

PLA in the Deng Era

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BACKGROUND

The Deng Xiaoping era began with his return to power for the third time in 1976 when Mao Zedong went to keep his appointment with Marx. The last nearly twenty years in the life of a nation of 1.2 billion have been dominated by Deng. He has made his indelible mark in China's history like many that have gone before him. His period in particular has been characterised by momentous developments; such as the Four Modernisations, China's emergence as a major global economic player and the improved capabilities of its armed forces. A conjunction of these factors has the potential to make China a leading nation in the world by the second decade of the 21st Century. This is a major contribution by any standards. An area where Deng's imprint will last for a long time is in the nation's security policy and on the PLA. As the era draws to a close it is time to assess this contribution.

The PLA has always been a dominant institution. It was officially founded on August 1, 1927, some six years after the Communist Party of China (CPC) was formed. But, in the initial years, till perhaps as late as the 1940s, it was the PLA that held the premier position in the organisation and was the unifying factor. It has been said, perhaps with some exaggeration, that it is neither the Party nor the Government that set up the Army, but the PLA that set up both. In the period of transition to the third generation leadership, after Deng finally passes from the scene, it is again the PLA that can be expected to play a dominant role.

Long years of continuous conflict have honed the PLA into a formidable fighting machine, but essentially for the type of wars that it was required to fight in its own special operational environment. This capability was effective perhaps till the mid 1960s. With Marshal Peng De Huai's fall in 1959 and Lin Biao's rise, there was a sharp downturn. Professionalism was downplayed and instead political correctness was emphasised. It was better to be Red than an expert. Though the Cultural Revolution did not affect the Army perhaps to the same extent as the rest of society, the PLA was not entirely isolated. As a result of this and with the break with the Soviet Union, by 1975 the PLA had

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reached its nadir. Deng was quick to spot this. In July 1975 when he was the Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) he launched an attack on the complacency and factionalism in the PLA. He accused it of being 'overstaffed, lax, arrogant and lazy'. In his assessment, the PLA was "in considerable disarray" having lost its fine traditions and had become a bloated outfit. "unable to make a good showing in combat"¹.

Less than a year later Deng was purged again, unable to improve the PLA. His words proved prophetic. In the war to "teach a lesson" to Vietnam in early 1979, when Deng was ironically back again in power, as the PLA's Chief of General Staff and Vice Chairman of the CMC, it suffered a major military set-back. The immediate analysis after the war blamed the PLA's backward state of weapons and equipment, due to which it was unable to "conduct a modern war".² But a detailed assessment by Marshal Xu Xianggian the then Defence Minister, concluded later by asserting that;

"We must admit that our Army cannot meet with the demands of modern war. There are many questions concerning the use of modern weapons, the organisation of joint operations, and bringing the various armed services into play.... These are acute contradictions before us and we must make arduous efforts to resolve this. Otherwise, even if our Army has modern weapons, it cannot use them and bring these into full play....We must equip ourselves with advance military thinking to meet the needs of modernising our national defence and the needs of future war".³

Marshal Xu's report put the onus of military reconstruction not on acquiring weapons and equipment but allotted priority to modernising national defence thinking and on updating military doctrine. This was in tune with Deng's own assessment of the world situation in the late 1970s. Even though there were many unfavourable developments, the overall situation was favourable to China. In any case, a major world war was not likely.

DENG'S STRATEGIC REASSESSMENT

This allowed Deng to make a major reassessment of the world strategic environment. From Mao's earlier dictum of preparing for "an early war", a "major war" and a "nuclear war", Deng made a major departure. He said that a major war between superpowers was not likely in the near future. Instead, competition between nations will be more in the sphere of "National Defence Construction".⁴ What was important at this stage was to develop "comprehensive national strength". This concept of "comprehensive national strength" was to be the foundation of China's security policy in the first decade and more of Deng's rule. According to this formulation, military power is but only

one component of overall national power. Other and even more important elements are political stability, ideological purity, cultural prosperity, educational, scientific and technological achievements and economic growth.⁵ It was this logic of Deng that allocated priorities to the Four Modernisations programme in 1978, with Military Modernisation as the last priority. According to Premier Zhou Enlai's earlier plan of June 1975, defence modernisation had been accorded third place, ahead of science and technology.⁶

The benign strategic environment that China now enjoyed for the first time since the mid nineteenth century allowed Deng Xiaoping a more relaxed view of the need to modernise the PLA. But the areas that needed to be addressed were clear. First, was to be doctrinal changes that would guide the conduct of war. Next, would come organisational and structural changes in the PLA. Finally, would be the need to modernise its weapons and equipment.

CHANGES IN MILITARY DOCTRINE

Military doctrine is generally accepted as a system of views that a State holds at a given time on the purposes and character of a possible war, on the preparations of the country and its armed forces for it and in the methods of waging war. In the case of Marxist China its military doctrine evolved based on historic experiences and the characteristics of its conflicts since the 1920s. Mao Zedong had synthesised these experiences into the People's War Doctrine.

The essence of People's War Doctrine is contained in the article "On Protracted War" written by Mao in 1938. A fundamental essence of protracted war was that it was a method by which a weaker side would tackle a stronger one. This has been a recurring phenomenon in Chinese history and one which has been deeply analysed in the past. Mao borrowed and expanded on these concepts. He wrote that a protracted war has to be conducted in three stages; the Strategic Defensive, the Strategic Stalemate, and the Strategic Offensive. Such a war would also help mobilise the people, which was both a requirement and central to the goal of fighting a successful People's War.⁷ Mao believed that war must be protracted at the strategic stage but brief at the campaign and tactical stages.⁸

This broad strategic doctrine was eminently successful in China's Revolutionary Wars and the War Against Japan. It incorporated the principles of "Strategic Retreat" and "Luring the Enemy in Deep". This was necessitated by the Red Army's relative weakness as well as to conserve its strength for the ultimate battle. But it was not a passive approach. Even in retreat the enemy must be guided to selected areas and then "compelled to take on heavy

burdens"⁹ The tactical essence of Mao's doctrine is incorporated in six principles that remained valid for quite some time :-

- To withdraw in the face of an enemy advance.
- Advance if the enemy withdraws.
- Relative strength at the strategic level one to five will suffice.
- Tactically, five to one is needed.
- Live off the enemy; ie depend on the resources that you get from him after his defeat.
- Ensure close cohesion between the Army and the People.¹⁰

CHALLENGE TO PEOPLE'S WAR DOCTRINE

The relevance of People's War in post liberation China should have become a major area of debate. Was this relevant in its entirety in the strategic environment that China confronted in the early 1950s? It can be argued that as a strategy of the weak against the strong this continued to have relevance. Yet, in all the actual wars that the PLA has fought since 1949, these principles have never actually been adopted. None of China's conflicts were within its own territory. From the Korean War (1950-53), to the war "to teach a lesson" to Vietnam in 1979, all were fought outside China's borders. No efforts were made to "lure the enemy in deep"; instead the doctrine followed was one of "striking the enemy in his nest" or "defending beyond the gates", where the People's War Doctrine was hardly applicable. Instead the strategy adopted was one of "self defence counter-attack".

Mao's "People's War" doctrine was challenged during his lifetime. More important was the debate to modernise the PLA in the late 1950s. Here the main protagonist was Marshal Peng De Huai, the Commander of the Chinese Communist Volunteers (CCV) in Korea in the mid 1950s. He and his group termed Mao's People's War Doctrine as "romantic nostalgia". He was soon purged not as much for his opposition to military doctrine, but for his criticism of the "Great Leap Forward".

The doctrine of "People's War" survived till Mao's death. To challenge the Great Helmsman during his life was to commit political suicide and worse. Another reason was that the concept of People's War encompassed a fairly wide spectrum of activities. It could be interpreted both as specific instructions for strategic planning as well as broad principles concerning war. One such interpretation was made by Yang Shangkun, the then Vice Chairman of the CMC when he said that the doctrine of People's War, "...is by no means the

end of the truth. On the contrary, it has opened up a correct and wide path for us to understand new problems in military spheres".¹¹ In a general way, the People's War can be extended to mean almost anything. Thus, Mao's thoughts can be considered of permanent value much in the manner as Sun Tzu's "Art of War" or Clausewitz's "On War".¹²

Deng's second reincarnation in the mid 1970s already had an effect on PLA thinking. Therefore, soon after Mao Zedong's death, even before Deng was reinstated again for the third time, the People's War doctrine was challenged vigorously. By the end of the 1970's the Soviet threat did not loom as large. Detente with the USA had already taken place. These new conditions required a fresh analysis of China's strategic environment and the formation of a new doctrine for the PLA. In an article in the Beijing Review in August 1977, Su Yu a leading military theoretician said :-

"(There must be) continuous development of our tactics under new conditions and flexible approach to the various methods of fighting according to objective conditions.... Our methods of fighting should change and develop.... We must be flexible in deploying our troops and in revising and changing our tactics, and we should constantly study and acquire up-to-date tactics resulting from the development of techniques and equipment....(therefore) future wars against aggression will be People's War Under Modern Conditions".¹³

PEOPLE'S WAR UNDER MODERN CONDITIONS

The final abandoning of People's War doctrine came much later. A review of the global security conditions was a pre-requisite. The Conference took the form of an enlarged CMC meeting in May-June 1985 with Deng Xiaoping in the chair and all senior military leaders of the PLA present. The final report that emerged was titled "Strategic Changes to the Guiding Thoughts on National Defence Construction and Army B".¹⁴ The main spirit behind the impending change was Deng's reassessment of the global strategic situation. He noted that:

"There should be a cognitive change in the basic assessment of the international situation for the present and the future; in accordance with this scientific understanding and judgment, there should also be a change in policy; there should also be a change in the guiding thoughts for national defence construction".¹⁵

In Deng's assessment a world war was unlikely to break out. Hence a more pragmatic approach needed to be adopted to military construction. Competition in the new era will emerge from economic conditions. Priority should

then be accorded to economic development and science and technology. Only when China's economy became more powerful would money be devoted to weapons acquisition for the military. It was on the basis of this new thinking that the China Academy of Military Sciences prepared a monograph on Strategy which became a text book for the higher echelons of the PLA. In this the doctrine was "People's War Under Modern Conditions" and the strategy came to be known as "Active Defence".¹⁶

STRATEGY OF ACTIVE DEFENCE

The first reference to the Strategy of Active Defence is to be found in Mao Zedong's article, "Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War" written in December 1936. Even here it was clearly spelt out that active defence is essentially "offensive defence", that is "defence through decisive engagements".¹⁷ This was further elaborated in an article by Mi Zhenyu, "China's Strategic Plan for Active Defence", when he stressed that, "Active defence is not just defence, but offence as part of defence"; a dialectic synthesis of offence and defence. He went on to say that "Strategic counter-attack is the most vigorous and most lively stage of defensive warfare".¹⁸

The basic assumption of Active Defence is that China will still have to fight from a position of comparative weakness. Therefore, in order to prevent the enemy from achieving a quick decision, China will still have to wage a protracted war. But there is now an acceptance that a protracted war will result in a tremendous loss to China. A China today that is increasingly industrialised can ill afford a devastation of its infrastructure that a modern war implies. Therefore, it will be imperative to win victory as rapidly as possible.¹⁹

It has been assumed that China's forces will be comparatively weak in the initial stages. But use of inferior strength to triumph over a superior enemy has been considered a traditional strength of the PLA. There is also an acceptance that modern war was more fierce, complex and more destructive. More manpower and material are likely to be consumed. Hence there will be greater reliance on the masses and their mobilization. At the same time every effort must be made to improve the technology of weapons and equipment for the future. There is also the need to evolve new strategies. There is a new interpretation to Mao's thinking in the new approach :

"You fight in your way, and we fight in ours; continue to fight when winning, and get out when one is not; change as the enemy changes and never stick to a set pattern".²⁰

Active Defence visualises three kinds of war that might involve China.

A world war; a large scale war of aggression against China by a foreign power; and border conflicts or limited war. The most likely war would be of the third variety along China's borders.²¹

The adoption of the People's War Doctrine and the strategy of Active Defence led to significant changes in the PLA. First, was a major reduction in forces, both by eliminating the numbers of Military Regions and other static formations, as well as cutting down on the strength of the PLA. This was essential in order to direct money towards military modernisations. Second, was in professionalising the PLA through enhancing academic qualifications, enlarging the scope and numbers of military institutions and finally by reintroducing military ranks as well as regularising service conditions. There was little if any acquisition of weapons or modernising the defence arsenal. Throughout the 1980s PLA budget remained largely static and in actual terms came down by about 40 per cent.²²

Deng Xiaoping's particular contribution was in laying down the broad formulation of overall policy. In his judgment, "peace and development are the two main issues of the modern world". In this condition peace-time construction will be the centerpiece of new strategic guidance. Hence military struggle must be subordinate to the Party's basic line. Also the building of the armed forces must be subordinate to the goal of national economic construction.²³

POST GULF WAR CHANGES

The 1990-91 Gulf War shook the PLA out of its complacency. There were two major consequences. One, was the end of the Cold War. With Soviet Union's dismemberment China lost its leverage in the bipolar global confrontation. The USA emerged as the sole superpower. China recognises this US pre-eminence, but qualifies it by saying that the world situation is in transition to multipolarity, implying that it will not last long. Second, was the enormous military technological superiority of the US. China assessed that it was 40 years behind the USA in military technology and needed to catch up fast. Accordingly, the PLA budget increased by 15-20 per cent annually in the 1990s.²⁴

To assess the lessons of the Gulf War the PLA undertook a number of studies. Most of these brought out the enormous strides the PLA had to take to catch up with the West in military technology. In particular, some of these lessons were :-

- Electronic warfare was decisive to the result of the entire war.

- High tech weaponry was the key to victory in future wars.
- Air and naval power were critical arms in modern warfare.
- Overall capability is measured by rapid response and fast deployment.
- Logistical support capability is as important as actual fighting strength.²⁵

Jiang Zemin was even more emphatic in supporting the cause of science and technology in war. In August 1991 he said that :

“The Gulf War makes us further see the functions of science and technology in contemporary war. Even though we do not believe in weapons as a decisive factor in war, we do believe in human beings as a decisive factor. Nonetheless, advanced weapons are after all important. The functions of science and technology cannot be ignored.”²⁶

The importance of military modernisation as a key component of Active Defence Strategy was further emphasised by Liu Huaqing in 1993. He said that :

“The mission of our armed forces is to safeguard our territory, sea, air and sea rights and interests, to maintain national integrity and to defend national security. Therefore, we pursue an active defence strategy; ie, military modernisation serves the needs of territorial and off-shore defence and of defence readiness and combat effectiveness under contemporary conditions in order to win high tech local and limited war with the available weapons and equipment”.²⁷

The challenge for the new era then is to be able to deal with local wars in a high technology environment. The CMC meeting in January 1996 called on the PLA to make “preparations for military struggle”, to set its eyes on local warfare under modern technology conditions, stress operational preparations by key arms, services and units, and to study new tactics and new methods of fighting based on existing equipment. PLA training must especially emphasise winning local wars under modern, high-tech conditions.²⁸

But local wars are essentially limited wars, and limited wars impose both political and military restrictions. The importance of political objectives has remained uppermost in Chinese thinking. Victory in high-tech limited wars will not be measured in terms of territory occupied or casualties inflicted, but on a wide variety of political objectives. These objectives may vary from “imposing a military and economic embargo on the enemy”, “deceiving him”, and “waging psychological warfare on him” to “destroying his key political and economic installations”.²⁹

DENG'S CONTRIBUTION TO RESTRUCTURING THE PLA

Deng made a number of major changes in restructuring the PLA. In 1985 he decided to reduce one million soldiers from its strength. No doubt much of this was cosmetic. But this enabled him to get rid of many old and unfit soldiers at all levels. By 1988 ranks were reintroduced in the PLA. A number of other laws were enacted formalising recruitment policies, service conditions, reserve liabilities etc. By these and other measures Deng managed to reduce the age of all commanders from platoon to army level by an average of about 10 years over a 5-year period.

A number of steps were taken to improve education standards. All officers now were required to be high school graduates and qualify from a service academy. Within the PLA training was expanded. Well over one hundred training institutions were recommissioned, restructured or expanded. All senior officers were required to undergo a number of training courses, some of long duration.

Senior ranks in the Army were now changed regularly every five years along with the five-yearly meetings of the Communist Party and the National People's Congress. High positions in the PLA have been changed regularly in recent years based on professional competence and political reliability. The Tiananmen incident had exposed chinks in PLA leadership. Many senior commanders expressed deep reservation about employing the PLA against the people. Some objected outright. Deng used the Yang brothers to purge these elements.³⁰ Having done their work they too were eliminated in 1992. In their positions he placed two thoroughly reliable long march veterans, Liu Huaqing and Zhang Zhen. They were then both in their late 70s and became the Vice Chairmen of the CMC. Liu also became a permanent member of the Politburo, the first PLA man in some years. The post of Secretary General of the CMC was left unfilled.

A new generation of leaders have been chosen from the PLA to hold key positions from autumn next year. That these positions can be selected and earmarked from so early reflects the confidence of the current leadership. General Zhang Wannian will take over from Liu Huaqing as the first Vice Chairman of the CMC and a member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo. This may well indicate that the military will from now on be permanently allocated a position in the supreme decision making organ of the nation at the Politburo level. It also reflects efforts at coopting the PLA to facilitate Jiang's succession after Deng. Zhang's sudden rise is largely due to his closeness to Jiang Zemin. Chi Haotian, the present Defence Minister, will be the second Vice Chairman of the CMC. Deng's long term military secre-

tary, General Wang Ruilin has been accommodated at two senior positions. He will be both the deputy secretary general of the CMC as well as the Director of the General Political Department of the PLA. Changes at other levels have also been made, to be carried out next year.

CONCLUSION

Deng's health is fading. He is slowly but surely passing from the scene. But till such time as he is in this world, his influence on the nation and in particular over the PLA will remain great. For seventy years he has been closely associated with the PLA at a high decision making level, even though there were many breaks. In the last two decades he has directly shaped the PLA. During this time the PLA was entirely under Party control. Its aspirations for military weapons upgradation remained checked. Apart from occasional shifts, such as the Tiananmen incident and the recent Taiwan crisis, the PLA has generally played a positive role. It is to be seen as to how the PLA reacts, over time, when Deng is no longer on the scene.

NOTES

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21. Shulong Chu n. 16.
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30. Yang Shangkung was the President and Vice Chairman of the CMC. Yang Baibing his step brother was Director of the PLA's General Political Department and Secretary General of the CMC