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# China's Strategic Culture and its Impact on the People's Liberation Army



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United Service Institution of India (USI)  
New Delhi

## About the Monograph

This monograph explores China's strategic culture and its impact on the People's Liberation Army (PLA), shaped by history, philosophy, and geopolitical factors. Drawing from Confucianism, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, Maoist doctrine, and modern strategic thought, China's military approach emphasises deception, psychological warfare, and strategic patience. The PLA's operational history—from the Korean War to border conflicts with India, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam—reveals a pattern of calculated aggression under the guise of 'Defensive Counterattacks'.

Key tenets of China's strategic culture include the 'Middle Kingdom' ideology, a preference for asymmetry, the use of surprise, and strict central control over military decision-making. The concept of 'Active Defence' justifies offensive actions framed as defensive measures, reinforcing China's pursuit of regional dominance. The monograph also examines China's contemporary military strategy, including its emphasis on non-contact warfare, space-based surveillance, and cyber warfare.

Understanding China's strategic culture provides crucial insights into its long-term geopolitical ambitions and military manoeuvres, particularly in the Indian Ocean and the Indo-Pacific. India, as a key regional player, must navigate China's assertive posture with strategic foresight, ensuring readiness in diplomacy, defence, and regional cooperation to effectively counterbalance Chinese influence.

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## Introduction

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A nation's strategic culture will flow from its geography, resources, history, experience, society, and political structure. The Peloponnesian Wars recorded that each state linked its military capabilities to its constitution. 2,400 years later, around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the Germans had a continental school of strategic thought (conflict with land powers). Historically, Britain avoided maintaining a continental army, but instead focused its resources and strategy on employing sea power to bring economic pressure to bear on its adversaries. Britain eschewed the maintenance of a large army and preferred an indirect approach. Israel, on the other hand, due to a lack of geographical depth, focusses the efforts of its small but educated population towards technological skill which contributes to a strategic culture that emphasises on strategic pre-emption, initiative, offensive action, and the use of advanced technology.

China has a 3,700-year-old history and its relative isolation has produced a unique strategic culture. Beijing's rise in general, the growth of Chinese military power, coupled with it being a land neighbour and rival power of India, make the understanding of China's strategic culture necessary for several reasons:

- A lack of understanding of a strategic culture different from India could lead to misperceptions.
- An understanding of Chinese strategic culture will give a better idea of Chinese decision-making. It may give Indian strategic thinkers greater insight and transparency than they

would otherwise have and provide greater insights into behaviour that otherwise would appear strange or anomalous.

- So far as the Chinese are concerned, they consider their strategic culture as an important determinant of their behaviour and that of others.
- It can guide India in responding effectively to its neighbour's moves.

## **Defining Strategic Culture**

“Strategic Culture is as an enduring and relatively stable cultural characteristic expressed in strategic behaviour of a state. It is a concentrated reflection of historical experience and characteristics of a nation or civilisation, pursuit of values, and cultural psychology in the strategic arena. Strategic behaviour of a state reflects the realistic requirements of a state here and now. Meanwhile, this behaviour hitherto is deeply rooted in historically formed tradition of Strategic Culture”

Science of Military Strategy, 2005<sup>1</sup>

“Strategic Culture reflects a society's values regarding the use of force”

Thomas G Mahnken<sup>2</sup>

In general, cultural traditions influence systems of thought. It is also a product of education and is the natural flowering of ideas, thoughts, and writing that emerge from a liberal and broad-based system, which encourages a spirit of enquiry, innovation, and reflection. Nations where primary and secondary education revolve around ideology, theology, excessively structured syllabi, and distorted history have seen the development of strategic cultures that are rigid and run the risk of being consumed by change, or

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destroyed from within. Soviet Russia and Pakistan are extreme examples of such manifestations.

A note of caution is in order here. Culture influences but does not determine decision-making. It is important, but not the only variable that shapes decision-making behaviours. Shifts in the pattern may be sudden, usually owing to a shock, or gradual.<sup>3</sup> More persistent patterns that are resistant to change over longer time frames can be classified as 'Deep'.





# Chapter 1

## China's Strategic Culture

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### Influencing Factors

Most Chinese think tanks and officers believe that ancient Chinese values and warfighting principles remain relevant today. Ancient Chinese military classics like *The Art of War*, as well as literary classics are central to the identity of the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>4</sup> Among other influencing factors of China's strategic culture are its geography, historical events, and the lasting influence of



Figure 1: Influencing Factors

certain individuals such as Confucius and Mao Tse-tung. In addition, the military campaigns of the PLA will give an insight into the thinking that goes into the decisions behind sending the PLA to war and how they fight them. These influencing factors are discussed in brief.

## **Confucius**

Confucius was a teacher and philosopher who lived from 551 BC to 479 BC. None of his original writings survived. His views are expressed in a text known as the *Analects* that was produced years after his death and contains short statements. It covers a range of topics, from how a gentleman should eat with proper decorum to how a ruler should govern. The vision of morality sketched in the *Analects* lays emphasis on education, rituals, and relationships (that are hierarchical yet provide benefits to both superior and inferior). He viewed political relationships as family relationships and emphasised on four specific relationships:

- Ruler and minister.
- Father and son.
- Elder and younger brother.
- Husband and wife.

In each, the former was expected to protect the latter, and in return, the latter was expected to be obedient. Social order was said to be threatened whenever people failed to act according to their prescribed roles. A ruler governing, according to Confucian principles, would guarantee order within his borders and expand the state since people would flock to live in such a peaceful and well-governed land.<sup>5</sup> In today's PLA, military leaders are expected to take on the role of the benevolent ruler. A military leader is expected to act as a father or an elder brother to his soldiers and to care for their well-being, while demanding discipline, loyalty, and respect from them in exchange. Leaders are also expected to

serve as ethical role models in the Confucian mould for their troops and replicate the same moral behaviour for gaining civilian support.

## Literary Influences

The PLA teaches its rank and file that they are heirs to an ancient Chinese legacy. The PLA handbooks routinely refer to battles fought 4,000 years ago for basic lessons and their leaders seek guidance from ancient texts for modern operations. There are four Chinese classic novels or four masterworks:

- *Romance of the Three Kingdoms.*
- *Water Margin.*
- *Journey to the West.*
- *The Plum in the Golden Vase.*

Every level of Chinese society has been and is familiar with the plots, characters, key incidents, and quotations—just as Indians are familiar with the plot and characters of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Those who could not read these novels for themselves know them through tea-house story-tellers, Chinese opera, card games, and more recently through novels, cartoons, films, video games, and theme parks. These classics were written between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries and the settings vary between 168 AD and 1127 AD. They are about heroic warriors and clever strategists whose exploits in the field of statecraft and military are celebrated in Chinese literature.

Two 14<sup>th</sup> Century novels in particular—*Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and *Water Margin* (also known as *Outlaws of the Marsh*)—remain important touchstones for the PLA. The heroes of these novels are depicted as embodiments of both Sun Tzu's martial principles and Confucius' social and political values. In *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, the heroes are powerful military and political leaders, while in *Water Margin*, they are outlaws and bandits. Their different social positions notwithstanding, all fight cleverly,

courageously, and in the name of righteous government and fair treatment of the common people. The present-day PLA publications frequently refer to these novels as object lessons in the efficacy of specific military tactics. Mao extensively cited these two novels in his writings. Most of the tactics and strategies depicted in these novels mirror those described in the seven military classics.<sup>6</sup>

## Seven Military Classics

Seven military texts of ancient China were canonised during the Song Dynasty in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century. Just as aspiring bureaucrats were required to learn and know the work of Confucius, imperial officers were required to read some or all of the military classics to merit promotion. The seven military classics include:

- *Six Secret Teachings* – Jiang Ziya.
- *The Methods of the Sima* – Sima Rangju.
- *The Art of War* – Sun Tzu
- *Wuzazu* – Xie Zhaozhe.
- *Wei Liaozi* – Wei Liao.
- *Three Strategies of Huang Shigong* – Wang Xuanming.
- Questions and Replies between Tang Taizong and Li Weigong.

These separate works were written between 500 BC and 700 AD and preserve the essential tenets of strategy distilled from the experience of China's ancient military tradition. The wide range of topics includes military strategy and tactics, logistics (mostly related to horses), the use of spies, deception, and the development and use of military technology.

While *The Art of War* is famous due to its widespread translation in the West, it is actually a part of the seven military classics—the remaining six being equally relevant in Chinese eyes. These have been read by Mao Tse-tung, Japan's Yamamoto, and Vietnam's Giap, and were the inspiration for their respective strategies. These

books are also referred to for modern subjects beyond the military, such as leadership and corporate strategy.<sup>7</sup>

## Thirty-Six Stratagems

The original hand-copied paperback, which is the basis of the current version, was believed to have been discovered in China's Shaanxi province, of an unknown date and author, and put into print by a local publisher in 1941. The *Thirty-Six Stratagems* only came to the public's attention after a review of it was published in the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Guangming Daily newspaper on 16 Sep 1961. It was subsequently reprinted and distributed with growing popularity. The *Thirty-Six Stratagems* are divided into six chapters containing six stratagems each. The first three chapters generally describe tactics for use in advantageous situations, whereas the last three chapters contain stratagems that are more suitable for disadvantageous situations. These 36 Chinese proverbs are related to 36 battle scenarios in Chinese history and folklore, predominantly of the Warring States period and the Three Kingdoms period.<sup>8</sup> The 36 stratagems mentioned in the text are mentioned in the Fig. 2 on page 16.<sup>9</sup>

The PLA draws the following lessons from the ancient classics:

- **Avoid or Minimise War if Possible.** The tactics of winning without fighting include diplomatic negotiations, breaking down enemy morale, and luring away enemy troops. When war is unavoidable, the military classics discourage total annihilation of the enemy, preferring to cow him rather than wipe him out.
- **Victory Depends on Careful Planning.** Chinese martial tradition emphasises the need to plan a war and creating the conditions for victory well before it begins, by studying the terrain, the enemy's strengths, and weaknesses, and making an honest assessment of one's own. This tradition stresses realism over ideals and flexibility over absolute tactical principles.

Stratagems in Superior Position		Stratagems in Confrontation		Stratagems in Attack	
01 瞒天过海	Cross the sea without the emperor's knowledge [Openly deceive but hide your true intentions]	07 无中生有	Create something from nothing [Fake or exaggerate something]	13 打草惊蛇	Stomp the grass to scare the snake [Stir things up to scare and impress]
02 围魏救赵	Besiege Wei to rescue Zhao [Attack another to save your target]	08 暗渡陈仓	Openly repair the gallery roads, but sneak through the passage of Chencang [Advance through a secret path]	14 借尸还魂	Borrow a corpse to resurrect the soul [Inject life into something old]
03 借刀杀人	Kill with a borrowed sword [Attack using the strength of another person]	09 隔岸观火	Watch the fires burning across the river [Let them fight your fight while you rest and observe]	15 调虎离山	Lure the tiger off its mountain lair [Decrease their position of strength]
04 以逸待劳	Wait at leisure while the enemy labors [Wait at ease for the exhausted enemy]	10 笑里藏刀	Hide a knife behind a smile [Befriend and attack by surprise]	16 欲擒故纵	In order to capture, one must let loose [Let go to recapture later]
05 趁火打劫	Loot a burning house [Hit them when they are down]	11 李代桃僵	Sacrifice the plum tree to preserve the peach tree [Sacrifice small for big gains]	17 抛砖引玉	Tossing out a brick to get a jade gem [Throw out small to attract big]
06 声东击西	Make a sound in the east, then strike in the west [Fake to the right; attack to the left]	12 顺手牵羊	Take the opportunity to pilfer a goat [Alertly exploit small things along the way]	18 擒贼擒首	Defeat the enemy by capturing their chief [Convince the leader and the rest will follow]
Stratagems in Confusing Position		Stratagems in Gaining Ground		Stratagems in Desperate Position	
19 釜底抽薪	Remove the firewood from under the pot [Remove key support]	25 偷梁换柱	Replace the beams with rotten timbers [Replace strong support with weak support]	31 美人计	The beauty trap [Provide alluring distractions with honey-pot traps]
20 混水摸鱼	Disturb the water and catch a fish [Surprise and take advantage]	26 指桑骂槐	Point at the mulberry tree while cursing the locust tree [Criticize indirectly from a safe position]	32 空城计	The empty fort strategy [Put on a bold front; fake strength]
21 金蝉脱壳	Slough off the cicada's golden shell [Remove your cover to reveal the inside]	27 假痴不癫	Feign madness but keep your balance [Play dumb and let them underestimate you]	33 反间计	Let the enemy's own spy sow discord in the enemy camp [Double agent play]
22 关门捉贼	Shut the door to catch the thief [Closed door attacks]	28 上屋抽梯	Remove the ladder when the enemy has ascended to the roof [Lead them into a trap, then cut off their escape]	34 苦肉计	Inflict injury on oneself to win the enemy's trust [Feign weakness through self-injury while arming yourself]
23 远交近攻	Befriend a distant state and strike a neighboring one [Build strategic alliances with others]	29 树上开花	Deck the tree with false blossoms [Reframe/expand deceitfully with objects of little value]	35 连环计	Chain stratagems [Turn the enemy's strengths into weaknesses through a series of connected stratagems]
24 假道伐虢	Obtain safe passage to conquer the State of Guo [Seek help from ally and attack ally too]	30 反客为主	Make the host and the guest exchange roles [Turn your defensive into an offensive position]	36 走为上	If all else fails, retreat [Know when to concede or give up]

Figure 2: Stratagems

- **Stratagems and Deception are Key Elements of Military Strength.** The classics stress that wars are won largely on the enemy's miscalculation of one's capabilities and plans, so exploiting elements of surprise and disinformation should be a military priority. Hence, there is a necessity to use stratagems—tricks or schemes to outwit the enemy. Deceiving the enemy about one's intentions and capabilities remains central to the PLA's approach to war.
- **An Army Cannot Win Unless its Members Possess a Strong Fighting Spirit.** Chinese martial texts place a premium on the mental and spiritual state—*qi*—of the Army. It is akin to morale that impels soldiers to fight even when one's physical resources are exhausted. Commanders can nourish the *qi* of their troops by keeping them materially well supplied, treating them benevolently, and providing them rewards and punishments that make their will to fight stronger than their fear of death.<sup>10</sup>
- **Emphasis on Comprehensive National Power.** Chinese writings, including those of Sun Tzu, repeatedly emphasise the importance of national strength and maintaining balance between military force levels and expenditure, and its sustainability in the long run.
- **Synergy between various Components of Government, especially Diplomacy and Military.** There was a high amount of synergy between the military and the diplomacy in achieving the necessary conditions for victory. The Qin Dynasty repeatedly made and broke alliances to suit its requirements and ensured its survival and expansion. In the modern era, there are instances where China allied with Soviet Union, subsequently broke up with Soviet Union to ally with the United States (US) and post-1990s allied again with Russia.
- **Preference for Survival over Territory.** Trends during this period also bring out 'Regime Survival' followed by 'Force Survival' as having relative greater importance than territory. Land was frequently ceded to avoid warfare on unfavourable

terms, though the states that surrendered land did so on the premise that it would recover the land in the future when circumstances were favourable. Thus, loss of territory in the short term was not considered as a dishonour.

## Historical Experiences

The scale of Chinese historical tragedies is massive. More people died in the Taiping Rebellion (20-30 million dead)—a domestic Chinese event between 1850 and 1864—than in World War I. Concepts such as the ‘Middle Kingdom’, ‘Mandate of Heaven’, ‘All Under Heaven’, ‘Dynastic Cycle’, benevolence, and Confucian principles are part of national folklore. The ‘Century of Humiliation’ that commenced during the end of the Qing Dynasty is repeatedly revisited in collective memory in order to ingrain a pathological distrust of foreigners, with an added emphasis on specific incidents such as the ‘Rape of Nanjing’. Chinese leaders, especially under Xi Jinping, continue to harp on the ‘National Humiliation’ of the colonial past and China’s return to its global leading role. The key takeaways from these historical experiences are:

- **Middle-Kingdom Mentality.** The Chinese demonstrate what is defined by anthropologists as ethno-centrism: the idea that one social group stands at the centre and all others are peripheral and subordinate. China’s sense of its cultural superiority derives from their belief that their nation had the most advanced culture, society, technology, and civilisation for much of recorded history, save the aberration of the past two centuries. Historically, the Chinese perceived their state as coinciding with the civilised world, and those who lived beyond its borders were referred to as barbarians. They believe that their nation served as the core of a hierarchical international system with tributary states arranged around its periphery. In the Chinese view, as long as tributary states observed the natural order of things, there was no need of war. A hierarchy of power with China at the apex was seen as a precondition of order and



stability.<sup>11</sup> This concept contrasts with the Westphalian system where states—regardless of their size—enjoyed at least formal equality, which is determined by sovereignty and not by parameters of relative power.

- **China is Non-expansionist.** Chinese leaders portray themselves as coming from a culture that is uniquely pacifist, that China is not an expansionist state, and that it has never fought an aggressive war in its history. However, historical evidence suggests that in the creation of their empires, the Chinese were no less arrogant or ruthless than the Japanese, Europeans, or Americans in the creation of theirs. During the Ming dynasty, Chinese leaders acted on the basis of *realpolitik*, cloaking their actions in Confucian rationalisation. The Chinese worldview rationalises the use of force, even when used in an offensive capacity as a purely defensive measure. Today, this predisposes Chinese military leaders to offensive military action by rationalising them as purely defensive.<sup>12</sup>

- **China must be Unified Internally and Free from External Meddling.** Strength and stability need internal unity and freedom from external interference. The course of Chinese history is marked by ebb and flow of unity and centralisation on one hand, and fragmentation and devolution on the other. Across the span of history, unifying and protecting the Chinese heartland has formed a consistent goal of the Chinese statecraft. Internal disunity leads to instability and regime change. In the Chinese eyes, internal weakness and external meddling are related. The Warring States period between 475 BC and 211 BC and the Century of Humiliation that began in the late Qing dynasty between 1839 and 1949 are frequently quoted by Chinese scholars as examples of this linkage. These instances inform the Chinese mindset that the international area is violent and predatory. This explains the high Chinese paranoia on maintaining internal stability at whatever cost, including when it comes to human rights—and to look for an external hand even when one is not there.

## Geography

- **15-Inch Isohyet.** An isohyet is a line joining places with the same amount of annual precipitation, and 15 inches of annual rainfall is the bare minimum requirement to sustain an agriculture-based economy. In China, the 15-inch isohyet roughly coincides with a line called the Heihe-Tenchong line. East of this line is less than half of China's landmass but contains the bulk of its 1.3 billion population, its industries, and everything else that matters. This part of China is also referred to as the 'Han Core'.

- **Active Defence.** In ancient China, several dynasties that ruled the central fertile agrarian plains faced security threats from the surrounding northern and western grassland nomadic peoples—Mongols, Huns, and Turks. The economic structure of grassland nomadism was relatively simple, but it could not meet the various needs of life. So, the nomadic tribes often went south seasonally to plunder the necessities of life from the agricultural areas. This long-term confrontation between the farming civilisation of the central plains and the nomadic civilisation of the North constituted the basic geographical pattern of ancient China. Hence, the Chinese had to have a defensive orientation against the marauding hordes. When the national power was strong, the Chinese emperors adopted an aggressive defence—'Active Defence'—by pre-emptive attacks. When weak, they chose to buy peace by providing luxuries such as silk, etc.

- **Persistence of Active Defence in Strategic Culture.** Despite being a coastal country located in the Pacific rim, ancient China essentially had a strategic outlook that was distinctly continental in nature, with its vision turned toward the West from where the existential threats emanated, and a geopolitical order of ancient civilisation centred on the central plains around the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River surrounded by

'Peripheral barbarians in four directions'.<sup>13</sup> It is only now that the Chinese perspective and focus is on the eastern seaboard, after the peripheral regions—Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet—are firmly secured and pacified as buffer states to protect the Han Core. However, the concept of active defence lingers on in the Chinese strategic culture which provides the historical rationalisation to undertake aggressive actions against its neighbours, terming them as 'Counterattacks in Self Defence'.

## **Mao Tse-tung**

An astute political and self-styled military strategist, Mao was well-versed with the Chinese classics and their contemporary relevance. The essence of Marxist-Leninist thought was based on the principle of class struggle, the party-army principle, and the mass mobilisation principle. In 1938, Mao called for the 'Sinification of Marxism'. Having determined that Lenin's urban, industrial revolution was inappropriate for China's largely rural population, he modified the original principles to better fit China's circumstances. He believed that the CCP's best chance of winning was to adopt guerrilla tactics, a strategy that he developed later into the concept of 'People's War'. Mao Tse-tung effectively controlled the life of each Chinese citizen from 1949 until his death in 1976, a period of 27 years. In so far as the PLA was concerned, he laid out some theories that continue to be treated as relevant by today's PLA leaders:

- **Participatory Decision-Making.** Taken from the concept of Lenin's 'Democratic Centralism', this implies that all ranks are politically equal and can take part in wide ranging discussions on matters of policy (democratic), but once a policy direction has been decided, all discussion will end, and all members will uphold that decision (centralism).
- **Voluntarism.** Mao strongly held that the human will is the determining factor of the success or failure of all endeavours,

that a sufficiently strong will could overcome not only personal shortcomings but even material reality to produce desired outcomes. The PLA continues to emphasise on the centrality of willpower to succeed in warfare, even though Mao's national-level experiment to prove the power of the human failed disastrously in the Great Leap Forward.

- **Military Science.** Mao and Marx believed that through a systemic analysis of history, one can understand the objective principles that govern human endeavours. The field of military science is, thus, dedicated to the study of the rules, guidelines, and laws that govern the conduct of war, and is viewed as not only an academic subject but also the starting point for decisions and policies.<sup>14</sup>

- **Political Power Grows out of the Barrel of a Gun.** While Mao believed that military power was essential, he also firmly believed that the party must control the military and not the other way around. To quote Mao, "The party commands the gun, and the gun must never be allowed to command the party".

- **Active Defence.** Mao strongly believed that China should be defensive at the strategic level and offensive at the operational and tactical levels. It is pertinent to note that offensives and pre-emptive strikes form a part of active defence. This suggests that an attack on or a threat to Chinese interests is sufficient to provoke a 'Self-defence Counterattack', as seen during the PLA military campaigns in Korea, India, Soviet Union, and Vietnam.<sup>15</sup>

## **Deng Xiaoping**

Deng became the supreme leader at a time when the economy, society, and military were in shambles. If China is what it is today, it was due to the course corrections in national strategy that were instituted by Deng. Rising from the ashes of centuries of colonial exploitation and rigid Communist influences, contemporary Chinese strategic culture would have met the same fate as Soviet

strategic culture but for the vision of Deng Xiaoping. Retaining much of the rigidity of the existing system, Deng complemented that framework with ideas that emerged from Chinese intellectuals, economists, scientists, and historians educated in the West to create a hybrid strategic culture that has emerged as a strong challenger to the West.<sup>16</sup> Had it not been for China's single-minded focus towards building its capacities for nearly two decades starting in the early 1990s, China would be in no position to challenge the West as it does today.

## **Defining China's Strategic Culture**

Having considered the influencing factors of strategic culture, it is important to list out the broad tenets of China's strategic culture which feature in the analysis of sinologists:

- The Chinese are a superior race due to their rich culture, and the world must accept this fact.
- The historical aberrations of the past two centuries need to be rectified in order to restore China's rightful place on the pinnacle of the hierarchy of nations.
- Domestic instability and external meddling are linked. Chinese leadership, thus, overreacts to domestic turmoil (Tiananmen and Falun Gong) and invariably draws imaginary links between internal problems and external meddling. In Chinese history, barring three (Liao, Yuan, and Qing), all dynasties were overthrown due to domestic rebellions.
  - The international system established by hegemonic nations is predatory.
  - A country's influence and standing are relative to its size and heft.
  - Guile and deception are legitimate tools of statecraft to further China's interests in the global arena.

- Forbearance, quietness, and softness need to be demonstrated when one is not strong. Maintain a low profile until your strength is built up.
- Rich country and strong army are intricately linked. Strategic art and comprehensive national strength are both indispensable.
- While surprise and deception are part of the Chinese stratagems, Chinese leadership provide warnings before employment of force. Yet it is difficult to discern when force will be employed, as evidenced in 1962.

Two diverse yet parallel threads of the Chinese strategic culture run concurrently. The Chinese narrative that China is a peace-loving country which opposes hegemony runs parallel to and concurrently with a China that undertakes offensive actions to defend its interests.<sup>17</sup>

## **Chapter 2**

# **Impact of Strategic Culture on the People's Liberation Army**

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### **People's Liberation Army's Track Record**

In addition to the baggage of history that the Chinese so proudly insist on carrying, there are also detailed accounts of China's and the PLA's behaviour during its past military conflicts. The latter has fought all its major neighbours during the past seven and a half decades, including Japan, Taiwan, India, the Soviet Union, and Vietnam, besides fighting the Americans in Korea. In addition, the PLA has acted domestically in Tibet, Xinjiang, and during the Tiananmen massacre. A brief examination of how these conflicts played out will give an insight into the common precepts of the Chinese strategic culture and how it manifests on the ground when the PLA is thrust into action.

### **Korea (1950-1953)**

Communist North Korea launched an attack on South Korea in Jun 1950. By the fall of 1950, the United Nations (UN) forces succeeded in pushing back the North Korean forces and doubled down on them by launching an offensive northward towards the Chinese border. The potential threat of the American presence on China's borders nudged Mao towards the decision to join battle against the Americans. Mao also laid hopes on the Soviet aid, which eventually materialised.

When Mao launched the PLA headlong into the Korean War, he overlooked one basic difference—that his troops were no longer fighting a guerrilla war on familiar terrain against a demoralised adversary, but instead a conventional war against the most modern army of the day. The Chinese People's Volunteer (CPV) enjoyed the advantages of surprise, deception, and mobility in the opening salvos of the campaign in Nov 1950, when it crossed the Yalu River. Overall, the CPV launched five separate 'Counteroffensives', pulling back after each to regroup and rearm. The UN forces were initially dislocated by the Chinese actions but eventually succeeded in disrupting the operational cycles of the CPV by launching their own counteroffensives. When a stalemate was reached in mid-1951 along the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel, it was to the advantage of the UN forces who had superior artillery and air power that could be brought to bear on static Chinese positions till cessation of hostilities in 1953.

The Korean War was a costly one for the Chinese if one were to go by bean counts. Mao rode roughshod over the pragmatic military advice of the Commander of the CPV, Peng Dehuai, and directed the operations personally from the Chinese Military Commission. At the end of the war, Mao glossed over the large Chinese casualties by claiming that the Chinese had achieved a spectacular victory in the conflict by demonstrating a capability of holding their own against an apparently superior force. He simultaneously ingratiated himself to Stalin as a champion of world communism, thereby, earning the PLA plenty of valuable high-tech Soviet weapon platforms.

In hindsight, the Chinese participation in the Korean War came with its flipside. The annual defence spending for the four years (1950-53) was between 34 and 43 per cent of the total annual government expenditure.<sup>18</sup> More pertinently, the Korean War was the first hot war of the Cold War era. The US had almost won the war in Oct 1950, but the Chinese entry decisively turned the course of the war, stretching the conflict for another two and a half years and costing precious American lives. The embarrassed and furious Americans allied openly with the Taiwanese. The



unification of Taiwan with China was delayed forever as a direct result of the Korean War, with the Americans deciding to maintain a permanent presence in the region. The spectre of a US nuclear attack on China, followed by a ground invasion, remained the major threat for the PLA for the next 20 years. The PLA modified their doctrine from 'People's War' to 'People's war under modern conditions'.

On the other hand, however, the reckless sacrifice of Chinese lives by Mao led the Americans to become more guarded in their assessment of China's responses to the US actions. These were to become restricting factors in the American strategic planning up to the Vietnam War in the 1970s.

### **Taiwan (1955-1958)**

At the end of the Civil War in 1949, the Communist juggernaut continued onwards to South China. However, the Korean War resulted in the postponement of the invasion of Taiwan by another year to 1952. The permanent presence of the US in the region after the war changed the equation in favour of Taiwan. The Chinese made a bid to capture some of the offshore islands in Jan 1955. Another offensive in Sep-Oct 1958 involved artillery shelling of the Jinmen/Kinmen islands. These two events came to be known as the First and Second Taiwan Strait Crises. Both crises did not end up in an armed conflict with the US because Mao issued explicit instructions that the PLA was not to engage the US ships, aircrafts, or cause American casualties under any circumstances.

The Second Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1958 was fought over the group of nine islands in the Jinmen group. These were six miles from the Fujian coast off Xiamen but 140 miles from Taiwan. Taiwan held these islands with six divisions, two tank battalions, and 150 pieces of heavy artillery. The 88,000 troops and 50,000 residents were totally dependent on supplies from Taiwan. Mao's plan was to interdict the supplies to these islands that came by sea. The close ranges permitted the use of artillery on Jinmen.



**Map 1: Xiamen and Kinmen islands**

Taiwan attempted to get the US ships to escort their ships, but Mao was quick to call their bluff. After a 40-day artillery barrage, Mao permitted Taiwan the continued possession of these islands, which could otherwise have been easily captured by the PLA. Their proximity enabled China to keep Taiwan on tenterhooks regarding an assault—with negligible cost to the Chinese.<sup>19</sup>

In a case of curious political signalling that defied all military logic, Mao openly announced that Jinmen would be fired upon by the PLA artillery on odd-numbered days and spared on even-numbered days. This pattern of shelling continued for the next two decades, from 25 Oct 1958 to 01 Jan 1979, making it the longest sustained artillery shelling in world military history.

## **India (1962)**

While China was still reeling under the effects of the Great Leap Forward, the PLA launched a self-defence counterattack on India. Launched in two separate offensives spaced within 20 days, the

PLA employed three divisions against an unprepared Indian opposition. The war was short and swift, and brought out the best in the PLA's planning of tactics and logistics. The fighting took place completely in Indian territory.

## **Soviet Union (1969)**

The PLA's border conflict with the Soviet Union in Mar 1969 must be viewed in the geopolitical context of relations between the two nations prevailing at that time. China felt that a strong Tsarist Russia had extracted unequal treaties with Imperial China in the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689), Aigun (1858), and Peking (1860). When the Soviet Union was established, there was hope among Chinese nationalists that the new nation would forego some of the ill-gotten wealth of the Tsars. That assumption was soon set to rest. Sino-Soviet relations had begun to decline after the purging of Stalin's obituary by Khrushchev in 1954. Another turning point was the withdrawal of all Soviet experts from China in 1960.

The Soviet Union claimed leadership of the Communist world, a patronising attitude which irked Mao. Border negotiations held in 1964 ended in failure under the circumstances. The Soviets unveiled the Brezhnev Doctrine in 1968 which openly endorsed the Soviet right to interfere in Socialist states to strengthen them against the West, as was done in Czechoslovakia in 1968.

The combination of all these factors resulted in the Chinese decision to escalate the level of dispute at Zhenbao (Damansky in Russian), an island on the Ussuri River. The Chinese claim based on the thalweg implied that the island was Chinese territory. The Soviet perception was based on the Treaty Map of 1861, which showed that the boundary was along the Chinese bank. This meant that the island was Soviet territory. At a tactical level, the Chinese decision to select Zhenbao for the opening salvo was a high ground on the Chinese bank that conferred the Chinese domination over the island that was merely 100 yards away.



**Image 1: Zhenbao Island**  
(Source: Wikipedia by Creative Commons)

The 'Normal' that had been established over the past few months in Zhenbao was that the Chinese infantry patrols would be detected by Soviet soldiers who would arrive in armoured cars, beat up the Chinese soldiers, and push them across the Chinese bank. On 02 Mar 1969, the river was still frozen. A Chinese column of 300 elite troops sneaked into one corner of the island and concealed their presence. Another column of Chinese entered the island the next morning in full view of the Soviet frontier guards as bait. The Soviets sent a patrol to push back the Chinese in their usual routine. This patrol was ambushed in the scuffle that followed and it was decimated by the numerically superior Chinese. The incident was clearly triggered by the Chinese side and left the Soviets infuriated at this Chinese chicanery and escalation.

The expected Soviet retribution came a fortnight later, on 15 Mar. The Soviets launched a full-scale artillery bombardment of the Chinese side up to two miles inside the Chinese territory. The casualties in these clashes are believed to have been 800 on the Chinese side and 60 on the Soviet side. It was followed by a massive

build-up of Soviet forces all along the Chinese frontier including the massing of Soviet forces along the 2,000 km-long Sino-Mongolian border. The Soviets deliberately, and for broader political purposes, ambushed and decimated Chinese military units at different carefully chosen points along the entire Sino-Soviet boundary. The Soviet Union also threatened to launch a full-scale invasion into China preceded by a nuclear strike in the coming months.<sup>20</sup>

The Chinese finally realised that their actions had resulted in Soviet responses that went far beyond what the Chinese had bargained for. Mao eventually sued for peace in Aug. The two Premiers, Zhou En Lai and Alexander Kosygin, met at Peking airport in Oct 1969 to arrive at an understanding to reduce the risk of escalation. The resolution of the border dispute was finally concluded in 1989 when Mikhail Gorbachev played a statesman's role in conceding to the *thalweg* principle on the Ussuri River. Representatives of the world media who went to Beijing to cover this border resolution summit between Gorbachev and Deng in May 1989, coincidentally, witnessed the Tiananmen Square massacre too.

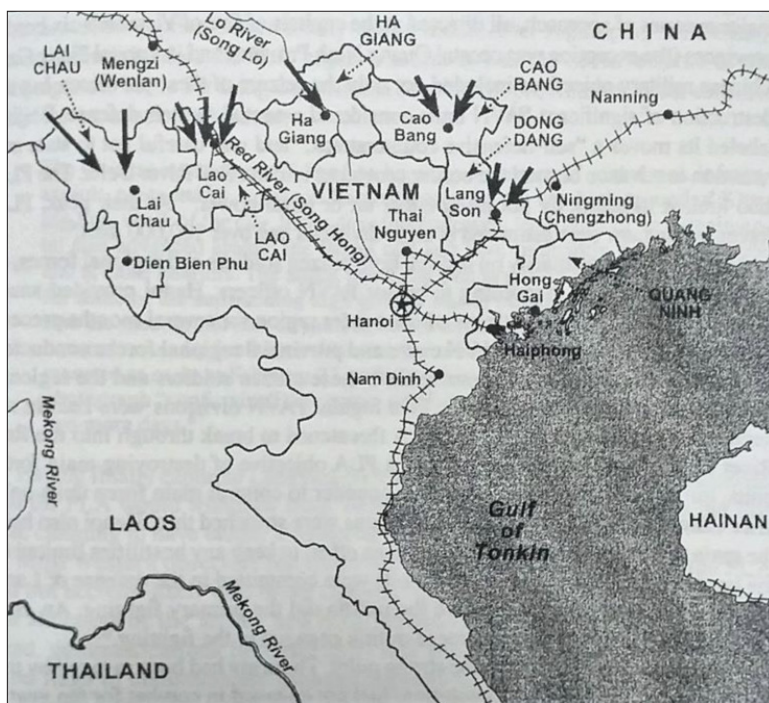
In hindsight, the Zhenbao Island incident of 02 Mar 1969 achieved a tactical victory for the PLA on that day but resulted in massive strategic costs on the country. The Chinese response to perceived Soviet threats turned those threats into reality when the Soviets called the Chinese bluff. When pushed to a corner, the Chinese sued for peace and de-escalated their actions so as not to beget Soviet punishment.

## **Vietnam (1979)**

China has historically looked upon Vietnam as a vassal state. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, venerate their struggle against their oppressors during the ten centuries of Chinese domination.<sup>21</sup> In the early 1970s, North Vietnam was a Communist state but aligned with the Soviet Union in the Communist world. Thus, it

was not necessarily close to China. Neighbouring Cambodia was under the Khmer Rouge of Pol Pot. On the pretext of provocations caused by Cambodian forces on the border, a unified Vietnam launched an all-out attack on Cambodia on 28 Dec 1978. Vietnamese forces captured Phnom Penh in a matter of 12 days. Cambodia was a pro-China country, and this Vietnamese action was not viewed kindly by the Chinese. There were speculations that Vietnam was further planning to invade Thailand, another pro-China country. Whether that was true or not, the Chinese had already by then decided to 'Teach Vietnam a lesson'.

On 17 Feb 1979, the PLA launched a full-scale invasion of Vietnam from the North (Map 2).<sup>22</sup> The stated operational objectives were the capture of five provincial capitals abutting the Chinese border. The Vietnamese relocated their forces to the North



Map 2: Chinese invasion of Vietnam (1979)

and put-up fierce resistance. The historical verdict of the conflict is that it resulted in Chinese embarrassment. The Chinese lost 25 per cent of their forces as casualties in the conflict. The Vietnamese had advantages of terrain and combat experience borne out of the fighting over the past two decades. The PLA, on the other hand, had just emerged out of two decades of domestic turmoil and found itself completely unequipped to fight a modern conventional war of the day. The Chinese withdrew after one month, but border clashes continued throughout the early 1980s.<sup>23</sup>

## **Analysis of PLA's Performance**

**Common Threads in PLA's Past Campaigns.** The five above-mentioned PLA campaigns reveal some common aspects that are ingrained in the institutional culture of the PLA:

- **Surprise.** In each of the five campaigns, the adversary was always caught by surprise. The Chinese do a good job of masking their intentions when it comes to direct military confrontation.
- **Deception.** Extensive deception is employed to achieve strategic surprise. Chinese pronouncements, overt actions, and diplomatic manoeuvres are all carefully orchestrated to hide their real intentions. Hence, Chinese pronouncements should never be taken at face value. In battle, confusing, luring, and trapping the enemy is a PLA hallmark.
- **Manoeuvre.** The PLA demonstrates a clear preference for mobile operations and manoeuvre, with a corresponding distaste for static point defence.
- **First Engagement.** Winning the first engagement is given overarching importance by the PLA.
- **Concentration of Force.** The point of attack is carefully chosen, one which would be a weak point of the enemy, and where the PLA will achieve employment of superior force.
- **Operations by Darkness.** The PLA has a proven record for



a predilection for night fighting and night-time movement of forces.

- **Mass Casualties.** The PLA has been more than willing to absorb heavy losses, when necessary, in the past. Whether this will be acceptable to today's PLA is debatable and is one of the reasons (besides the spectre of failure) why the reunification of Taiwan remains an unfinished agenda for China.

- **Offensive Operations.** The primacy of offensive operations over defensive operations is evident in all the PLA's campaigns, as it has fired the first salvo.

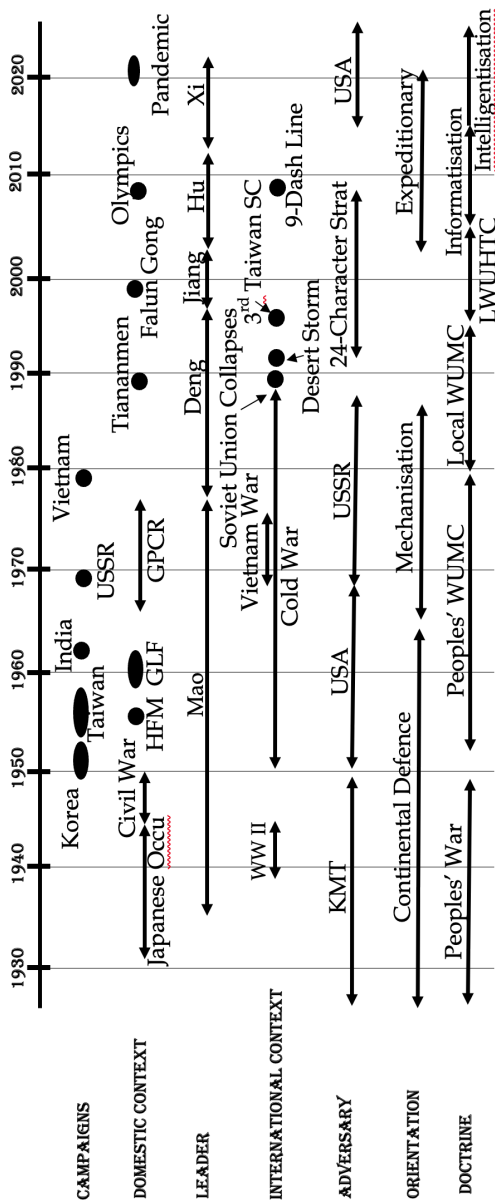
- **Fighting Outside China.** The PLA has ensured that all its fighting against adversaries has occurred outside China's territory.

- **Propaganda.** China will use force quite readily, always insisting that it is defensive in nature. Confucian rationalisation is employed to couch every offensive action as a defensive measure and moral obligation. Although it was China that attacked Indian and Soviet positions first in 1962 and 1969, respectively, and invaded Vietnam in 1979, Beijing officially labelled all these wars as '*Ziwei Huanji*' (self-defensive counterattacks).

- **Penchant for Taking Risks.** In wars with the US and the Soviet Union, the Chinese risked spiralling the conflict into a nuclear war. Yet, they went ahead with their decision to enter into conflict, based on their internal cost-benefit analysis.

- **Centralised Plans.** The PLA will always work on tightly controlled plans that local commanders have little flexibility to interfere with. The formulation and approval of plans takes a long time. Interfering with the planned operation cycles of the PLA—as UN forces achieved in Korea—is an assured way to dislocate PLA operations.





Legend	
HFM: Hundred Flowers Movement	GLF: Great Leap Forward
GPCR: Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution	WWII: World War II
Taiwan SC: Taiwan Strait Crisis	KMT: Kuomintang
WUMC: Wars Under Modern Conditions	LWUHTC: Local Wars Under High Tech Conditions

Chart 1: Timeline of PLA (by the author)

## **Military Strategy**

The tenets of Chinese military strategic culture are:

- It is the goal of strategy to exploit the propensity of things to achieve their own objectives.
- War is a scientific process.
- Through secrecy and stratagems, it is possible to achieve victory against a superior adversary.
- Fighting just wars assures victory.
- Always win the first engagement.
- 'Red' is more important than 'Expert'. Ideological purity is of greater importance than professional competence.

These tenets are opposites of the established western perceptions about warfare—that one has to fight fairly and honourably, that war is uncertain, and that no plan survives the first contact. They have been examined below.

## **Propensity of Things**

Western view and approach have evolved from ancient Greece with emphasis on instrumentality and causality. The Chinese worldview, however, is premised on '*Shih*'—aligning oneself to the natural order of things to achieve success. These divergent views will lead to misperceptions.

## **War is a Scientific Process**

The Chinese military tradition emphasises on analysing the adversary as a precondition for success. This is a running theme in the military classics, including Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. The book emphasises on analytical process that stresses on pre-war calculations, intelligence gathering, planning, and preparations. Chinese warfighting emphasises minimising armed engagements.

Rather, the idea is of winning without fighting—not arising out of any humanitarian motive, but so that the victor could capture resources intact and use them for his own purpose. This, in turn, depends on accurate assessment. If the General analyses all variables of war correctly, victory will be determined before engaging in battle and possibly make battle superfluous.

## **Secrecy and Stratagems**

The Chinese believe that they possess special gifts when it comes to the practice of statecraft, and that Chinese cleverness is more than a match for material strength. The Chinese way of war focusses on the mind of the adversary, with the goal of having the greatest psychological impact. The ideal operation is one that is timed perfectly to be both quick and decisive, leaving the enemy at both material and psychological disadvantage, and this is achieved by catching him off guard. Chinese strategists, both ancient and modern, believe that through strategic cleverness, they can secure decisive victory at little or no cost. Consequently, the concept of fair play is absent from Chinese classics. Rather, any atrocity that expeditiously achieves one's purpose is acceptable—the perfect example being an 'Assassin's Mace'—a fantastic weapon that is hidden and employed at the appropriate moment and has a decisive impact, one that will deliver victory.

## **Just Wars and Forever Victorious**

The PLA claims that it saved China from foreign aggression, domestic tyranny, and prevents more powerful adversaries from interfering in Chinese affairs. The military narrative stresses that China has fought wars only when necessary to do so and has always fought in a defensive and moral fashion. It also emphasises that the PLA has won every war that it has fought, even when it faced more advanced adversaries.

## **Circumstances for the Use of Force**

Six core features emerge in the historical pattern in China's use of force:

- An effort to protect a central heartland while maintaining control over China's 'Strategic Periphery'.
- Expansion or contraction of peripheral control dependent on the strength of the regime and its capacity. With increase in China's overall and specifically military strength, especially against smaller states such as Philippines or Vietnam, China can be seen as ambitiously seeking effective control over larger areas along its peripheries, terrestrial, maritime, and even non-traditional peripheries, such as cyber and space.
- The frequent yet limited use of force against external entities, primarily for heartland defence and peripheral control, and often on the basis of pragmatic calculations of relative power and effect.
- A reliance on less-than-coercive strategies when the state is weak.
- A strong relationship between the power and influence of domestic leadership, and the use of force. The stronger the domestic leadership, the greater its willingness to use force.<sup>24</sup>
- A continued, and continuing, propensity to tightly control the application of force, as can be seen in building up several layers of applying force, from Maritime Militias and (equally potent) Coast Guard, well-enabled Border Defence Units, and high-tech, fail-proof enablers such as Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) and communications satellites in low Earth orbit/medium Earth orbit.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Likely Manifestation**

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#### **Indian Strategic Culture**

When crystal gazing into how China's strategic culture will manifest towards India, a major factor that the Chinese will consider is Indian strategic culture. Their perceptions of how Indians think and fight will influence their strategy. Foreign perceptions of Indian strategic culture vary between a 'Pacifist' India and a 'Hard Realist' India.

#### **Pacifist Indian Strategic Culture**

The most vocal proponent of this argument is George Tanham of RAND who, in his 1992 monograph 'Indian Strategic Thought: An Interpretive Essay', argued that India's values, cultural diversity, recent historical legacy, and non-alignment as a state policy stymied the proliferation of strategic thought and could result in sub-optimal responses to challenges faced on multiple fronts, particularly in areas related to national security. The perceptions of a pacifist strategic outlook of India are guided by the following factors:

- The Gandhian influence in modern Indian outlook and philosophy.
- India's leadership and activism in the Non-Aligned Movement.
- Protracted insurgencies in Northeast and Jammu and Kashmir.

- Chronic restraint to Pakistan's provocations.
- Lack of strategic orientation of political leadership.
- The Hindu concepts of life cycles and repetitions.<sup>25</sup>

## Hard Realist Indian Strategic Culture

On the other hand, India's national strategic culture can be viewed in a completely contrasting light by cherry picking the following aspects of culture and demonstrated behaviour:

- The most celebrated of Indian strategic texts, the *Arthashastra* advocates a realist outlook to statecraft and warfare, and recommends the accumulation of power through the use of offensive force, deception, treachery, assassination, and deceit, and the view that conquest and establishment of hegemony is the proper policy of a 'Good' leader. These teachings are similar to the most worrisome lessons discovered in Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* or any other Chinese text on strategy.
- The *Arthashastra* does not form the whole of Indian strategic tradition—there exists a more violent, less compromising tradition as well, represented by the *Mahabharata*, which emphasises annihilation of the enemy through systematic attrition. It is believed by India watchers that the *Mahabharata*'s focus on force-on-force attrition warfare still informs elements of modern Indian Army doctrine.<sup>26</sup>
- India undertook aggressive military actions to assimilate Hyderabad, Daman and Diu, and Goa.
- It signed unequal treaties with Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim.
- Since independence, although India has emphasised peace at the global and regional level, it has frequently projected coercive power over its smaller neighbours:
  - Intervened in Pakistan to help create an independent Bangladesh in 1971.

- Sent an unwelcome peacekeeping force into Sri Lanka in 1987.
- Dispatched an expeditionary force to defeat a coup in the Maldives in 1988.
- Blockaded Nepal in 1989 and 2015.
- Launched surgical strikes into Pakistan in 2016 and 2019.

## Reinforcing Negative Stereotypes

Although most Indians themselves may hold that India has a pacifist outlook, countries in India's immediate neighbourhood—and in all probability, China—perceive India as representative of the hard realist strategic culture. In addition, the image of the ubiquitous Indian soldier seen in the streets of Shanghai, Beijing, and Canton during the Opium Wars and Boxer Rebellion has been reinforced in Chinese folklore as part of the narrative of the 'Century of Humiliation'. This continues to inform Chinese perceptions of Indians even a century and a half after the event, while benign contributions such as those of Dr Dwarkanath Kotnis are conveniently relegated to lesser importance.<sup>27</sup>

## Contours of Manifestation

No set piece prescription can be made on the Chinese threat, but some of its likely characteristics will be:

- **Non-contact Warfare.** The PLA is unlikely to engage in physical battles, as in the past. This would be a consequence of its recent capability acquisitions in informatisation and intelligentisation, as also the consequences of the demographic challenges that plague their system.
- **Operational Fires.** The PLA will extensively employ their firepower to engage the adversary at varying depths of the

battlefield. They will exploit their advantage in first and second artillery.

- **Unblinking Eyes.** China's edge in space-based ISR assets will ensure that there is uninterrupted battlefield transparency for their forces, while ensuring that the same is denied for the adversary by exploiting the offensive capabilities they have built up on that count.

- **Non-traditional Domains of Warfare.** The PLA will attempt to assert dominance over cyber, electronic warfare, and Information Warfare (IW) domains before joining the battle.

- **Tight Control.** Operational plans will be dictated and controlled by Beijing, with little or no flexibility delegated to tac-level leadership. As in the past, the PLA will be motivated by the fear of failure rather than the hope for success.

- **Importance of Territory.** The PLA will engage to achieve the desired psychological impact of an emphatic victory rather than measure victory in terms of real estate. China's response to the adversary gaining temporary control of territory will be less dictated by the value of land but more by the loss of face in the info ops domain.

- **Objectives for Own Offensive Plans.** The PLA is unlikely to adopt static defensive positions to secure territory.

- **Limiting the Conflict.** The PLA will attempt to define limits to the conflict along various parameters—geographical extent, troops involved, firepower, time, and domains. Breaking these PLA-imposed limits will dislocate the PLA.

- **Strategic Deception.** The Chinese state will choose from the entire spectrum of available capacities while deciding to launch military action. Some actions will be undertaken to provoke specific responses—say in the maritime domain—before escalating to the actual points of decision. The media, diplomacy, non-state actors, and the military will all act in cohesion to



deceive the adversary regarding the real intention. The adversary should expect to get surprised.

- **Shāshǒujiǎn.** The concept of an ‘Assassin’s Mace’—a legendary ancient Chinese weapon—is highly admired by the PLA and today, it metaphorically refers to describe certain modern weapon systems. One can expect China to come up with some of these in an actual conflict and exploit them in IW domain to cause greater damage to morale than they cause in the physical domain. Taking a leaf from China, an adversary should resist the temptation to advertise every capability that is built upon, so that there remain some trump cards when the balloon goes up.

## **Near-term Prospects**

China’s growing global aspirations and increasing geopolitical footprint presents a formidable challenge to India. The rivalry between India and China spans many domains—in race, religion, cultural values, economy, military, and political structures. As geographic neighbours, this rivalry will be a zero-sum game—one’s rise will be perceived to occur at the expense of the other. A brief scan of opportunities and challenges for China in the current geopolitical milieu will shed the likely direction of China’s strategic culture soon.

## **Opportunities for China**

- **Strategic Ambiguity of the United States.** There is a period of struggle and tumult when the established global hegemon is challenged by an aspiring power. China’s consistent rise coupled with the US’ ambivalence in its China policy and devaluation of American political and economic prestige are seen as reassuring signs by the Chinese.

- **Civil-Military Fusion.** China has integrated its civil-industry complex for exploiting the latest in innovative technology for military purposes, with the aim of using cutting-edge technologies to achieve asymmetry in different domains.
- **Absorption of Reforms.** China's monolithic system ensures that the process of military reforms initiated in 2016 are being absorbed quickly. The desired force structures are being rolled out faster than what would be possible in other political systems.
- **Domestic Stability.** This is an important barometer of the CCP's legitimacy in its own eyes. China has regained control over the domestic environment and muffled any media coverage that could reveal a crack in the image of a peaceful domestic state.

## Challenges for China

- **Authoritarianism vs Collective Leadership.** Authoritarianism tends to stifle the human spirit worldwide. China's own experience of the 27 years under Mao-led Deng to set in stone a collective leadership model to prevent recurrence of the tyranny that occurred under Mao. Xi Jinping has dismantled those institutional measures under the cloak of an anti-corruption campaign. In the absence of checks and balances to his unfettered power, he could lead China and the world into an unending spiral of tension and conflict.
- **Demographic Challenges.** China is confronted with the twin demographic challenges of an ageing population and a declining workforce. These societal fault lines are already impacting the PLA where problems with one-child soldiers such as individualism, ego centrality, and risk aversion are being openly discussed by the PLA in their declassified documents.
- **Zero-sum Game.** China's aspirations are at the expense of other great powers. Countries that have dealt with China over

the past decade have come to realise that the win-win situation that China proclaims in its growing economic forays into poorer countries is a double win for China. China's aggressiveness towards belligerents in the South China Sea dispute are becoming increasingly emblematic of China's condescending attitude towards smaller states—just as the Middle Kingdom behaved with barbarian states in its periphery.

- **Systemic Incongruity.** China hopes to upend the prevailing global system. While its critique of skewed rules-based order constructed by the US resonates with smaller nations, the options that China offers are far more disconcerting—one in which the world will have to be beholden to China and unquestioningly accept Chinese racial, cultural, and intellectual superiority.

- **Taiwan.** Having repeatedly declared reunification of Taiwan as an unfinished agenda, China keeps pushing itself into a corner where it would be forced into action and become a victim of the dilemma Taiwan poses—an embarrassing military defeat or a pyrrhic victory.

## Conclusion

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China's claim to racial superiority is based on its glorious history vis-à-vis the western nations. On this count, the Chinese grudgingly accept that Indian history is equally robust. Indian culture, history, and traditions have been as sophisticated as of China, if not more. For a more objective comparison of the two cultures, one has to read John Keay, who has authored a book on both Indian and Chinese histories—and he concludes that both cultures were equally glorious in their different ways. For example, while the Chinese make quite a fuss about their epic, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, India's *Mahabharata* is far older, longer, complicated in plot, and sophisticated in the depth of human emotions and characters in comparison.

There are other comparisons too. The strength of Chinese and Indian cultures is equally visible in their power of assimilation. In China, the Mongols became the Yuans, and in India, they became the Mughals. Both societies thrive in a system of informal networks for social progression—a concept that is absent in the West. In China, it has a formal term '*Guangxi*'. In India, the non-disclosure agreement has an accurate term—'The pal system'.

The knowledge of Chinese strategic culture can be very instructive for those dealing with them. While no set piece prescription can be made of how the Chinese threat will manifest, the aim is to give an insight into what is on the Chinese mind—how they think, how they create a narrative of national humiliation to justify present-day bad behaviour, what hurts them most, and where—and this knowledge will help adversaries better navigate the challenges that China keeps throwing at them.

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## About the Author

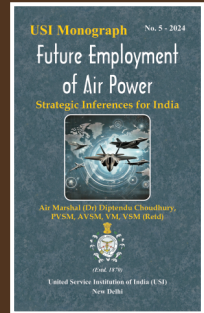
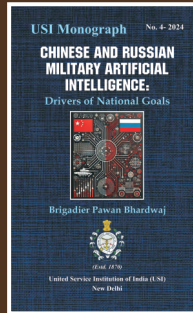
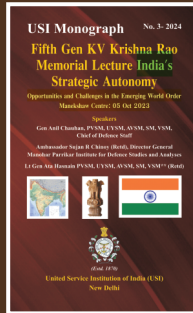
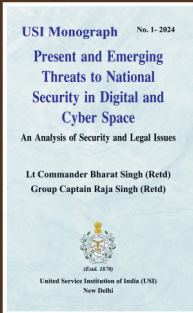


**Brigadier Sanjay Kannothe, VSM**, was commissioned into 8 Gorkha Rifles in 1997. An alumnus of Rashtriya Indian Military College, National Defence Academy, and Defence Services Staff College (DSSC), he has operational experience in the Kashmir Valley, on the Line of Control, in Northern Glacier, and Manipur. He commanded a Battalion along the Line of Actual Control. He has served as an Instructor at Infantry School and DSSC, as Assistant Military Attache in Nepal, and at Military Secretary's (MS) Branch as Colonel MS. Brigadier Kannothe has authored articles in various journals on topics related to China, including a United Service Institution of India's Occasional Paper in 2023. He is presently commanding a Rashtriya Rifles Sector in Jammu and Kashmir.



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