

China's Military Strategy of Active Defence : Implications for India

Colonel Deepak Saini*

Introduction

China's '*reform and opening*' commenced in 1978. Consequently she has made rapid economic progress, improved domestic stability and interconnections with the outside world. Economic growth has also reduced threat of balkanisation; question of Taiwan though remains at large. Continued stability and economic growth has helped China in upgrading and reorganising her military on modern lines with expanding torrents of ambition and matching capability generation.

Some China watchers believe that possibility of outbreak of major hostilities between China and her neighbours particularly India¹ or amongst the ASEAN countries² is unlikely in the near future. This is based on inter-dependency of trade, globalisation, perceived increased transparencies being shown by the Chinese and presence of other regional powers in the region.

China hopes to avoid regional instability from affecting her border states, thereby her economic growth and domestic stability. However, changes in regional security will call for change in Chinese focus and her military deployment pattern which in turn will have vectoring consequences for the region. Reasons for instability include; Korean peninsula, Chinese interests in Myanmar, Pakistan and Afghanistan; disputed land borders with India, maritime boundary issue in South and East China Seas and her ability to access foreign resources and transporting them back to the mainland. A major interference in any such contingency would topple the apple cart. However, for the present, people argue that there is no imminent reason to believe that war is likely to happen in the region.

Growing Global Status and Future Leadership

In absence of the possibility of a conflict, emerging geopolitical and military balance between the USA, China, India and other powers in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is likely to influence day-to-day choices being made by smaller nations of the IOR. These choices will prove crucial in the later part of this century. In this sense, the question which arises is: Why do the Chinese have a policy of accepting accolades for growing into a global power, yet doing trifling little in terms of accepting commensurate responsibilities of shared interest of others in the region? Why is China's authoritarian regime unwilling to bind itself to globally accepted norms? Why is she hesitant to settle outstanding border disputes? Do the Chinese have a different 'design'?

Current situation is likely to continue, as the fourth generation Chinese leadership under President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao grooms the next generation slated to take over at 18th Party Congress in 2012. While Hu steps down as General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, he continues as Chairman, Central Military Commission (CMC) or Commander-in-Chief of the PLA. Thus, Hu will continue to wield influence over national policy and in deciding top positions of 'Sixth generation' leadership! As for the Fifth generation, current Vice President Xi Jinping, is expected to take over from Hu and Vice Premier Li Keqiang is to succeed Premier Wen Jiabao³. Therefore, there will be no major national policy related shifts.

China's Military Strategy: Relevance of Active Defence

PLA adopted the path of 'informatisation' in 2002 and continues to retain interest in modern combat and counter-insurgency operations without actually participating in either. Modern China's operational or 'active defence' (*jiji fangyu*) component of the 'Guidelines' proclaims non initiation of wars, except to defend her 'sovereignty and integrity'. On commencement of hostilities, however, based on principle of active defence, China intends taking initiative to annihilate the enemy. Strategically, the guideline is 'active defence'; in reality, emphasis is on taking initiative as in 'active offence'. Chinese Defence White Paper of 2008 propagates implementing military strategy of 'active defence; i.e. her military shall strike after the enemy has 'attacked'; but what construes an 'attack' is elusive and not restricted to 'military attack'. Also what is perceived as 'threat' to China's 'sovereignty and integrity' is not known to the world. Modern history has many examples wherein Chinese leaders have claimed their pre-emptive military acts as 'strategically defensive' actions. The 1962 Indo-China war is a live example, so also China's intervention in Korea (1950s) and similarly for Vietnam (1979). It is therefore axiomatic to conclude that China is likely to continue with pre-emptive military actions to advance her core interests.

Above mentioned Chinese intervention pattern suggests that she does not subscribe to the theory of awaiting a military strike passively nor shall she give away an advantageous position in politics or military tactics. She retains the ability of striking first under the all encompassing argument of military pre-emption being a 'strategically defensive' act and 'active defence' the new sheathed tool for achieving her aim.

China's Space Programme

China has an active Space programme⁴ which commenced in 1992 and has reached an advanced stage, by 2025 she intends landing astronauts on the moon. In Jan 2007 China conducted an Anti-Satellite Test using a ballistic missile carrying a kinetic kill vehicle. Though this was intended to be a demonstrator, it brought down the curtains on Chinese claim of using space only for peaceful purposes⁵.

On the military side, China is acquiring technologies to improve her space based C4ISR capabilities. In addition it would be prudent to assume that the Chinese would be working on abilities to degrade their opponent(s) use of satellites by capturing or destroying them. This act apart from impacting the psychology of the adversary also goes well with the overall theme of 'active defence'.

Strategic Missile Force (SMF) or the Second Artillery Corps (SAC)

The SMF is believed to be equipped with 110-140 nuclear missiles, including 15-20 DongFeng 3, about 18-20 DongFeng 4, IRBMs; 20 DongFeng 5, ICBMs; and 60-80 DongFeng 21, MRBMs. The new generation DongFeng 31 (deployed 2007) and its improved variant DongFeng 31A is close to operational deployment⁶. Additionalities include 1,000 conventional theatre missiles as also the DongFeng 21 C, conventional MRBM, DH-10 Land Attack Cruise Missiles (LACMs) and Julang 1 (one SSBN; 12 missiles) alongwith Julang 2 (two SSBNs; 12 missiles each)⁷. China is also making concerted efforts to operationalise her Anti Ship Ballistic Missiles⁸ designed to hit an air craft carrier at sea.

Western writings suggest that currently China has six operational missile bases⁹. The CMC controls all SMF units under a strict four level Chain of Command i.e. CMC – Missile Base – Missile Brigade – Launch Battalion. The organisational structure therefore lends itself to be an essential ingredient of the ‘active defence’ capability of the Chinese.

Modernisation of China’s Ground Forces

PLA’s transformation from an inward looking army into an offensive and manoeuvre oriented force is ongoing. Recent military exercises viz, STRIDE, SHARP, WARRIOR, etc, have focused on force projection, joint command and control and sound logistics.

The Chinese army is organised into 18 Group Armies (GA), which are corps-sized combined arms units with two or three GAs allotted to each of the seven Military Regions (MR). Balance of regular ground forces and all army reserve units are under control of the 30 Provincial Military Districts, tasked for border defence and internal security¹⁰, implying, the GAs are practically not defence oriented. In addition, PLA has adopted ‘Integrated Joint Operations’ concept for operations at campaign level in demanding and complex electromagnetic environments¹¹. Under the ‘active defence’ guidelines PLA ground forces are the lead agencies and their largest long range military exercise ‘STRIDE 2009’ was conducted in August 2009, involving movement of 50,000 troops of four MRs to fight in unfamiliar areas. This, as per a Chinese military specialist, also tested long range force projection capability¹². Was this to validate the concept of ‘active defence’ for the PLA?

Upgradation of Chinese Air Force (PLAAF)

PLAAF plays a lead role in China’s ‘anti access’ and ‘area denial’ operations and is of great significance for ‘active defence.’ Today PLAAF is being upgraded for operating beyond China’s borders. Development and operationalisation of her fifth generation fighter, J-XX and the C-919 transport aircraft for strategic airlift are indicators in this direction.

PLAAF’s current fighter aircraft inventory is changing very fast. For the present it comprises of about 1,000 J-7s and J-8 IIs, 95-116 J-11s, 70 Su-27s, 76 Su-30MKK multi role fighters and 24 Su 30 MK-2; as also some 60-80 indigenous J-10 multi role fighters and about 200 J-11 air superiority multi role aircrafts¹³. She is upgrading her intermediate-range bomber and ground-attack capabilities with JH-7 fighter-bombers of which at least five regiments have been raised¹⁴. China is also simultaneously creating infrastructure and airfields in border areas.

PLAAF’s is also developing force multipliers i.e. tankers, AEW and AWACS, intelligence and electronic warfare aircrafts. It may also be recalled that during the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, a PLAAF communication relay aircraft cruised over the disaster zone providing command and control support to rescue troops, demonstrating a new capability.

On the long range airlift capability front, PLAAF has 14 IL-76 MD aircrafts (1990 vintage); has ordered 30 IL-76s and four IL-78 tankers (in 2005) from Russia. China is developing an indigenous four-engine turboprop transport plane of the C-130 class to replace Y-8 (An -12 Cub). Once these aircrafts are in place, her power projection capabilities will get enhanced, a major beneficiary being her ‘active defence’ propagation.

Naval Warfare Capabilities

Traditionally, China is regarded as a land power, but this is changing. China argues that her economic and political power is contingent upon access to and use of the sea, therefore, a strong navy is required to safeguard such access as also to maintain territorial integrity. Modernisation of Chinese Navy (PLAN) has been driven by two factors; possibility of military conflict with Taiwan and more recently, the growing need to protect her sea lines of communication.

The naval component of ‘active defence’ is termed as ‘Offshore Active Defence.’ China’s 2008 Defence White Paper describes PLAN as a strategic service, developing the capability to operate in ‘distant waters.’ PLAN is organised into: North, East, and South Sea Fleets. The South Sea Fleet also has two marine brigades¹⁵. In addition, her aircraft carrier programme is also fairly advanced and is likely to fructify by 2015¹⁶.

China has also expanded her amphibious fleet, today she has nineteen Type 072-II/Yuting and Type 072-III/Yuting-II class Landing Ships Tank, as also Type 071 Landing Platform Docks, which can carry up to four large air cushion landing crafts. Current amphibious fleet of PLAN is capable of transporting an army division across the Taiwan Strait¹⁷. However, additional transport capacities can be generated with container/merchant ships.

China’s submarine force is the largest amongst Asian countries. She has eight to ten nuclear and about sixty diesel-electric submarines. Additionally, she is building four new types of submarines; Song class or Type 39/39G; the Yuan class or Type 41; the Shang class or Type 93, a nuclear powered attack submarine (SSN) and the Jin class or Type 94 a nuclear powered ballistic missile submarine (SSBN)¹⁸. China therefore, appears to be in a great hurry to develop into a global naval power in the very near future.

What after Attaining Resurgent ‘Middle Kingdom’ Status?

This is how China’s ‘*reform and opening*’ is unfolding along with the ‘*active defence*’ component of her ‘defensive’ military strategy. So what lies in future for her neighbours? Would China through diplomacy, military coercion, threat

or outright financial buy or blackmail transform them to serve as her 'subservient' or 'tributary' States? What shall be the sovereignty status of these countries by 2030 when China proclaims arrival into the new Middle Kingdom? What, therefore, is at stake for India after losing 23,000 sqkm of territory to China in 1962 and a pending claim of 92,000 sqkm mainly in the East (Arunachal Pradesh).

Incidents of recent past are indicators of impending future. Therefore, we need to reconstruct issues of waiving off the need of Indian passport to travel to China for people of Arunachal Pradesh; stapled Chinese visas for Indians born in Kashmir, denial of visa to the GOC-in-C, Northern Command for a planned high level defence contact by Beijing. In addition, China's recent denial of sending 11,000 troops to occupy areas of Gilgit and Baltistan in Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), while Pakistan's acceptance on presence of Chinese troops on its Northern borders has had some repercussions. This issue was subsequently re-coloured by China stating that presence of troops was on reasons of preventing an internal situation in Xinjiang and to construct tunnels, for an oil pipeline and a railway line to help China in obviating 6,000 mile sea route by directly transporting oil into the heart of her main land through Pakistan. Not to be missed is the shift in focus from India's Eastern areas (where the claimants are one on one) into the cauldron of J&K; and in specific the so called 'Northern Areas' which are not regarded as part of POK by Pakistan.

Parallels need to be drawn between North Korea and Pakistan. The sinking of the South Korean Cheonan class (1,200 tonne) warship by North Korea and its silent acceptance by South Korea and the USA, her biggest ally and peace keeper of the region, is notable. The answer to this passivity lies in North Korea possessing nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, a large defence force, an unpredictable leadership and China's unstinted support. Same is the case with Pakistan. Today's Pakistan has nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, a large defence force, is internally unstable and has China's unstinted support while continuing to remain a 'strategic ally' of America for the 'war on terror'.

Conclusion

China's recent clash with Japan over territorial waters, her demonstrative action of planting the Chinese flag in the deepest portion of the disputed South China Sea are indicators of future hot spots based on China's claims and her will to resolve the disputes by force, if necessary, amongst militarily weaker claimants. It should therefore be a foregone conclusion that China's fast paced modernisation of the PLA, the SMF, her space programme coupled with the policy of 'active defence' where preemption is a 'strategically defensive act' would help her in hardening of stance with her other neighbours where she has geopolitical and economic interests with pending boundary disputes and who may not accept her hegemony meekly.

It is in the light of China's shift in focus from India's Eastern areas to J&K including the 'Northern Areas' of Pakistan Occupied Kashmir that we need to see the situation morphing by 2030 into a different hue. Herein lies a strong possibility of this complete area being termed as a 'Core Area of Interest' by the Chinese for securing their land route for energy etc. In this sense it will be only axiomatic to presume that in case the J&K imbroglio shows signs of resolution by way of merging into mainstream India the issue may serve as a catalyst or a 'threat' to China's 'sovereignty and integrity' and call for activating her 'active defence' postulate. Therefore, there should be no misconception about maintaining credible military deterrence which we should be able to muster on our own while continuing diplomatic efforts for stabilising the region. In the recent past Indian leadership has taken steps towards this direction, however, much more needs to be done and at a much faster pace.

***Colonel Deepak Saini** was commissioned into the Dogra Regiment (4 DOGRA) on 20 Dec 1986. He is presently serving at the HQ Andaman and Nicobar Command.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXL, No. 582, October-December 2010.