

# ISW Uses Babel Street to Investigate China's Military Leadership Purges

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has conducted an anti-corruption campaign against top military leadership and senior military-industrial executives since 2023, but the purges began to intensify in late 2024. The [Institute for the Study of War \(ISW\)](#) wanted to identify some of the lesser-known targets as well as gain a deeper understanding of these actions for a forthcoming report.

ISW aims to advance an informed understanding of military affairs through reliable research, trusted analysis, and innovative education. They are committed to improving the nation's ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats to achieve U.S. strategic objectives. ISW is a non-partisan, non-profit, public policy research organization.

ISW has been using Babel Street Insights due to its ability to surface a wide range of unique, multilanguage insights drawn from billions of publicly available data sources worldwide. In addition to this study on the CCP's efforts, ISW has used Insights to research [China's incursions](#) into the Taiwan-controlled waters around Kinmen Island, construct an [order of battle for Hamas](#), and [understand Russian troop strength](#) in Ukraine.

## The challenge

Since 2023, the CCP has conducted purges or investigations of several top military figures, including two defense ministers, the commander of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Rocket Force, the top political commissar of the Central Military Commission (CMC), and most significantly, one of the CMC's two vice chairmen.<sup>1</sup> This led ISW to question how these cases were connected and what was happening behind the scenes. Some purges appeared to be related to actual corruption around procurements for the Rocket Force.

ISW assessed that other purges and investigations may have been tied to perceived ideological heterodoxy or disloyalty to Xi Jinping. A third hypothesis or parallel explanation is factional politics, as several recent targets of the purges were part of the Fujian Clique, one of two main groups of officials

close to Xi Jinping. Some of the names ISW uncovered were less widely reported and less corroborated than others. ISW began a project to find as many high-level targets of purges as possible, verify the ones it could, and see what trends it could identify.

## The approach

ISW primarily used Babel Street Insights to conduct far-reaching searches of publicly available information across news outlets, social media platforms, and blogs. To preserve operational security while accessing PRC websites, ISW used Secure Access, a managed attribution capability within Insights that allows analysts to remain anonymous while viewing sites as they appear in-country.

The PRC/CCP did not publicly announce many of the names of allegedly purged or disciplined officials — rather, such reports often came from citizen journalists, social media posts, and other unofficial Chinese sources. The ability to access posts on blogs, Weibo, and other Chinese social media helped ISW build a list of names to investigate further.

ISW used a combination of search methods for these investigations to determine which officials were arrested, purged, or placed under investigation around the same time. Analysts used the person's name and keywords in Chinese such as "31st Group Army," "Nanjing Military Region," "corruption," "Chairman Responsibility System," and "arrest." They further searched for names occurring together to identify commonalities and connections, especially if the officials were removed from office around the same time.

Insights allows users to filter which sources or authors should appear in the results, which let ISW researchers eliminate "noise" by cutting out results that contained the keywords but were not relevant to the goal. Analysts could choose to look at only official PRC sources, or only social media sources, as needed.

Excluding official sources helped ISW find names of officials/officers that the PRC has not publicly confirmed have been arrested, investigated, or disciplined. Conversely, looking at only official sources when searching certain names let ISW see whether officials who were rumored to have been purged had appeared at public events since the time of their alleged disciplinary action.

For example, PLA Eastern Theater Commander Lin Xiangyang has been rumored (but never confirmed) to be under investigation for many months, with some sources reporting his disappearance or suicide. Lin appeared at public events in March (so earlier rumors of his purge were premature) but has not appeared in public since then (so more recent rumors of his arrest in March may be true).

ISW also filtered search results using the ability to set specific date parameters. Often, multiple officials are arrested or disciplined at the same time, but only some of them are noted by the state news. Knowing the arrest date of one official, such as CMC Vice Chairman He Weidong, enabled ISW to set a narrower date range to look for posts and articles around that time — noting officials who might otherwise be lost in a large volume of search results.

## The impact

Without the specialized OSINT tools from Babel Street, ISW would have relied on already-published reports about PLA purges. These can be found through standard search engines or through ISW's normal manual collection process, which involves daily browsing of select news and government websites.

According to Daniel Shats, China Analyst at ISW, "Doing the research without Babel Street would have made the research less unique (since it would repeat what other English-language source already found) and less comprehensive. The Babel Street search algorithm led us to new sources of information that would have taken much longer to find, allowing us to produce more comprehensive research in less time."

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