
China's Military Doctrine and Strategy: Continuity with Change

Monika Chansoria

Wo da wode, ni da nide
(We fight our way, you fight your way)

– PLA principle

A nation's military strategy is fundamentally crucial and consequential towards defining its operational doctrine. By the mid-1980s, Beijing altered its national military strategy from an explicit focus on a major, perhaps 'nuclear' war with the Soviet Union towards concentrating on preparations for a potential "Local, Limited War" on China's periphery. The developments in the conventional and strategic forces of China and efforts at joint operational training, along with improvements in logistics are expected to be carried forward and enhance the military capabilities of China in this decade.¹ Explanation of a nation's strategic posture and the force structure it seeks can be achieved by means of analysing its military doctrine. In the case of the People's Republic of China, the concept of "doctrine" in the Western sense is not followed, but is divided into "operational theory" and "operational practice," with the study of "military science" linking the two.²

Doctrinal Strategy of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)

The PLA views war as entailing three levels of conflict: wars, campaigns and battles. These three levels are inclusive of strategy, campaign methods and

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tactics respectively.³ In 1999, the new doctrine was given concrete shape by the PLA in an official “New Generation Operations Regulation,” which the PLA refers to as *gangyao*, or the highest-level operational and training guidance documents for campaigns. These *gangyao* have been issued for joint campaigns for the army, air force, and Second Artillery and for logistic operations.⁴

With Deng Xiaoping’s focus on economic modernisation as the cornerstone for the future reforms process in China, the outward-looking China in the following years sought a leading role in the international mainstream. There was a realisation that it would require a new type of defence establishment and a new strategic direction as compared to that of a previously autarkic China seeking to lead just the “Third World.”

While China has never explicitly presented any grand strategy in any comprehensive manner, it appears to have pursued a grand strategy, conditioned substantially by its historical experience, political interests and geo-strategic environment, according to the views of Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis. China’s grand strategy, they opine, is keyed to the attainment of three interrelated objectives: the preservation of domestic order and well-being in the face of different forms of social strife; the defence against persistent external threats to national sovereignty and territory; and the attainment and maintenance of geo-political influence as a major and, perhaps, primary state.⁵ As a matter of fact, there has been persistent debate on whether there actually is any “grand strategy” in the Chinese context. According to David Finklestein, what emerges from the distillation of statements of the Chinese leadership that have been publicly declared or adduced is that its national security objectives are sovereignty, modernity and stability.⁶

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Era of People’s War

The Red Army’s experiences during the decades of the late 1930s and early 1940s formed the basis for the “People’s War” concept, which became the doctrine of the Red Army and subsequently the PLA. Mao’s military thought grew out of these occurrences as he developed his ideas and drew on the works of the

Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu in addition to other theorists. Synthesising these influences with lessons learned from the Red Army's successes and failures, Mao was able to create a comprehensive politico-military doctrine that sought to wage revolutionary warfare. People's War incorporated political, economic, and psychological measures with protracted military struggle against a superior foe. As a military doctrine, the emphasis of People's War lay on the mobilisation of the populace to support the regular as well as the guerrilla forces; the primacy of men over weapons, with superior motivation compensating for inferior technology; and the three progressive phases of protracted warfare—strategic defensive, strategic stalemate, and strategic offensive. During the first stage, enemy forces were to be “lured in deep” into one's own territory to be over-extended, dispersed and finally isolated.

Despite the gradual changes towards a strategy of forward defence, key elements of Mao Zedong's principles of People's War continued to remain the core of successive strategies. Mao's concept of “active defence” or “offensive defence” (*jiji fangyu*) since the 1930s was retained. Active defence as the basis of a military strategy meant that the PLA's defence against an enemy's attack is designed to prepare for a counter-attack.⁷ According to a senior Chinese Colonel, Wang Naiming, the strategic policy of active defence is a component of the national security strategy and must be made subordinate to the overall strategy of the country. Wang quotes Marx and Engels to say, “The most effective defence is still achieved by offence.”⁸ While furthering this statement, Mao Zedong once specifically pointed out by stating, “Active defence is the real defence, and the defence for counter-attack and offence.” Adding to Mao's statement, Deng Xiaoping stated, “Active defence is not just simple defence, it has offence in it.” The integration of defence and offence reflects the developing law of war itself.⁹ The principle of “active defence” (or strategy of offensive defence) was put to test for the first time by China when it launched an initial spoiling attack against a weaker adversary, preempting a coordinated attack on its territory by the Soviet Union and India in 1962. According to Kenneth W Allen, Glenn Krume and Jonathan D Pollack, “Although necessarily a somewhat amorphous concept, People's War retains a measure of influence in Chinese thinking, at least in broad conceptual terms.”¹⁰

Chinese strategic thinkers including Sun Tzu, Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, argued, “mind is superior to matter,” “thought is more powerful than weapons,” and “doctrine overcomes (bare) strength.”¹¹

Forward defence and “winning the first battle” required changes in training, logistical support, command and control to support the new operations. PLA

training in the early 1980s began to include combined arms warfare as PLA ground forces started to integrate armour, artillery and air defence into their operational skills and tactics in an effort to offset the battlefield advantages of the adversary.¹² In a major deviation from its earlier position, “luring the enemy in deep” was not part of the new strategy, therefore, creating the first major break with Mao’s principles. Commenting on the changes underway in 1983, Chinese Defence Minister, Zhang Aiping declared:

The principle of war is to achieve the greatest victory at the smallest cost. To achieve this, we should depend not only on political factors, but also on the correct strategy and tactics of the war’s commander, the sophisticated nature of our military equipment, the quality of our personnel who use the equipment, etc.¹³

In fact, by linking issues of technology, doctrine, strategy, operations and training to success in war, Zhang expressed the essence of the PLA’s new approach to the defence of China. The new emphasis was on the military effectiveness of standing forces, not mass mobilisation and drowning the enemy in a sea of People’s War.¹⁴ It would be apt to state that modernisation of a military force would be partial if it did not modify its military strategy and doctrine. China perceives threats by a superpower and by possible conflicts on its land borders against lesser powers. Based on these threats, it formulated its “defence policy” and aligned it on the strategy of “active-defence”. This strategy is claimed to be in pursuit of “self-defence.” The structure of Chinese military thinking has always been dominated by the main criterion of protection of the core (or heartland). The core is inclusive of central China with the outlying being Tibet, Xinjiang, Mongolia, Manchuria and Taiwan.¹⁵

According to Wang Naiming, the Chinese strategy of active defence postulates the following:¹⁶

- The safeguarding of national sovereignty; and national security should be the highest criterion for the army’s strategic action;
- Integration of reform as the motive force; development as the goal and stability as a precondition;

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- The active defence strategy should be pursued to safeguard a peaceful and stable environment for economic development, reforms and opening up;
- The aim should not be to simply win the war, but also the ability to contain it; and
- The highest goal of military strategy is to create a strategic environment of long-term peace and stability in order to ensure the smooth construction of the country.

Advocating the progressive trends of modernisation, Deng Liqun stated that China's military modernisation would "raise education and training to the stature of 'strategy'" (*ba jiaoyu xunlian tigao dao zhanlue diwei*). The military now "takes cadre education and training as the focal point" (*ba ganbu de jiaoyu xunlian zuowei zhongdian*): "Each level of cadres form the powerful backbone of military construction, the organisational leaders and commanders of any future war."¹⁷

While commenting on the nature of People's War during the mid-1980s, Paul Godwin argued, "There is now sufficient evidence that the current military elite seeks to reject People's War, however modified, as an approach to strategy and force structure requirements. While the label of 'People's War' may well be retained, the content of Chinese strategy is likely to be very different from what has gone before."¹⁸

Shifting Strategy from Continental to Peripheral Defence

Speaking about China's nuclear doctrine, it was in the 1980s that Beijing began for the first time to systematically think about the survivability of its strategic deterrent and launched a determined effort to modernise its nuclear forces.¹⁹ By the mid-1990s, China fielded approximately 20 CSS-4 (DF-5A) intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) which were liquid-fuelled missiles based in silos. There were apprehensions regarding its vulnerability to a nuclear or perhaps even a conventional first strike. The People's Republic of China (PRC) also has dozens of CSS-3 (DF-4) long-range missiles capable of reaching targets in Russia and Asia.

Chinese analysts have engaged in discussions about shifting away from the traditional Chinese strategic nuclear doctrine of "minimum deterrence" (*zuidi xiandu weishe*) toward the adoption of a nuclear doctrine based on the concept of "limited deterrence" (*youxian weishe*). Chinese nuclear strategists, according to Alastair Iain Johnston, argue that the limited deterrence doctrine "requires sufficient counter-force and counter-value tactical, theater, and strategic nuclear forces to deter the escalation of conventional or nuclear war."²⁰ This war-fighting

doctrine repudiates the notion that mutually assured destruction (MAD) is a stable basis for deterrence. Instead, its proponents argue that for deterrence to be credible, it must be based upon capabilities that could actually be used to achieve specific objectives in a nuclear war.²¹

A Chinese shift toward the doctrine of limited nuclear deterrence would have important implications in a number of areas. It would increase the number and type of target requirements for Chinese nuclear forces, which in turn would push China's ongoing nuclear force modernisation in new and different directions. In addition, shifting to the doctrine of limited deterrence might also make it necessary for the strategic rocket forces or Second Artillery (*dier paobing*) to operate at a much higher state of readiness, and perhaps even lead Beijing to drop, conditionalise or clarify its long-standing no-first-use (NFU) commitment as consistent with a policy of launch-on warning (LOW) or launch-under-attack (LUA).²²

However, Johnston concludes that "China does not presently have the operational capabilities to implement this vision of limited deterrence." Moreover, he notes that it is unclear whether strategists who favour limited deterrence are influencing the resource allocation, research and development, and acquisition decisions that are driving China's current round of nuclear and missile modernisation.²³

The US intelligence community projects that by 2015, China will have 75 to 100 missiles armed with nuclear warheads, "deployed primarily against the US."²⁴ China's long-running modernisation programme is motivated by Beijing's commitment to develop and deploy a more reliable, survivable and, therefore credible strategic missile force.²⁵ By 2015, when the US projects that China's strategic missile forces will consist primarily of solid-fuelled, mobile missiles, China will have gone a long way toward achieving this objective.

Therefore, it would be apt to comprehend that the 1985 transformation of China's national military strategy reoriented the PLA away from its almost exclusive concern with continental defence. The armed forces' new defence guidance required them to defend not only land boundaries, but also to protect China's extensive maritime

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territories and claims. This vivid change in strategy required major modifications in the PLA's operational doctrine, expanding the roles and missions of its air and naval forces, and abrogating essentially all of the principal elements that form the core of "People's War"—whether "Under Modern Conditions" or not. For China's armed forces, the 1985 change in national military strategy was to be little short of revolutionary.²⁶ In essence, China's military strategists responded to their new requirements by focussing on potential contingencies for small-scale wars over land boundaries, maritime disputes over contested territorial seas and islands, surprise air attacks, defence against deliberately limited attacks into Chinese territory and counter-attacks launched by Chinese forces into enemy territory to prevent invasion or dispel a threatening situation.²⁷

While altering the operational concepts, it was accepted that regaining the initiative in a high-intensity conflict of short duration, would be a complicated task. More attention, therefore, had to be given to offensive operations in the opening stages of a local, limited war.²⁸ As a consequence of these considerations, the PLA's preferred mode of operations was to overwhelm the adversary early in the war and seek a quick termination of the conflict. In the balance of offence vs defence, offensive operations assumed foremost importance. The strategic planners accepted that in the futuristic scenario of China joining the ranks of great powers in the 21st century, it must have three-dimensional frontiers. This, in turn, would enable it to establish and maintain the necessary "security space, survival space, scientific exploration and technological development space and economic activity space."²⁹

Soon after the new national military strategy was announced, China's Military Regions (MRs) were reduced from eleven to seven and successively the armed forces initiated a reduction in force, decreasing the PLA's size from 4.238 million to 3.2 million by 1990, including civilian staff and employees. Other changes included eliminating specific headquarters for the armour and artillery corps by transforming them into sub-departments of the General Staff Department (GSD). Personnel reductions and reorganisation were accompanied by the elimination of excess obsolescent weaponry from the inventory. Ten thousand artillery pieces, more than 1,100 tanks, 610 naval vessels and some 2,500 aircraft were taken out of service.³⁰ It seemed evident that the People's Republic of China was well on its way to prepare for war under modern conditions.

People's War Under Modern Conditions

China's leadership recognised the need to transform the PLA, which essentially was an infantry army with limited mobility, logistics, ordnance, and communications,

into a modern military force. This force would be capable of withstanding and subsequently emerging victorious in the future battle waged under modern conditions.

The changing international situation goaded the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) Central Military Commission (CMC) in the later half of 1985 to decree a new guiding strategic statement: global nuclear warfare was no longer inevitable. For the foreseeable future, the world scene would significantly be characterised by small "regional and local wars." According to the post-1985 Chinese doctrine, limited war can take different forms under a wide variety of circumstances, so appropriate forces must be extremely flexible (not a characteristic of most PLA units).

The Chinese developed the doctrine of "People's War Under Modern Conditions," primarily as a modification of the earlier Maoist doctrine of People's War.³¹ This strategic doctrine envisioned the defence of China against Soviet invasion by a combination of mobile mechanised operations by the PLA's regular forces, positional defence by regional forces and guerrilla warfare in the enemy's rear by the people's militia. The main forces' mobile defence was envisioned as manoeuvre warfare, somewhat like the US Army's active defence doctrine of the 1970s.³² Although, many changes in Chinese strategy during the early 1980 were identified, People's War Under Modern Conditions was considered as China's most significant, albeit constantly changing, strategic doctrine. Harlan Jencks opines, "People's War Under Modern Conditions remained China's defensive strategy during its long transition from 'underdeveloped' to 'world-power' status—a transition that still has decades to go."³³

Long before the Gulf War shocked many Chinese strategists, Deng Xiaoping had stated, "On wars nowadays: if our military officers don't have the knowledge to fight modernised war, it is unacceptable... Because equipment is not the same, commanding modernised war will require many new faces of knowledge."³⁴ Military and strategic experts around the world stress the importance that China attached to the awesome technical-military power demonstrated by the

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US during the war. The course of events during that time was instrumental in providing a new focus to China's military modernisation involving developments such as reprioritising of the modernisation programme while placing priority to developing the air force, the navy and its missile development programme.

While commenting on the rapid and drastic transformation in existing forms of warfare, Chinese President Jiang Zemin pointed out in 1993: "We had shifted our strategic guideline from aiming at engaging in an early war, an all-out war and a nuclear war to a local war under the condition of modern technologies, especially high technologies. This shift represents the development and improvement of our strategic guideline."³⁵ Besides Gen Liu Huaqing, a senior member of the CCP Central Military Commission stated, "The PLA fails to meet the demands of modern warfare and this is the principal problem with army-building."³⁶ Liu Huaqing's concerns focussed on both armaments and training, for he contended that in neither was the PLA prepared for modern warfare.³⁷ The new guidelines replaced those issued in 1985 that moved PLA war preparations (*zhanbei*) from "People's War Under Modern Conditions" to "Limited Local War." The 1993 guidelines stemmed from a detailed assessment of the military implications of the 1991 Gulf War, which resulted in modifying PLA war preparations from Local War to "Local War Under High-Tech Conditions."³⁸ It would be pertinent to accept that even though PLA capabilities have undeniably improved, the period 2006-08 noticed PLA self-assessments articulating suspicions similar to the ones expressed by Gen Liu Huaqing in 1993. This was especially visible when the 2008 *Liberation Army Daily's* "New Year Message" to the PLA stated:

At present and for a quite a long time to come, the main contradiction in our army building is still that the level of our modernisation is incompatible with the demands of winning a partial (local) war under informationised conditions, and our military capability is incompatible with the demands of carrying out the army's historic missions in the new century and new stage.³⁹

Apparently, the immediate result of this reprioritisation was evident in the enhanced accuracy of medium-range missiles of the sort that were fired near Taiwan in March 1996.⁴⁰ However, the PLA's manoeuvres versus Taiwan in 1995 and 1996 exposed some of the weaknesses of the PLA's strategic development. The PLA fired DF-15 missiles near Taiwan in July 1995 and March 1996, though not in rapid coordination with other weapons.⁴¹ In fact, specific PLA weaknesses identified by late 1996 included: reconnaissance, target acquisition

and surveillance capabilities at all levels (space-based, aircraft-based, sea-based, ground-based and man-portable), mobility and rapid response, weapons lethality and air defence. Other identified deficiencies focussed on the lack of jointness among the Services, including command, control, communications, intelligence (C3I), operations, reconnaissance and electronic counter-measures.⁴² The critical reality now faced by China's military strategists is that the military contingencies they perceive as most likely are not susceptible to a strategy based upon protraction and attrition. According to PLA analysts, future wars will require offensive or even preemptive joint operations conducted by standing forces with little mobilisation lead time. This requirement in particular is appearing to create the greatest difficulty for PLA planners.⁴³

The strategy of People's War Under Modern Conditions allowed for dramatic force restructuring in an atmosphere of absolute political stability allowing Beijing to overhaul its army to adapt to modern conditions. Nonetheless, it still highlighted the army's unchanging political status, subordinate to the CCP, whose nominal task was to defend and mobilise the "people." It should not be looked upon as an extant military strategy. Rather, it was a doctrinal phrase that, like the Four Cardinal Principles of Deng Xiaoping, preserved the Communist Party's absolute leadership in a strategic and political atmosphere that otherwise was highly fluid. The preservation of the Communist Party's dictatorship was the only real principle of the Four Cardinal Principles, and the desire to preserve the political power of "people's mass party" the primary political legacy of People's War.⁴⁴

Changes from People's War Under Modern Conditions could be seen in three critical areas. First, the PLA's underlying operational concepts were changed from those designed to support a war of protraction and attrition to operations seeking an early termination of the conflict. With this objective, offensive operations took precedence over defence. Second, rapid response and the readiness of all three

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Services for joint operations diminished the dominance that the PLA ground forces had achieved through history in addition to a national military strategy focussed on continental defence. Ground force preeminence was particularly eroded by the new strategy's focus on defence of China's extensive maritime territorial claims and possessions. Third, modernising selected standing forces became the military leadership's preeminent concern, with mass mobilisation viewed only as a last resort.⁴⁵

China's primary operational strategy guideline is termed "active defence," which stipulates, "China does not initiate wars or fight wars of aggression."⁴⁶ According to Wang Naiming, the most significant aspect while carrying out the strategic policy of active defence is to practise people's warfare under modern conditions, for which the people's army would provide the backbone force.⁴⁷ Under modern conditions, the practice of People's War means not only the direct preparedness against war, but also implies the enduring construction of national defence. It is an amalgamation of the party, government, military and civilian set-up; and involves political, economic, scientific and technological, military, diplomatic, educational, cultural and other areas. The strength of a nation's defence is not simply determined by its armed forces, but by the comprehensive national power that is the foundation for supporting the armed forces and preparedness against war.⁴⁸

The shift in operational thinking that is going on inside the PLA is very apparent when the current attributes of the military strategy are compared to the previous maxims:⁴⁹

- From luring deep to fighting forward.
- From a war of annihilation to a campaign against key points.
- From a war of attrition to a decisive campaign with a decisive first battle.
- From waiting for the first blow to deterring the first blow by force.
- From a decisive campaign to an "offensive defence" campaign.
- From "advance and retreat boldly" to checking the initial enemy advance.
- From "front army campaign" to a "war zone" campaign.
- From the principles of mass to the principle of concentration of firepower.
- From four separate Service campaigns to joint operations.

Discussing the numerous levels on which wars could be contested, Wu Chunqin states, "Victory without war does not mean there is not any war at all. The wars one must fight are political wars, economic wars, science and technology wars, diplomatic wars, etc. To sum up in a word, it is a war of comprehensive

national power.”⁵⁰ Build-up of a comprehensive structure appears to be the key, according to Srikanth Kondapalli, who opines that China’s strategic orientation in this decade revolves around issues related to enhancing its “comprehensive national strength” with increasing its military capabilities as an important component; territorial ambitions based on historical claims and irredentist approaches.⁵¹

The method driving the calculus of “comprehensive national strength” relies on a dynamic process of measuring quantitatively and qualitatively key components of a country’s multi-layered comprehensive national power system. The US Department of Defence, in its *Annual Report to the Congress*, in 2000, evaluated that Chinese analysts measure four sub-systems of national power:

- *Material or hard power* (natural resources, economics, science and technology and national defence);
- *Spirit or soft power* (politics, foreign affairs, culture and education);
- *Coordinated power* (leadership organisation, command, management and coordination of national development); and
- *Environmental power* (international, natural and domestic).⁵²

China’s grand strategy seeks to preserve national independence and increase national power through the balancing of two competing objectives:

- Development of comprehensive national power (*zonghe guoli*); and
- Exploitation of existing “strategic configuration of power” (*shi*).⁵³

While discussing China’s grand strategy, Gurmeet Kanwal cites a RAND study, which discusses achieving the following three interrelated objectives vis-à-vis grand strategy:

- The preservation of domestic order and well-being in the face of different forms of social strife;
- Defence against persistent external threats to national sovereignty and territory; and
- Attainment and maintenance of geo-political influence as a major and perhaps, primary state.⁵⁴

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As David Shambaugh observes in his paper “PLA Strategy and Doctrine,” military doctrine is fundamental to all facets of China’s military modernisation. It is also the principal “driver” for force structure, personnel recruitment, military education, training regimes, hardware needs, research and development, weapons procurement and operational strategy. The Chinese White Paper in 2000 made an attempt to cover all these facets by giving greater transparency in the broad functioning of its armed forces. In studying these salient aspects of the defence policy enunciated by the Chinese, the major issues that were predominant suggested that economic development would continue receiving priority for enhancing “comprehensive national strength.”⁵⁵

It is observed that while in the Western military thinking, the basic doctrine is distinguished from the operational doctrine, in the PLA the operational doctrine came to be described as “operational principles” or “campaign theory” (*zhanyi*). Operational principles include concepts such as mobility, attrition, annihilation, close or deep-depth defence, layered defence, preemptive strikes, asymmetric warfare, trans-regional operations, offensive operations and other general concepts.⁵⁶ Active defence has long been a core feature of the PLA’s operational doctrine and has assumed greater significance with the passage of time.

Prevailing Conditions: A Shift from High-Tech to Informationisation

The Chinese White Paper on national defence issued in 2004, stated that the objective of the PLA was to win local wars under the conditions of informationisation. The priority would be placed on developing weaponry and equipment, building joint operational capabilities, and making full preparations in the battlefield. While continuing to adhere to the concept of People’s War, there was an emphasis on furtherance of developing strategies and tactics of the People’s War that are best suited in the present conditions of informationisation.

Thus, assuming that informationisation has been set as the goal of modernisation of its national defence and the armed forces, China has formulated a build-up of these strategies. The PLA aims to accomplish mechanisation and make major progress in informationisation by 2020, thus, by and large, reaching the goal of modernisation of national defence and the armed forces by the mid-21st century.⁵⁷ Although, China continues to reiterate that it is pursuing a national defence policy, which is purely defensive in nature, the 2008 Chinese White Paper on national defence reveals that it is working towards implementing a “military strategy of active defence,” for which China has formulated strategic guidelines

for building a fortified national defence with strong military forces.⁵⁸ Besides, China is endeavouring to build a strong national defence through modern military forces owing to concerns regarding “the superiority of the developed countries in economy, science, technology and military affairs.” While formulating its military strategy of active defence for the 21st century, Beijing is focussing on four crucial components: emphasising the prevention and deterrence of crises and wars; building high-tech military capabilities to win local wars in conditions of ‘informationisation’; enhancing the ability to counter various security threats; and, improving its military mobilisation and logistics mechanism. According to the November 2008 *China Brief*, the PLA is likely to accomplish the goal of mechanisation and make major progress in informationisation by 2020.⁵⁹

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According to Richard D Fisher Jr., China’s military modernisation in the current era has two basic phases: the first period, lasting from the reign of Deng Xiaoping probably into the early 2010s, can be viewed as the “catch-up” period to prepare for large regional military contingencies, such as Taiwan and Korea, and to consolidate control over the South China Sea; and, secondly, building on the accomplishments of the first but more tailored to the requirements of exercising global military influence. The beginning of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006-2010) marks a period of overlap.⁶⁰ The new technologies sought include the revolutionary technologies of unconventional warfare, electronic warfare, information warfare and intercontinental missiles. “Information and knowledge have changed the previous practice of estimating military strength by merely calculating the number of armoured divisions, airborne combined troops and aircraft carrier fighting groups. At present, it is also necessary to calculate invisible strengths, like computational ability, communication capacity, reliability, real-time reconnaissance ability and so on.”⁶¹ These elements of China’s emerging doctrine are designed to be effective in regional wars under high-tech conditions, which Chinese strategists have focussed on as a type of war China is likely to face in any near-term conflict, and also against information-based wars that are unconstrained by geographic regions or territories.

A military text published by the National Defence University, discussing “high-tech war and army quality building,” contains a theme that is increasingly popular in military circles. “[H]igh-tech war has already changed the traditional concept of ‘certain victory in numbers’.... Instead, one must rely upon superior quality to attain victory.”⁶² The PLA’s National Defence University textbook, *The Science of Military Strategy*, by Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi notes, “Under high-tech conditions, for the defensive side, the strategy of gaining mastery by striking only after the enemy has struck does not mean waiting for the enemy’s strike passively.”⁶³ Fundamentally transforming the definition of “first shot,” Peng and Yao further state that if “hostile forces such as religious extremists, national separatists and international terrorists challenged a country’s sovereignty, it could be considered as ‘firing the first shot’ on the plane of politics and strategy.”⁶⁴

Emphasising Integrated Joint Operations

The strategic guideline of active defence aims at winning local wars in conditions of informationisation and, thus, makes it requisite to meet the requirements of confrontation between war systems in modern warfare and taking integrated joint operations (IJO) as the basic approach. It is designed to bring the operational strengths of different Services and arms into full play, combine offensive operations with defensive operations, and give priority to the flexible application of strategies and tactics. The guideline stresses upon deterring crises and wars while strictly adhering to a position of self-defence, exercises prudence in the use of force, seeks to effectively control war situations and strives to “reduce the risks and costs of war. It calls for the building of a lean and effective deterrent force and the flexible use of different means of deterrence.”⁶⁵

The present decade focusses on the major evolution in strategy and operations with a visible shift from joint operations (JO) to IJO. Whereas JO still placed emphasis on individual Service divisions where command chains are still largely vertical, IJO begins to accept that Service divisions do not matter when command chains can be “flat” due to the levelling power of digital command, control and sensor systems.⁶⁶ China comprehends the need to grapple with new command methods and technologies. This implies in particular more use of computer simulation and automation. This source refers to the need to build “C4I” (command, control, communication, computers and intelligence). The focus on C4I also means paying more attention to ensuring that technology and doctrine are complementary.⁶⁷ Another considerable aspect involves improving and updating strategy. This refers particularly to the creation of a strategy that considers the far-reaching implications

of electronic warfare and its threats to command and control. China needs to build strategies to defend it against electronic wars under high-tech conditions, and to develop the capacity to fight such wars.⁶⁸

The evolution of China's military doctrine to "Limited War Under High-Tech Conditions" could also be a consequence of technological upgradation and the resulting "revolution in military affairs." The term "limited" could encompass various factors in the dimensions that could make it "limited" for China but not so "limited" for another weaker country in comparison. Thus, as it emerges, a war with an 'ideological bias' is unlikely to remain "limited."⁶⁹ According to Larry M Wortzel, the PLA's doctrine of Limited War Under High Technology Conditions makes it likely that Beijing will see conflict as an acceptable risk.⁷⁰

The 1991 Persian Gulf War raised military technology to even higher levels of significance, changing the national military strategy from preparing for "Local, Limited War" to "Local, Limited War Under High-Tech Conditions" (*jubu zhanzheng zai gaoji jishu tiaojian xia*)⁷¹ The display of high technology armaments and equipment during the Gulf War was instrumental towards gaining early gains. In contemporary warfare, gaining the initiative early after the outbreak of conflict, requires effective joint operations. Because the anticipated military contingencies were potentially high intensive wars, without effective coordinated efforts between the Services, it would be impossible to gain and maintain the initiative. Command and control and logistics at the operational level, therefore, had to be unified.⁷² PLA planning from thereon assumed that future military contingencies could erupt without much warning, therefore, rapid reaction forces had to be ready at a moment's notice.

Rapid Reaction Units

Since future contingencies are expected to involve only limited numbers of forces, the PLA undertook equipping and training of particular units as rapid response (*kuaisu*) units. The PLA also began to build and train "fist" (*quantou*) units—a PLA version of the US Army Rangers and Special Forces—to conduct tactical missions viewed as critical to the conduct of a specific operation. These elite "rapid response" and "fist" units were designed to become the nucleus of a modern PLA competent in joint warfare. The need for joint operations accentuated the PLA's weakness in air power support of ground and naval operations.⁷³ To execute war preparations, China has been specifically stressing the building of its elite troops. Since local wars are likely to be fought in border regions or on territorial waters with limited in-depth defence, mass mobilisation would not necessarily be required.

Militia units may continue to fulfill support functions such as reconnaissance, guides, patrol, battlefield rescue and transport, since they are more familiar with the environment. However, war-fighting *per se*, will be primarily conducted by streamlined, self-contained campaign formations, tactical formations, or rapid deployment units. This has influenced the PLA's concept of developing "fist" or "Rapid Reaction Forces" (RRFs) as pockets of excellence till it is able to fully upgrade the PLA.⁷⁴ It is engaged in the training of 40 RRF units, 20 of which have already been reportedly commissioned in different regions and units of the PLA with varying levels of development and capabilities. These RRFs are being developed in each of the seven MRs, in each of the 21 Group Armies and also by the service arms of the military in this decade. By the end of this decade, the Chinese leadership intends to change its armed forces into a "lean and mean" striking force by further reorganisations.⁷⁵

The concept of "rapid war, rapid resolution," requires a series of crippling strikes directed against vital areas and key points of the enemy's infrastructure. These critical targets include military and civilian command and control facilities, surveillance network for intelligence purposes, important airfields, air defence warning and control systems, logistic bases and forward logistic nodes and road and railway networks at critical choke points, etc. The concept does not aim at the destruction of the forces of the enemy but only at paralysing them by crippling these vital organs of command, control, communication, intelligence and logistics—thus, "winning victory with one strike." From the Chinese perspective, "gaining victory by striking first" is the fundamental means of offsetting the technological and logistic advantage that a more advanced military power would bring to the battlefield.⁷⁶

In 2003, the Central Military Commission made it clear that the basic sign of modernisation is informationisation. It is understood that the high technology war is an information technology war. The task of mechanisation has not been completed in the PLA and it remains in the semi-mechanised stage. Although the military mechanisation needs to develop, it has been recognised that the PLA must aim at engaging in information technology war rather than traditional mechanisation war. Therefore, China's military forces have to further develop information technology to improve mechanisation in order to simultaneously realise the twin goals of mechanisation and informationisation.⁷⁷

Chinese Defence Minister Chi Haotian who was instrumental in working towards promoting a "Modern, High-Tech People's War" in 1997 stated:

The first and foremost task of creatively developing a high-tech people's war is, in accordance with the principles for building crack, combined and efficient troops, to build revolutionised, modernised and standardised standing armed forces oriented to the needs of the 21st century, and also to build strong reserve forces which are "ample in quantity, well-trained, highly mobile, and well-equipped." In other words, the country will have a combination of elite standing troops and powerful reserve forces.⁷⁸

Chi also emphasised that China's vast geographical size is no longer described as strategically advantageous. In an age of information warfare, size merely implies a potential command and control problem for those forced instantly to defend themselves

In July 2008, the PLA promulgated the 7th revision of the Outline of Military Training and Evaluation (OMTE), the authoritative guide to how the PLA organises, implements, and evaluates training. In 2008, over 150 PLA units were involved in testing and validating the draft OMTE, which became standard widely across the entire force in early 2009. The new OMTE emphasises realistic training conditions, training in electromagnetic and joint environments as well as integrating new and high technologies into the force structure.⁷⁹ A PLA publication stated that "rapid occupation and stable control have become the basic roles of the army in operations in the information age."⁸⁰

The PLA General Staff Department (GSD) organised two exercises during September and October 2008—LIBING-2008 and LIANHE-2008 respectively, each of which involved elements from different MRs. Training between MRs is unusual and highlights the PLA's efforts to improve mobility and enhance training realism by forcing units to operate on unfamiliar terrain. Both exercises also accentuated command training necessary for effective combined-arms and joint operations, as stipulated in the new OMTE.⁸¹

Conclusion

An integral part of Chinese military doctrine since decades has been denial of information, strategic deception and achievement of psychological surprise. This trend gets reflected even in China's defence budget figures where Beijing

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has estimated its defence expenditure for 2008 at about US \$61 billion. However, this figure is much lower than the estimate made by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). According to SIPRI, China is likely to spend a staggering \$140 billion on the PLA Navy and PLA Air Force this year. In addition, according to the US Pentagon's 2007 estimates, China's likely defence expenditure will range between US \$97 and \$139 billion. In fact, during a US Senate Armed Services Committee testimony on 27 January 2009, Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, identified the threat of Chinese military build-up by stating, “The areas of greatest concern are Chinese investments and growing capabilities in cyber and anti-satellite warfare, anti-air and anti-ship weaponry, submarines and ballistic missiles.”⁸²

As China prepares for its 60th anniversary as a republic in October 2009, the armed forces appear to be receiving enhanced political guidance regarding their responsibilities and missions. The PLA's modernisation drive is intended to contribute militarily to enhancing China's comprehensive national power. It is also expected to ensure that China can fight and hold its own against a Western Coalition with armed forces trained and equipped to the revolution in military affairs (RMA) standards through the practice of ‘paralysis’ or ‘acupuncture’ warfare in the electronic or cyberspace domain. The Chinese find information warfare (IW) extremely attractive as they view it as an asymmetric tool that will ultimately enable them to overcome their relative backwardness in military hardware. In Chinese thinking, IW (*xinxi zhanzheng*) presents a level playing field for prevailing upon the adversary in future wars.

The steady augmentation of China's military capabilities during the course of this decade highlights the significance of challenges posed to its immediate and extended periphery. China's growing power and influence in Asia poses a strategic challenge to India. The Chinese armed forces are well ahead of their Indian counterparts in many areas of defence modernisation and the gap is slowly becoming unbridgeable. Whilst China's defence budget is growing annually between 16 and 18 per cent, India's defence budget struggles to match up at less than 2.0 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

It is possible that 15 to 20 years from now, China may attempt to force a military solution to the territorial dispute with India after settling the Taiwan and South China Sea issues. In case the present trend of inadequate allocations for defence modernisation and delays in decision-making continues, India may be forced to accept an unequal settlement due to its military weakness. China's resolve to fight and win local wars on its borders poses a challenge to the regional stability. China's strategic outlook and its grand strategy remain shrouded in secrecy, even as the armed forces are modernising rapidly and preparing to extend China's area of influence well beyond the first and second island chain and into the Indian Ocean.

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