. • Supply chain resiliency is not optimized. • Border and coastal defense mechanisms are not optimized.
<i>Feedback / coordination</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inadequate requirement reporting mechanisms for defense construction and weapons and equipment procurement. • No mechanism for feedback on military product designs.
<i>Outdated</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No modern weapons and equipment management system. • Deficient leadership and management systems.
<i>Policies / processes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No appropriate mechanism for the CCP, government, military, law enforcement, and civilians to manage the border; therefore, they cannot comprehensively strengthen the border and consolidate defenses. • Weak standardization mechanisms between military and civilian work for construction and management in aerospace, military trade, and other fields. • Militia system reforms need to be addressed.^v • Subpar process for designs to be scientifically demonstrated and then implemented.

Table 1: Challenges to cross-military and local government work

^{iv} Zhang did not overtly organize his writing this way; this characterization is based on the author’s contextual and linguistic analysis.

^v No specifics given.

The Way Forward

Taken at face value, Zhang describes a military and cross-military local government and civil system still very deep in the process of developing the capabilities needed for realizing its national security aspirations. It is Zhang's job to lead and inspire these efforts to meet Xi's expectations, and Zhang clearly sees the possibility of missing the mark. Change at the scope, scale, and speed that China's military has undergone and continues to move through is vastly challenging.

Zhang emphasizes no matter how reforms are carried out, they must be done in accordance with "fundamental political principles." He reminds readers that these reforms reflect the will of the Party, at the center of which is Comrade Xi, so everyone must strictly obey, champion, and execute the reforms without fail or deviation. According to Zhang, "we must carry out the mass line throughout"^{vi} and both military and civilian domains must innovate to capitalize on Xi's "strategic arrangements" to consolidate and improve the "integrated national strategic system" (一体化国家战略体系) and capacity building.³⁷

The key, Zhang states, to solving all limitations preventing the realization of the *2027 Goal* is to implement the philosophy and methodology of "Xi Jinping Thought," deploy systems planning and systems thinking, and in all ways, adhere to the Party. Zhang invokes improving the "CMC Chairman's Responsibility System" (CRS) as a solution. The CRS is not a physical system; it is more an oath and an ethos. It is the expectation that the PLA will "take on" Xi's guidance and dutifully adopt his way of thinking. This should result in ensuring the CCP's absolute leadership over the military.³⁸ According to official guidance on the CRS, the entire PLA must be absolutely loyal, pure, reliable, and must resolutely obey Chairman Xi's command and be responsible to and "reassure" (give no cause for worry) Chairman Xi.³⁹ Where the PLA lacks discipline and integrity, Zhang calls to improve the "system" through the use of the CRS.

Zhang further explains that as reforms go deeper, "the stronger the system correlation is, and the more complex the contradictions and problems it touches; therefore, governance concepts must be carried throughout."⁴⁰ Essentially, because these reforms are intended to solve difficult, systemic problems, the "root" of the problem increasingly comes to the foreground as the reforms progress. These reforms, in a sense, intend to extricate entrenched maladaptations deeply embedded in the foundation of PLA structures. However, for the system to survive, the PLA must rebalance to the CCP and away from the root problem that must be eliminated. Zhang asserts the strength of military governance of the reforms provides the leverage needed to extract

^{vi} The "mass line" is a political concept connected to Maoism and Marxist-Leninist epistemology. As it is deployed in China today, the term expresses the quality of reciprocation between the Party and the people. It is an evaluative and refinement process where the people who must exist under the political system being created are presumptively afforded feedback to the creators of the system who presumptively hear them, but ultimately the creators are not accountable to the people.

the root. Zhang states the reform process must be closely followed and supported, the “last mile” is as important as the first step to prevent major distortions.⁴¹

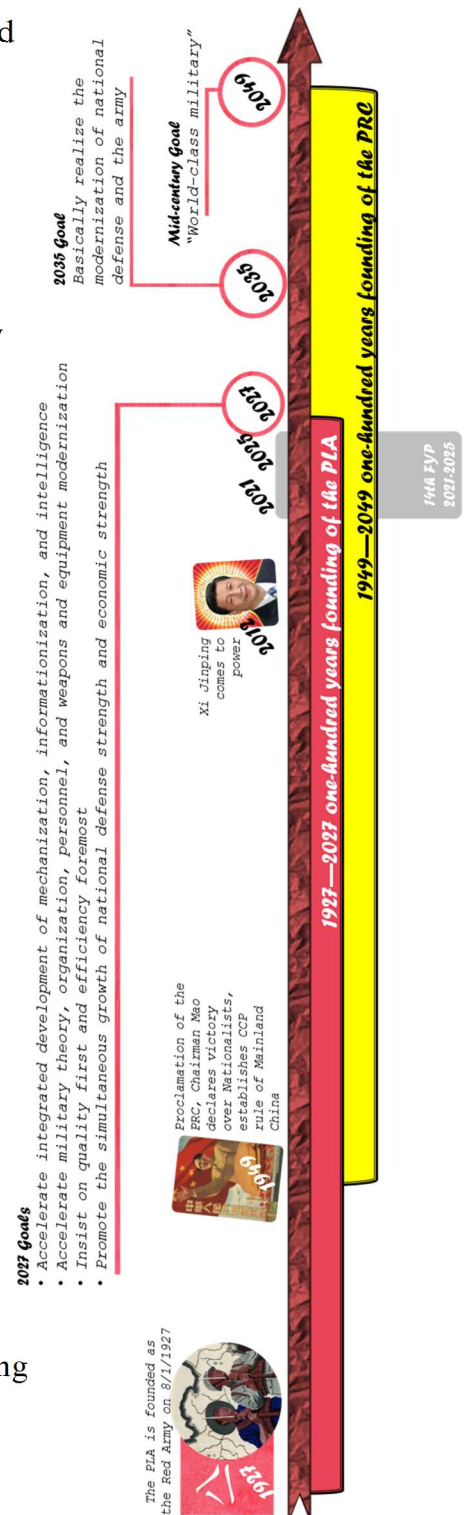
Conclusions

It is rare for a CMC Vice-Chairman, or any uniformed military leader, to step out as the frontline communicator of Party doctrine outside of military channels.^{vii} Zhang’s role has expanded, as seen in September and October of 2024, where “with the approval of Secretary Xi”^{viii} Zhang led both a seminar on combat command innovation at China’s National Defense University⁴² and an on-site meeting of comprehensive military training in Jiangjiakou (Hebei Province, northwest China).⁴³ Zhang also led a delegation to Vietnam, meeting with the Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary Tô Lâm, President Lương Cường, and Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính.⁴⁴ Zhang leading, versus attending, these interactions is notable. As was Zhang’s meeting with U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan at the end of August 2024. It had been nearly a decade since a CMC Vice-Chair met with such a high level U.S. defense official.⁴⁵

It is also worth noting how Zhang seems to think about problems. Zhang’s approach appears to be systematic, dogmatic and he is trying to be an exemplar. His systematic approach to diagnosing the problem is akin to testing each “bulb” along a string of broken lights. If one “bulb” is broken, the entire string of lights will not work. The dogmatic aspect is his communicated belief in the catechisms of the CCP. If PLA modernization and reforms are not working, it must be because people are not embracing “Xi Jinping Thought” and not using the CRS and therefore are not actually adhering to the Party. Zhang sees these as all interdependent.

^{vii} Looking through the tenure of Zhang’s predecessor, PLA Air Force General XU Qiliang—though Xu’s activities were reported and key parts of speeches were quoted, Xu never took on the role of central communicator of national security concerns to the nation and the world.

^{viii} “经习近平主席批准” “with the approval of Secretary Xi.”



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Endnotes

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³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Xinhua, “中央军委印发《关于全面深入贯彻军委主席负责制的意见》” [The Central Military Commission issued the ‘Opinions on Comprehensively and Thoroughly Implementing the System of Chairman Responsibility of the Military Commission], *Xinhua*, 05 November 2017, accessed 3 January 2025, https://web.archive.org/web/20171107040904/http://www.mod.gov.cn/shouye/2017-11/05/content_4796674.htm.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Zhang, 2024.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² “张又侠在全军院校作战指挥教学模式创新研讨活动上强调 创新作战指挥教学 强化打仗人才培养 为强军兴军提供强有力人才支撑,” [At a Seminar on Innovating Operational Command Instruction Models at All Military Academies, Zhang Youxia Stressed Innovation, Strengthening Combat Skill Cultivation, and Strengthening the Force by Supporting Strong and Talented People], PRC Ministry of National Defense, September 13, 2024, https://web.archive.org/web/20241004121759/http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/gc/zyx/2024_246931/16338292.html.

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⁴⁴ “越共中央总书记苏林、国家主席梁强、政府总理范明政分别会见张又侠” [General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam Tô Lâm, President Lương Cường and Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính met with Zhang Youxia], PRC Ministry of National Defense, October 26, 2024, https://web.archive.org/web/20250413183324/http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/gc/zyx/2024_246931/16347662.html.

⁴⁵ Katsuji Nakazawa, “Analysis: General’s Smile Hints at Changes in China Power Balance,” *Nikkei Asia*, September 5, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Editor-s-Picks/China-up-close/Analysis-General-s-smile-hints-at-changes-in-China-power-balance>.