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Why General Fang Fenghui Was Purged

Fang, the former chief of joint staff, has close ties to disgraced top generals who are accused of attempting a coup.

By Don Tse

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During a dinner party with the family of ex-Central Military Commission (CMC) Vice Chairman Guo Boxiong at Beijing's Minzu Hotel, General Fang Fenghui proclaimed: "I'll kill in one shot whoever dares to remove the old leading cadre." Fang's bluster came after Xu Caihou, the other former CMC vice chair, was officially placed under investigation in 2014, according to an August 31, 2017 report by Hong Kong newspaper *Ming Pao*.

Fang never got around to successfully defending Guo. Guo was officially brought in for corruption in April 2015, and sentenced to life in prison in July 2016. Meanwhile, Fang, who had joined President Xi Jinping for his Florida meeting with President Donald Trump in April and signed a new Sino-U.S. military agreement in August, was abruptly removed as CMC chief of joint staff and disappeared from public view just days before the *Ming Pao* report.

Fang's vanishing shocked observers at the time because he had participated in numerous high-profile diplomatic exchanges earlier that year, and was widely tipped for a CMC vice chairman slot at the 19th Party Congress in October. On January 9, Chinese state media announced in a terse statement that Fang Fenghui was suspected of bribery and would be handed over to military prosecutors for legal proceedings. No other details were provided.

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In reviewing available public information and tracing patronage networks, it appears that Fang's downfall is a case of individual career interests clashing with factional obligations.

The Dynamics of Factional Struggle

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) factional infighting (*neidou*) has been a part of elite Chinese politics since the days of Mao Zedong. To the public, leading cadres show unity to maintain the image of political "stability" for propaganda purposes. Behind the scenes, factional struggle is complex, messy, and consequential. Often, the rise and fall of officials are closely linked with the fate of their political patrons and factions.

Yet factional allegiances are somewhat fluid in communist China's Machiavellian political environment. This is because one of the core reasons why officials form factions in the first place is so that they can maintain or advance their self-interests. Powerful officials are known to have sacrificed their political patrons or clients when it is to their benefit. For instance, Mao purged Deng Xiaoping three times after perceiving him to be a threat, but promptly proceeded to "rehabilitate" Deng when his services were required. And despite having professed "loyalty" to Mao, Deng arrested the Great Helmsman's wife and moved against his designated successor after his death. In another case, founding revolutionary Bo Yibo helped influential Party hardliners dethrone former Party leader Hu Yaobang even though the latter was responsible for Bo's "rehabilitation" after the Cultural Revolution.

Understanding that self-interest sometimes takes priority over factional allegiance is vital for making sense of Fang Fenghui's intertwining political patronage network and the reason for his purge.

Fang has longstanding associations with top members of the Jiang Zemin faction, the most influential political clique in the two decades before Xi took top office in 2012. Mainland Chinese articles published after Fang was sidelined on August 26 have made the Fang-Jiang faction connection more apparent. On September 10, an **author** claiming to be the former aide of Jiang faction elite Guo Boxiong described an exchange he witnessed between Guo and Fang in 1987, where Fang hailed Guo as "brother-in-law" before proceeding to charm Guo by explaining how they were related and speaking in Shaanxi dialect. Both men are natives of Shaanxi, and it is possible for the exchange to have taken place given their posting in the late 1980s. At the time, Guo served as deputy chief of staff of the Lanzhou Military Region in northwestern China, while Fang was a division chief of staff in Lanzhou's Xinjiang Military District. The charge of bribery against Fang and **commentary** in mainland Chinese media suggesting that he had paid his way to rise quickly up the ranks also indirectly links him with Guo and Xu Caihou, who dominated military affairs from the mid-2000s until 2012.

Fang's ties with the Jiang faction can also be discerned from his relationship with the late general **Zhang Yang**. Both generals forged a partnership while serving as senior officers of the Guangzhou Military Region in the early 2000s — Fang was the military region's chief of staff from 2003 to 2007 while Zhang was its political commissar from 2004 to 2007. Later, both generals again became chief of staff and political commissar in the CMC after the 18th Congress in 2012, a period where Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou still had control over personnel movement. Zhang Yang

allegedly reestablished his working partnership with Fang four days after he watched a stage play together with then-CMC Vice Chairman Xu, according to mainland Chinese media reports after Zhang's death by suicide was made public in November 2017. The official military newspaper **directly linked** Zhang with Xu and Guo in its critique of Zhang's suicide. And according to a Guangzhou-based military source cited in the *South China Morning Post*, both "Guo and Xu were proxies of former president Jiang Zemin, with Fang, Zhang, and other senior military officers their accomplices."

Keen observers of Party factional politics may note that Fang Fenghui appeared to be on the side of the Jiang faction's rivals in recent years. For instance, Hu Jintao appointed Fang as commander of the Beijing Military Region in 2007, a critical period where Hu was beginning to gain some leverage over Jiang (Hu ordered the arrest of powerful Jiang ally Chen Liangyu in 2006) in their tussle to shape the outcome of the personnel reshuffle at the 18th Party Congress. Fang reportedly repaid Hu's trust by blocking some of Jiang's personnel arrangements during the Fourth Plenum of the 17th Congress in September 2009, according to overseas Chinese media. Hu picking Fang as parade commander for a military parade marking the PRC's 60th anniversary in October and his promotion to full general the following year suggests that there is some truth to the reports.

Further, Xi Jinping, who is allied with Hu against the Jiang faction, retained Fang as CMC chief of joint staff after launching his military reforms in 2015. The fact that Fang kept his post, a crucial office that oversees military planning, combat operations, and the military intelligence system, when Xi was replacing many senior military officials, and continued to partake in high-level diplomatic meetings suggests that at least until very recently, Fang had Xi's trust.

Fang's involvement with both the Jiang faction and the Xi-Hu camp is not contradictory given that self-interest is at the core of factional struggle. Fang likely courted Jiang elites like Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou to ensure steady career progression, leading to his becoming a senior commander of a military region when he was only in his early 50s and later, CMC chief of joint staff. Helping Hu Jintao saw Fang become the youngest PLA regional commander, and gave him enough political capital to survive the leadership transition in 2012 and Xi's military reform in 2015. And supporting Xi is in Fang's interest because his power would grow as Xi consolidates his control over the regime.

Fang, however, would conceivably challenge Xi if his interests were at stake.

Coup Plotter?

About a month after Fang Fenghui and Zhang Yang vanished, Hong Kong magazine *Qian Shao* reported that both generals were quietly resisting Xi's efforts to clean out the "pernicious influence" of Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou from the military in a bid to protect their comrades and networks from the anti-corruption campaign. Xi was allegedly aware of Fang and Zhang's doing, and had planned to retire them ahead of schedule at the 19th Congress. Meanwhile, both generals were hatching a military coup against Xi, but were found out and arrested before they could launch their rebellion.

A study of official and unofficial information indicates that the *Qian Shao* story has a ring of authenticity to it. In September, I **wrote** that Fang may have plotted a **failed coup** against the Xi leadership after observing certain unusual personnel activity at the time. First, Xi replaced another five CMC members in quick succession after Fang was removed, a development which suggests that something major had happened to allow Xi to make key personnel appointments seemingly uncontested. Personnel changes of such magnitude are usually decided and carried out only after a period of negotiation between Xi and the various CCP factions and Party elders.

Next, Fang and Zhang were not among the delegates invited to the 19th Party Congress, an

indication that they were almost certainly in trouble. Overseas **news media** also cited sources claiming that the generals were being investigated. Recent efforts by Chinese state media to link Zhang Yang and Fang Fenghui with Guo Boxiong and Xu Caihou implies that the Zhang and Fang, like Guo and Xu, are also guilty of seeking to “wreck and split the Party” — official parlance for a coup attempt on the top leadership.

A failed coup attempt by Fang and Zhang would explain certain military developments since the 19th Party Congress. Contrary to the expectations of observers, Xi downsized the CMC from nine to seven members instead of increasing its membership to dilute its power and create additional checks and balances in the system. I earlier **wrote** that a smaller CMC would allow Xi to have greater control over the military and more time to reassess the loyalties of his senior generals while grooming a new leadership corp. Xi’s decision to downsize the top leadership body when it would be more intuitive and in line with his military reform to expand it makes sense if Fang and Zhang had been cultivating opposition to challenge the Xi leadership.

Then, in December, over 100 division-level officers from interior units were made to swap positions with their counterparts in the border regions, a possible precautionary measure by Xi to break up existing power networks and defamiliarize officers and their troops. As Xi frequently reshuffles military personnel, disgruntled senior officers will find it hard to form an effective anti-Xi coalition.

In sum, Fang Fenghui was very possibly purged because he and Zhang Yang challenged Xi’s authority to preserve their self-interests. The Fang and Zhang cases also show that Xi’s control over the military is far from absolute, and he may be in a more unstable position politically than observers tend to believe.

Translated by Larry Ong.

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