



CHANGE WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS Modernization and Orthodoxy in The People's Liberation Army

Philip Reid
CCW Visiting Research Fellow
June 2022

As the modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) continues in the 'period of strategic opportunity', Chinese defence writings and official statements have disavowed the legacy of the early-communist era when national strategy relied on the country's traditional demographic and territorial advantages.¹ The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* published by the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) for example, states a need to change the concept of a 'continental military'.² The government's 2015 Defence White Paper proposes eschewing the 'traditional mentality that land outweighs sea'.³ These statements have been embellished by a strand of Western commentary that, in sensationalizing Chinese 'pockets of excellence', has contributed to the PLA's modernization being perceived as a *fait accompli*. The PLA's 'continental' legacy however is less attributable to its early-revolutionary leadership, than the embodiment of a much deeper tradition. The five centuries of internecine conflict that preceded the establishment of the Han dynasty, would produce a body of literature that has for more than two millennia informed the use of terrain, deception and manoeuvre, and located the halcyon reference for China's 'lost martial culture' firmly in the country's vast interior.⁴

The dynastic states that have ruled over a united China have all been continental powers, variously exhibiting the sociological influences of steppe and the country's populous central plain. The anomaly in this continuum was a period between the 11th and 14th Centuries when China was, in the absence of a clear competitor, the world's leading naval power and as the People's Republic has expanded the scope of its maritime operations, official statements and Chinese media outlets have invoked the maritime legacy of the Song Dynasty and the seven famed expeditions of Ming admiral Zheng He. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) could claim a fleet from the mid-1950s but warships were rarely deployed beyond the First Island Chain before the 1980s, when the opening of the Chinese economy, the debate over Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZs) and impasse with Taiwan, informed the strategic shift from 'near-coast defence' to 'near-seas' and 'offshore defence'. While this was entrenched by the 1996 Taiwan Crisis, 2004, when Hu set out the *Historic Missions of the Armed Forces in the New Period of the New Century* is seen as the landmark year for the PRC's blue-water aspirations and it is the impact of the PLAN's increasing share of defence expenditure ever since, that is being felt today.

¹ Academy of Military Science, *The Science of Military Strategy* (2013), Academy of Military Science of the People's Republic of China, Military Strategy Studies Department (2013), Translated by Project Everest, United States Air University, 317, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2021-02-08%20Chinese%20Military%20Thoughts-%20In%20their%20own%20words%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy%202013.pdf>

² Science of Military Strategy (2013), 319.

³ State Council of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*, Defence White Paper May 2015, Beijing (2015)

⁴ Chen-Ya Tien, *Chinese Military Theory*, Spa Books (1992), 122-131

The comprehensive military reforms that commenced in 2015, consolidated two trends in PLA force development extant since the 1980s: increasing ground force manoeuvre and interoperability, and a dilution of the army's traditional dominance over the other services. Ground Forces have been streamlined to fight 'informatized local wars' and seen total end-strength reduced by more than two-thirds. Yet the question of whether the present momentum of reform will bring about a permanent shift in the PRC's strategic and warfighting culture, is a valid one. In assessing the PLA's military modernization, this paper seeks to identify in the major semi-official doctrinal publications of the past two decades, the legacy influence of four 'continental' orthodoxies: the inter-service primacy of ground forces, a reliance on both national geography and demography, and a strategic orientation towards the Eurasian interior. Party leadership has used self-critical phraseology to describe the PLA's shortcomings in fulfilling its 'historic mission' and the perpetuation of certain idiosyncrasies might simply be a marker for the slow progress of the reforms.⁵ Alternatively, with futures conceivable along a broad spectrum from effective blue-water contender, to near seas preponderance, to an expansionist continental power otherwise contained in the First Island Chain, it is possible that the reform period may yet produce the 'world class military' the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has committed to realizing by 2049, but one with 'Chinese characteristics'.

Ground Forces and the Joint Command Structure

The origins of China's military modernization may be traced to the Qing dynasty's defeat in the First Opium War. Successive attempts to assimilate European arms and methods and foster a domestic military industry, ended however with China's crushing defeat to Japan in 1894, and the Warlord era that supervened the collapse of the Qing in 1911, further stifled modernization. The armed force that elevated China from a position of near-total prostration before foreign powers, was a guerrilla force that, notwithstanding prolific Soviet assistance, defeated larger and better-equipped adversaries by effective use of terrain, manoeuvre and force concentration. Subsequent attempts to modernize the armed forces of the early-People's Republic, were again reversed by the Cultural Revolution, during which the PLA swelled to over six million, ranks were abolished and training was sacrificed in favour of political education.⁶ In 1980, Deng Xiaoping initiated the first of three major force reductions and established two experimental combined group armies but the PLA would not conduct its first major joint exercise until 1996. Reduced to nearly a third of its pre-1980 size, China's armed forces conducted a succession of formative large-scale exercises during the 2000s and prioritized the development of an integrated electronic information system for joint command and control.⁷

Macro-structural reform would ultimately elude Jiang and Hu but while the sweeping changes initiated in 2015 are noteworthy for having overcome longstanding bureaucratic resistance, it is important to recognize that Xi was not the architect of these reforms. They represent instead the culmination of a protracted effort across the armed forces and had five key elements. Firstly, the four general departments

⁵ Dennis J. Blasko, "The 'Two Incompatibles' and PLA Self-Assessments of Military Capability," China Brief 13, no. 10 (May 9, 2013), <https://jamestown.org/program/the-two-incompatibles-and-pla-self-assessments-of-military-capability/>. US Defence Department, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020, Office of the Secretary of Defence Annual Report to Congress, 6

⁶ M.Taylor Fravel, *Active Defence: China's Military Strategy Since 1949*, Princeton University Press (2019), 73

⁷ Edmund Burke, Kristen Gunness, Cortez Cooper III, Mark Cozad, People's Liberation Army Operational Concepts, Research Report RAND Cooperation (2020), 7, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA394-1.html

were dissolved and their functions absorbed into fifteen smaller departments under the Central Military Commission (CMC). Secondly, the PLA's seven Military Regions were replaced by five Theatre Commands subordinate to the CMC's Joint Operations Command Centre: each aligned with one of China's principle strategic directions, plus a central reserve command. Third, a separate headquarters was created for the PLA Ground Forces, a role previously performed *de facto* by the General Service Department (GSD). The new land forces HQ is equal in rank to the navy, air force and two new services: the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF), previously the Second Artillery, and the Strategic Support Force (SSF) which inherited much of the PLA's fragmented cyber and information warfare capability. The reforms ostensibly give the services authority over force management issues while empowering theatre headquarters to command operations but the CMC was also reduced in size and the individual service heads removed. Finally, PLA ground forces were cut by a further three hundred thousand and the number of group armies reduced from eighteen to thirteen.

While these reforms have centralized power in the hands of Xi as CMC chairman, they represent a *prima facie* loss for the army's status and influence. Under the Military Regions, the four General Departments had been run as ground force fiefdoms and Group Armies had commanded most operational units as well as ad-hoc wartime joint command structures. As a service headquarters the new Army HQ must coordinate with the CMC structure for force building purposes as well as with the Theatre Commands for operational functions. The Joint Logistics Support Centres (JLSCs) also appear to be more joint in composition than the logistical sub-departments under the Military Regions.⁸ The army is also reported to have transformed several coastal defence units and a motorized infantry brigade into four new PLAN marine brigades, diluting its near-monopoly on amphibious operations.⁹ While the PLAN and PLAAF benefitted from imports of advanced Russian equipment in the 1990s and have seen increased investment in research, development and force-building, roughly forty percent of the PLA's Main Battle Tank (MBT) force, is between two and four decades old and a significant number of infantry brigades are equipped with outdated equipment.¹⁰ Most long-range strike assets are under the command of the other services or the CMC, leaving the army with a limited power projection capability. That PLA Ground Forces are not being developed to defeat a near-peer competitor is implied by reports that the Type-96B MBT, rather than the superior Type-99 series, has been selected as the mainstay of the future tank force.¹¹

The five Theatre Command Army headquarters have nevertheless retained direct command responsibility for operational army units and unlike the former Military Region structure, Ground Force units wear the generic army patch.¹² Furthermore, Ground Force personnel who have been assigned to the CMC staff,

⁸ Zhao Jiaqing, "Shenyang Joint Logistics Centre Organizes Severe Cold Weather Training", China Network, January 26, 2017, available at www.china.com.cn/military/2017-01/26/content_40184471.htm [Accessed 14 May 2022]

⁹ PLA Daily, "Role Model Helps New Recruits Grow and Improve", PLA Daily, Article September 30, 2017, available at www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2017-09/30/content_189134.htm [Accessed 10 May 2022]. Sina.com, "Decrypt 'Operation Red Sea' Prototype", Article, Sina.com, February 20, 2018, available at <http://mil.news.sina.com.cn/china/2018-02-20/doc-ifyrswmu3697775.shtml> [Accessed 25 Apr 2022].

Joel Wuthnow, System Overload: Can China's Military Be Distracted in a War over Taiwan?, Institute for National Strategic Studies China Strategic Perspectives 15, Centre for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defence University, 15

¹⁰ US Defence Department, Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2021, Office of the Secretary of Defence Annual Report to Congress, 46.

¹¹ Zhang Tao, ed., "Type-96B Seen as Pillar of Nation's Tank Force," China Daily (Beijing), August 10, 2016, available at http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/china-military-news/201608/10/content_7200566.htm [Accessed 28 Apr 2022]

¹² Dennis J. Blasko, The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms: The PLA Army, Chapter 10 in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, Edited by Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, National Defence University Press (2019), Washington, 352

Theatre Headquarters, SSF and the JLSF, and who are not counted against overall army end strength, wear army uniforms.¹³ Indeed, the continued prevalence of ground commanders in the new joint commands, senior staff positions and participating in joint command training courses has led some analysts to qualify the depth of the reforms.¹⁴ Both Admiral Yuan Yubai and Air Force General Yi Xiaoguang, whose appointments had been seen as milestones in the joint transition, have been replaced as heads of the South and Central Theatre Commands respectively, returning China's regional military leadership to its pre-reform army standard.

With one PLAN and two Rocket Force officers, the reformed composition of the CMC is the most joint in its history and Air Force Vice-Chairman Xu Qiliang is known as a leading reformer. The commission however retains key army heavyweights, notably second-ranked Vice-Chair Zhang Youxia, and Joint Staff Department (JSD) head Li Zuocheng, both celebrated war heroes from the 1979 Chengdu military region. The CMC's only naval officer, Political Work Department (PWD) head Miao Hua, transferred from the army in 2014. While another Xi favourite, that Miao's defining naval appointment was as political commissar on the 2017 Belt and Road global goodwill cruise, might also be taken as a symbolic affirmation of how the navy's operational role is presently perceived.

Strategic Direction

PLA literature has traditionally used the term 'strategic direction' to align a Theatre Command or Military Region with a given contingency and to prioritize the allocation of military resources. That for almost China's entire history this has been continental, is acknowledged in the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* which states that 'for thousands of years', dynasties have 'focused on seeking strategic expansion of space in the peripheral regions on land'.¹⁵ The Eurasian Steppe and the semi-Sinicized steppe borderlands produced the Tang and Yuan dynasties as well as the Qing by way of the Jurchen, but all pre-modern rulers of a unified China were obliged to deal with the persistent threat of invasion from the North and North-West.¹⁶

The People's Republic has updated its strategic guideline nine times but altered its strategic direction only twice. In 1952, planners identified China's East and North-East as the most likely objective of an amphibious assault by American or Chinese nationalist forces.¹⁷ In the mid-1960s however, force posture and defensive preparations pivoted to meet the threat of Soviet invasion, before returning to the oceanic direction in the 1990s, this time the South-East. While implied in Jiang's Speeches, the possibility of a conflict with the United States over Taiwan would not be referenced directly until the 2004 strategic guideline.¹⁸ The 2013 *Science of Strategy* confirmed that 'the threat of war' is higher 'in the sea direction' than 'in the land direction' and while the 14th Five Year Plan published in 2021 has been noted for its

¹³ *ibid*, 358

¹⁴ Edmund J. Burke and Arthur Chan, Coming to a (New) Theatre Command Near You: Command, Control, and Forces, Chapter 6 in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, Edited by Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, National Defence University Press (2019), Washington, 247. Dennis J. Blasko, The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms, 379

¹⁵ *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), 308

¹⁶ Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*, Translated by J.R.Foster and Charles Hartman, The Folio Society, 112, 243-244, 374

¹⁷ *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), 53

¹⁸ Li Yousheng, ed, *Lectures on the Science of Joint Campaigns*, Beijing: Junshi Kexue Chubanshe, 201-203

softer language on the issue of reunification, the primacy of the Eastern Theatre has been entrenched by heightened cross-strait tensions since the election of Taiwanese President Tsai in 2016.¹⁹

Like its Southern counterpart, the Western theatre commands only two Group Armies, compared with three in the North, Central and Eastern theatres, but the Southern Theatre Command compensates with larger and more advanced air and rocket forces and the Northern Command receives the best heavy armour, so the lack of offensive capability in the West is clear. Both of China's Over the Horizon (OTH) 'backscatter' radars and two of the five Large Phased Array Radar (LPAR) systems face the South East and the situated in Xinjiang, Shandong and Heilongjiang are intended primarily for training and the tracking of the US ballistic threat across the North Pole respectively.²⁰ China's borders with the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have effectively been demilitarized since a 1997 confidence-building agreement and the Western theatre's principle Rocket Force base is located close to Central China, implying a supporting role in the main strategic direction.²¹ The Western Theatre's three major PLAAF bases, more than any other command, are justified by its geographical vastness and limited transportation network, and the theatre notably does not host a strategic bomber division.²²

China faces a significant deficit in strategic airlift and the failure to achieve full mechanization by 2020, has been seen as an early setback for Xi's reforms, but the transformation of PLA Ground Forces into a modular interoperable-manoeuvre force, represented today by the seventy-eight combined arms brigades under the Group Armies, has been largely successful.²³ The 2020 *Science of Strategy* published by the PLA National Defence University, describes the military battalion system as 'basically completed' and China's pandemic response successfully tested the JLSF's standardized logistics concept.²⁴ Transregional exercises have become the headline events in the army's annual training cycle, all involving sequential deployments by road, rail and air, to a distant training base under enemy attack.²⁵ The PLA maintains at least one sizable training complex in each theatre command, from coastal and flat areas, to high-plateau and mountainous terrains and of the seventy transregional exercises that took place between 2006 and 2016, only two brigades participated in more than one exercise, implying that no group army, theatre or strategic direction was considered more important than another.²⁶ Speeches by Xi and Xu Qiliang have echoed calls in the 2015 Defence White Paper and the 2017 *Science of Strategy* for 'balancing' between strategic directions and the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* acknowledges the 'strong correlation' between 'various strategic directions'. The 2020 strategy also emphasizes the importance of the Arctic region, the subject of a White Paper published two years earlier, both as an important burgeoning international trade route and as a 'strategic commanding height', essential to hemispheric dominance.²⁷

¹⁹ *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), 125. Meia Neuwens and Fenella McGerty, China's new Five Year Plan and 2021 budget: what do they mean for Defence?, Analysis, The Institute for International Strategic Studies, 8th March 2021, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/03/chinas-new-five-year-plan-and-2021-budget> [Accessed 1 May 2022]

²⁰ Hans M. Kristensen, "China's Strategic Systems and Programs", in *China's Strategic Arsenal: Worldview, Doctrine and Systems*, ed. James M. Smith and Paul J. Bolt (Georgetown University Press, 2021), 116

²¹ Chung C. (2004). The Shanghai Co-operation Organization: China's Changing Influence in Central Asia, *The China Quarterly*, No. 180 (Dec., 2004), pp. 989-1009 Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of the School of Oriental and African Studies Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20192414> [Accessed 14 May 2022]

²² US Defence Department 2020, 103-111

²³ *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), 23

²⁴ National Defence University, *Theoretical Works of National Key Subjects: Science of Military Strategy 2020*, National Defence University Press (2020), translated by Project Everest, China Aerospace Studies Institute, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2022-01-26%202020%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy.pdf> [Accessed 20 May 2022], 351

²⁵ Blasko, The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms, 367. Joel Wuthnow, *System Overload*, 22-23.

²⁶ *ibid*, 369

²⁷ *Science of Strategy* (2020), 163, 186. Joel Wuthnow, What I Learned From the PLA's Latest Strategy Textbook, China Brief, Publication: China Brief Volume: 21 Issue: 11, The Jamestown Foundation,

The PLA's Strategic direction therefore is a more fluid concept than in 2004. A number of prominent Chinese thinkers have since criticized Beijing's focus on the First Island Chain, Gao Bai, for example, and Wang Jisi, arguing for a more continental orientation. Renowned academic and member of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Foreign Policy Advisory Committee at a crucial period between 2008 and 2016, Wang's influential 2012 article *March West*, has been linked by scholars to the genesis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the following year. *March West* epitomized a revanchist zeitgeist in China in the years that immediately followed the Global Financial Crisis, which would produce not only the Xi premiership but the most conspicuous foreign policy initiative in the history of the People's Republic. A proliferation of Belt and Road commentary since 2013, has cited a host of domestic economic alibis qualifying the BRI's geopolitical overtones, but the initiative's official 'corridor' model is nevertheless an instructive case study for understanding how Beijing perceives its Eurasian frontier in the Twenty-First Century.

Chinese defence writings during the past twenty years make numerous references to the country's 'spatial superiority'.²⁸ In realizing what it describes as the 'expansion from home territory defence to forward edge defence', the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* asserts the role of China's 'geographical superiorities', 'vast national land' and favourable 'simultaneous radiation' of transportation and communication networks.²⁹ Likewise, the 2020 strategy proposes the establishment of joint logistics 'based on national territory and forward radiation'.³⁰ In discussing the trend of 'directional expansionism' beyond borders, these documents make no distinction between the landward and maritime domain, but the simple facts of China's borderland topography are such that this necessarily implies some overlap with the six proposed overland economic corridors of the BRI.³¹ In the 2013 strategy, Chinese territory is also described as 'a protruding arc facing the Western Pacific Ocean and the Northern Indian Ocean', supporting 'strategic space expansion' and a 'powerful two-ocean layout'.³²

PLA literature has implied the possibility of a two-front war since 2004. Clear references to the Himalayan Line of Control (LoC) in a joint operations publication that year and in the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*, reflected concerns among Chinese strategists that heightened US defence cooperation with India has brought about a 'secondary strategic direction'.³³ Xinjiang's highway system has grown by sixteen percent since 2015 but Tibet's has grown by fifty-one percent and the autonomous region's (TAR) transport and logistical network has been significantly upgraded, including the construction of eight new roads connecting forward positions along the LoC with the region's trunk highway system as well as a railway line between Lhasa and Nyingchi on the disputed border with Arunachal Pradesh. Beijing has also reportedly operationalized an ambitious project to connect Tibetan villages and command posts to the mainland with an Advanced Info-Optical Network (CAINONET).³⁴ Type-96 advanced Main Battle Tanks are being fielded in local combined-arms brigades and in July 2018 China elevated the Tibetan

<https://jamestown.org/program/what-i-learned-from-the-plas-latest-strategy-textbook/> [Accessed 6 May 2022].

People's Daily, China's Military Strategy; "Xu Qiliang: Resolutely Push Forward the Integrated Development of Economic and National Defence Construction", Article, People's Daily Online, November 12, 2015,

<http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2015/1112/c64094-27805738.html> [Accessed 1 Jun 2022]. People's Daily, "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report to the 19th Party Congress", People's Daily Online, October 27, 2017, available at <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2017/1028/c64094-29613660.html> [Accessed 15 May 2022]

²⁸ *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), 303

²⁹ *ibid*, 128, 133

³⁰ *ibid*, 415

³¹ *ibid*, 300

³² *ibid*, 133, 310-312

³³ *ibid*, 123, 252, 259. Joel Wuthnow, *System Overload*, 29

³⁴ V K Saxena Lt Gen, *The Power Behind Arrogance*, 27

Military Command (TMC) one level higher than the provincial commands. The TMC now sits directly under Army HQ, enjoying a degree of autonomy in conducting operations against India.³⁵

The PLA has traditionally preferred the use of artillery over offensive aviation in high-altitude operations, but a March 2022 report by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) identifies a total of thirty-seven large and medium-sized airports and heliports in Tibet and Xinjiang, twenty-two of which are considered dual-use, that have either been newly-constructed or upgraded since 2017 - the year of a seventy-three day confrontation between Chinese and Indian forces on the Doklam plateau. This figure does not include a further two-dozen smaller airfields, constructed in Xinjiang during the same period.³⁶ Chinese combat aviation faces serious disadvantages on the Tibetan plateau, with high-altitude take offs limiting maximum take-off weight, combat radius and payload and the increase in construction may be an attempt to mitigate against this as well as improve mutual fighter support between the more remote airfields. Indian analysts have also noted changes in Western Theatre Command tempo since 2018: an increase in the frequency of joint exercises and the year-round deployments of advanced Su-27 and J-10 aircraft, corroborating official Chinese statements that had previously warned of a response to India's acquisition of fourth-generation aircraft.³⁷ Dual-use of civilian airports in Tibet has increased to such an extent that several, Lhasa Gonggar for example, and Shigatse, have become *de facto* military facilities and the same is being assumed for a major new airport under construction at Tashkurgan in the strategically-sensitive Kashgar prefecture close to the border with Pakistan-occupied Kashmir.³⁸

The Indian defence community has long postulated the dual-use potential of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): the flagship 'economic corridor' of the BRI touted in official Pakistani and Chinese statements and the hyperbolic Belt and Road media space, as an alternative to the Malacca Strait for Beijing's importation of strategic commodities. Despite twenty years of 'Kashgar to Gwadar' rhetoric however, overland trade between China and Pakistan across their shared Himalayan border remains negligible, and the 'String of Pearls' theory has yet to be corroborated by evidence of a permanent Chinese military presence in the Port of Gwadar. Nevertheless there is presently a debate among foreign observers as to how PLAN assets in the Indian Ocean would be controlled, in the event of a conflict with India.³⁹ While some have argued that the counter-piracy task group remains under the administrative remit of the JSD Operations Bureau's Overseas Operations Division, this is a peacetime arrangement and Theatre Commands nominally control naval units within their jurisdiction during conflict.⁴⁰ The operational scope of the Southern TC, which has practised 'far seas oceanic combat system construction'

³⁵ Pillai and Mohan, 24. V K Saxena Lt Gen, *The Power Behind Arrogance: Assessment of China's Ari and Missile Arsenal*, (Vivekananda International Foundation, 2020), <https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/Power-behind-Arrogance.pdf> [Accessed 29 Apr 2022] 20

³⁶ Centre for Strategic and International Studies, *How Is China Expanding its Infrastructure to Project Power Along its Western Borders?*, ChinaPower Project, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (2022), <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-tibet-xinjiang-border-india-military-airport-heliport/> [Accessed 4 Jun 2022]

³⁷ Larry Wortzel, *PLA Contingency Planning and the Case of India*, Chapter 10 in *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China*, Edited by Andrew Scobell, Arthur S. Ding, Phillip C. Saunders, and Scott W. Harold, National Defence University Press, Washington, D.C (2015), 240. Rajeswari Pillai and Rajagopalan Pulkit Mohan, *PLA Joint Exercises in Tibet: Implications for India*, ORF Occasional Paper February 2020, 12-20 <https://www.orfonline.org/pla-joint-exercises-in-tibet-implications-for-india-65861/> [Accessed 14 May 2022]

³⁸ Pillai and Mohan, 16-20.

³⁹ Edmund J. Burke and Arthur Chan, *Coming to a (New) Theatre Command Near You: Command, Control, and Forces*, Chapter 6 in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, Edited by Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, National Defence University Press (2019), Washington

⁴⁰ Ian Burns McCaslin and Andrew Erickson, *The Impact of Xi-era Reforms on the Chinese Navy*, Chapter 3 in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, Edited by Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, National Defence University Press (2019), Washington, 137

as far afield as the Central Pacific, is not clearly defined, leaving the authority of the Western TC over naval assets deployed West of the Malacca Strait, open to speculation. Even if, as some analysts have suggested, this might be managed by the deployment of a Naval operational HQ to Chengdu, the extrapolation of the Western theatre's purview, to the Indian Ocean, Pakistan, and possibly even Bangladesh in a conflict, would represent a strong affirmation of the 'national home territory defence' strategy articulated in 2013, of 'the home territory as reliance, the two oceans region as key-point and the network space as the crux'.⁴¹

On aggregate, the People's Republic has registered territorial gains along its Western border, both in its confrontations with India as well as from border settlements with Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. In late-2021, the Tajik government finally confirmed the existence on its territory of a PAP patrol base, close to the tri-border area with China and Afghanistan, which had been exposed and somewhat sensationalized by Western and Indian media in 2019 as the surreptitious acquisition of a second base for China's military overseas.⁴² The Xinjiang PAP unit associated with the base, is assessed to have been conducting joint-patrols along the Afghan border since 2016 when China established a multilateral security mechanism, the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM), with Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Pakistan is the largest export market globally for Chinese arms. The third largest, Myanmar, is also territorially contiguous to China and the northern border of second-ranked Bangladesh is separated from the Western Theatre Command by only a few hundred kilometres of Indian territory.⁴³ Strategic partnerships with Pakistan and the Russian Federation enjoy the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' two-highest nomenclature classifications and the greatest number of Chinese bilateral and multilateral exercises during the past decade have been performed with these two countries.⁴⁴ While the highest concentration of defence engagement and the second highest concentration of exercises in 2019 and 2020 was in the ASEAN region, exercises with three territories contiguous to the Western Theatre Command: Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Mongolia, constituted China's third most active regional cluster.⁴⁵ This does not include the biennial multilateral exercises performed under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO): a Sino-centric regional governance initiative born out of border demarcation talks with Russia and Central Asia in the 1990s and still mostly comprised of nations contiguous to China.

The assumption that Beijing still views its military strategy solely through a cross-strait lens arises from a 'weak China' interpretation of a developing state aligning with a specific threat to its sovereignty, even if now only an existential one, rather than as a burgeoning world power seeking the path of least resistance for 'forward edge' defence. Central Asia's strategic importance for China ahead of other adjacent regions in this regard, may be understood threefold. On a historical level, Central Asia is crucial for Beijing's sense of prestige and its relations with the Islamic World.⁴⁶ The Han and Tang periods saw episodes of successful commercial and military expansion into the region and Ming withdrawal in the mid-15th

⁴¹ Science of Military Strategy (2013), 127, 309

⁴² Reid Standish, "Tajikistan Approves Construction Of New Chinese-Funded Base As Beijing's Security Presence In Central Asia Grows", Radio Free Europe, October 27 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tajikistan-approves-chinese-base/31532078.html> [Accessed 10 May 2022]

⁴³ SIPRI, TIV of arms exports from China, 2010-2020, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, https://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php [Accessed 20th February 2022]

⁴⁴ Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications, China Strategic Perspectives 11, Centre for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies National Defence University, 3. Also US Defence Department, 2021, 12.

⁴⁵ US Defence Department 2021, 163. Also US Defence Department, 2020, 169.

⁴⁶ Jacques Gernet, 250

Century, was reversed by the military campaigns of the Qing.⁴⁷ Buddhism spread to China by way of Central Asia and under the Mongol-Yuan dynasty, China's integration with the Eurasian overland trading network now known as the 'Silk Road' and an important anachronism for BRI diplomacy, reached its apogee.⁴⁸ The historical idea of a 'greater China' extends to the oasis cities of Transoxiana and unlike borders with India and the Russian Federation, the route to Central Asia is a natural thoroughfare along which Chinese influence must either expand or recede. Due to the construction of new pipeline and railroad connections since the mid-2000s, Central Asia is today also an important contiguous source of oil, gas, uranium and other strategic minerals, and an instructive frontier region for China's corporate champions.

Above all however, the region is considered defence in depth for Xinjiang. Chinese concerns during the peak of Western influence in Central Asia in the mid-2000s, cited not only support for Uighur separatists but alleged-AWACs patrols on the edge of Chinese Airspace and the potential deployment of NATO tactical nuclear weapons.⁴⁹ An inaugural display of SCO solidarity in 2005, saw a Chinese-prompted call for Washington to evacuate its recently-established military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Beijing has since cultivated a regional consensus on the 'three evils': terrorism, extremism and separatism, that implies mutual understanding not only on the Uighur issue and Islamic fundamentalism, but democratic proliferation. While China's rising arms sales to Central Asia do not yet challenge Russia's dominance of core inventories, the movement of Chinese personnel and material across border crossing points has been normalized by SCO exercises and the organization's counter-terrorism mandate remains the basis of China's defence diplomacy and the most likely grounds for a regional intervention.

Retrograde Defence

The third PLA orthodoxy examined in this paper is 'retrograde' defence: the strategic use of China's vast territory to create local force superiority and induce an invading enemy to overextend. First attributed to Mao in 1930, the term 'lure in deep' is synonymous with communist victory over the Kuomintang and to some extent Japan, but the modern use of retrograde defence can be traced to the mid-19th century when China was first confronted with a technologically-superior maritime adversary. Qing strategists such as Zeng Guofen and Lin Zexu advocated various degrees of retrograde defence and their ideas were borrowed and developed by revolutionary leaders such as Cai E who also cited the Boer War and the Russian defeat of Napoleon.⁵⁰ 'Masterly inactivity' is sanctioned in Chinese strategic thought not least by countless dynastic retreats in the face of barbarian invasion but also by way of Sun Tzu who argued that an army should posture 'like water', avoiding strength and attacking weakness.

Mao's return to political primacy in the 1960s ended a brief period of experimentation by the PLA leadership but the push for a more forward defensive posture was resumed after the threat to the Chinese capital, of a modern deep armoured thrust from the Soviet border, was revealed by the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. In 1980, 'lure in deep' was replaced in the official strategic guideline by 'active defence', a term that

⁴⁷ *ibid*, 125, 408, 499

⁴⁸ *ibid*, 374

⁴⁹ Shirin Akiner, Kyrgyzstan 2010: Conflict and Context, Silk Road Paper, The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute (2016), 41. Also Chung C., 1004. Also Ben Lowsen, Like a Good Neighbour: Chinese Intervention Through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Chapter 11 in *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China*, Edited by Andrew Scobell, Arthur S. Ding, Phillip C. Saunders, and Scott W. Harold, National Defence University Press, Washington, D.C (2015), 255

⁵⁰ Chen-Ya Tien, 76, 134

the party has otherwise used to characterize all national strategy since independence.⁵¹ The strategic shift was vindicated by the 1991 Gulf War, which highlighted not only the pressing need for PLA modernization but the obvious loss of battlefield initiative for a technologically-inferior side adopting a passive defence. Campaign literature in the 1990s and 2000s subsequently outlined a mixture of traditional, ground-centric constructs, such as positional defence and manoeuvre warfare alongside new concepts.⁵² Appearing to confirm the passing of retrograde defence into Chinese history, the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*, muses that the country is long past ‘having bare feet and thus not afraid of wearing shoes’.⁵³

In the present day Mao’s concept of protracted war along with its three phases is of little relevance. Contemporary PRC writings describe active defence in terms of ‘strategic defence’, that is to say waiting until an enemy has initiated a strategic offensive, before responding with ‘tactical offence’ in order to seize and maintain the initiative. While held as distinct from pre-emption however, the threshold for ‘active defence’ has never been defined. The most frequently cited examples of Chinese ‘active defence’ are the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the 1969 Zhenbao Island confrontation, the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese war and all three Taiwan crises, each characterized by tactical offensives after the Chinese leadership has perceived itself to be on the strategic defensive. The recent Doklam and Galwan Valley confrontations, may also be understood in this context. The 2019 White Paper restates ‘active defence’ as the basis for China’s military strategy and adds in respect of its Asia-Pacific neighbours that ‘addressing differences and disputes through dialogue and consultation has become a preferred policy option for regional countries’.⁵⁴ This was distorted slightly in the US Defence Department’s 2020 Annual China Report to ‘its’, that is to say Beijing’s, preferred policy option, setting a more ominous tone but a threshold for active defence is nevertheless implicit.⁵⁵

Andrew Scobell has written of Beijing’s ‘nested’ worldview and the party leadership’s perception of China’s security environment as comprised of four concentric circles radiating outwards from the mainland.⁵⁶ Defence writings and Foreign Ministry statements since 2004, have increasingly appeared to sanction the use of military operations overseas in defence of Chinese interests. Defence White papers published in 2015 and 2019 both conform to this trend and the 2015 National Security Law and the 2020 PAP reforms appear to provide legal frameworks for the safeguarding of interests overseas.⁵⁷ The 2020 *Science of Strategy* lists supporting the expansion of China’s overseas interests as one of the PLA’s four strategic functions and cites the ‘rapid advancement of the Belt and Road’ without drawing any distinction between the BRI’s maritime and continental components.⁵⁸ The publication does however list border closure as one of the army’s main non-war military operations and refers to the need for ‘coercive measures’ to intercept the ‘three forces’ abroad.⁵⁹ This is a tacit reference to the PAP patrol base in Tajikistan and affirms the contiguous extension of ground force operational scope, proposed in the 2013 *Science of Strategy*, ‘to strategic channels and vital areas where our security and development interests are at stake’.⁶⁰

⁵¹ Ma Suzheng, Reflecting on Eighty Years, Beijing Changzheng Chubanshe (2008), 146. Liang Ying, Brief Discussion on the Fourth Middle East War, Jiefangjun Bao, December 15 1975

⁵² Burke, Gunness and Cooper, 6

⁵³ Science of Military Strategy (2013), 137

⁵⁴ 2019 Defence White Paper

⁵⁵ US Defence Department 2020, 7

⁵⁶ Andrew Scobell. “China’s Nested Worldview”, in China’s Strategic Arsenal: Worldview, Doctrine and Systems, ed. James M. Smith and Paul J. Bolt (Georgetown University Press, 2021), 23-26

⁵⁷ US Defence Department 2020, 124. US Defence Department 2021, 74

⁵⁸ Science of Military Strategy (2020), 296, 321, 337

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 296, 321

⁶⁰ Science of Military Strategy (2013), 259

It is however the extension of China's strategic 'forward edge' in the maritime domain since 2004, that has attracted the most attention.⁶¹ The PLAN has maintained an anti-Piracy task force in the Gulf of Aden since 2008, and rotating warships have participated in a wide range of non-war military activities in the Indian Ocean. The PLAN's latest ships use modern combat management systems and air surveillance sensors which allow surface forces to operate outside shore-based air defence systems and Beijing has drastically expanded its satellite coverage in the Asia-Pacific region. The PRC's 2019 defence white paper described the PLAN as speeding up the transition from 'defence on the near seas' to 'protection missions on the far seas'.⁶² The 2020 *Science of Strategy*, discusses far-seas manoeuvre operations to effect sea control with greater clarity than previous publications, as well as confirming the ongoing shift to a force structure 'centred on aircraft carrier formations and nuclear submarines'.⁶³ China's two aircraft carriers, commissioned in 2012 and 2017, have conducted routine training exercises in the South China Sea and Western Pacific and a third carrier equipped with catapult-assisted take off (CATOBAR), is likely to conduct alpha sea trials this summer. Chinese defence analysts have argued for a total of six Carrier Strike Groups, with two permanently on station in the Western Pacific and two in the Indian Ocean.⁶⁴ The 2020 strategy discusses the need to expand PLAN activity in the Indian Ocean in anticipation of 'hegemonic countries' attempting to exercise control over strategic 'sea lanes' and 'air routes'.⁶⁵

This is a somewhat more optimistic assessment however than that given in the *Strategy of Science* published only seven years earlier which stated that 'within a considerably long period of time', it will be 'impossible to carry out symmetrical and relatively large-scale air and naval combats in areas distant from the homeland'.⁶⁶ This reflected perhaps, the numerous logistical challenges initially reported by the anti-piracy task force which have to some extent been remedied by the establishment of a support base in Djibouti in 2016, but the 2020 strategy continues to concede 'large difficulties in operational support' and appears to advocate a need to shift from shore-based to maritime logistical support.⁶⁷ While two Fuyi-class fast combat support ships had already been launched in 2015 and 2017, this language nevertheless contradicts a statement made only a year earlier by the PLAN Political Commissar in Djibouti who stated that the 'navy's support for far sea escort missions will gradually shift from a model based on supply ships supplemented by foreign ports to one that is based on overseas bases supplemented by foreign ports and domestic supports'.⁶⁸

Shore-based and maritime logistical support are by no means mutually exclusive but this contradiction exemplifies the analytical confusion that has clouded China's perceived-push for a blue water fleet capable of exercising sea control far from home shores, implied by defence writings and the PRC's carrier and advanced destroyer construction programs. Despite twenty years of 'String of Pearls' speculation, China

⁶¹ *ibid*, 262

⁶² State Council of the People's Republic of China, China's National Defence in the New Era, Defence White Paper July 2019, Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd., Beijing (2019)

⁶³ Wuthnow, What I Learned From the PLA's Latest Strategy Textbook. *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 366

⁶⁴ Ronald O'Rourke, China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress, Congressional Research Service (2017) 7-5700, 25

⁶⁵ *Science of Military Strategy* 2020, 295, 361-365

⁶⁶ *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), 133

⁶⁷ Kristen Gunness and Samuel K. Berkowitz, PLA Navy Planning for Out of Area Deployments, Chapter 14 in *The People's Liberation Army and Contingency Planning in China*, Edited by Andrew Scobell, Arthur S. Ding, Phillip C. Saunders, and Scott W. Harold, National Defence University Press, Washington, D.C (2015), 325.

Wuthnow, What I Learned From the PLA's Latest Strategy Textbook. *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 366-368

⁶⁸ Duchâtel M. (2019) Overseas Military Operations in Belt and Road Countries: The Normative Constraints and Legal Framework, Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads, NBR Special Report 80, Edited by Nadege Rolland, National Bureau of Asian Research with support from the Daniel Morgan Graduate School of National Security, 12

has notably failed to secure a second naval support base and the other services have increasingly exploited the new emphasis on the maritime domain. Safeguarding maritime rights and interests and conducting 'active offensive defence' above the sea zones, is stated as a basic objective of PLAAF strategy in the 2013 strategy and the Air Force has significantly extended its training operations into the Western Pacific since 2014.⁶⁹ In 2020, PLAAF Airborne units conducted inter-service training exercises with and responded directly to requests for assistance from, PLAN units.⁷⁰

While it is not yet clear how rocket force units will be integrated into joint operations, several accounts from PLARF sources also highlight Rocket Force efforts to 'build into' all five joint theatre operation command centres.⁷¹ The PLARF has emerged as a silent winner of the PLA reforms. CMC member Wei Fenghe, one of two PLARF officers on the commission, is both the highest ranking PLARF/Second Artillery officer in history and the first non-Army Minister of Defence. A PLARF general was also selected as the inaugural director of the SSF. Although the PLAN is less sanguine and the dispersal of road-mobile launchers and the integration of new systems will create challenges, the PLARF has aggressively promoted its burgeoning Anti-Ship capability. In 2019, the Rocket Force conducted the first confirmed live-fire launch of the road-mobile DF-21D Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM), actively deployed since 2010, firing six into the South China Sea, and has begun to participate in joint exercises, many of which appear to be based on counter-intervention scenarios.⁷²

Rocket and Air Force insertion into maritime campaigns could either be effected jointly under Theatre Commands or, with long-range conventional strike assets likely still under direct CMC 'skip echelon' control, both services could also conduct 'sea blockade' or 'sea dominance' campaigns independently.⁷³ The PLAAF has reportedly studied US air blockade concepts, including mine laying, which could be employed beyond the First Island Chain.⁷⁴ The operational scope of precision firepower strike in the 'near future' is given in the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* as the First and Second Island Chains but will 'gradually expand' to cover the Indian Ocean and Western Pacific Ocean.⁷⁵ Specifically the strategy states that 'in the event of a loss of control', here likely a reference to the interdiction of Chinese SLOCs, 'distant combat strengths and weaponry disposition in the homeland territory' must be utilized 'to deter, absorb, and control the Western Pacific Ocean and Northern Indian Ocean strategic outer line'. The Second Artillery appears to be listed *primus inter pares* alongside Air Force, Navy and Space systems, as the 'strengths main body'.⁷⁶

Indian analysts have previously expressed concern over the ability of Western Theatre strategic assets based at Delingha, notably the DF-31 and DF-21C, to target urban centres in northern India.⁷⁷ It has

⁶⁹ *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), 283

⁷⁰ US Defence Department 2021, 58

⁷¹ Rocket Force News, "A Certain Base's Joint Training Wins 'Iron Fist'", Article, Rocket Force News, November 11, 2017, 1. Rocket Force News, "Command Academy Focuses Intently on Requirements of Winning, Reforms Military Education to Reflect Actual Combat", Article, Rocket Force News, July 8, 2017, 1a; Guo Yuandan, "How China's Theater Commands Conduct Operations: By Truly Joining Systems and Fusing Command and Control Entities", Huanqiu Wang, October 8, 2017

⁷² Joel Wuthnow, Phillip C. Saunders, and Ian Burns McCaslin, *PLA Overseas Operations in 2035: Inching Toward a Global Combat Capability*, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Strategic Forum no.309, May 2021, National Defence University, Washington, 8. US Defence Department 2021, 61. McCaslin and Erickson, 144.

⁷³ Wuthnow, *System Overload*, 19

⁷⁴ Roger Cliff et al., *Shaking the Heavens and Splitting the Earth: Chinese Air Force Employment Concepts in the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010), 150–151, 162

⁷⁵ *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), 336

⁷⁶ *ibid*, 133

⁷⁷ Pillai and Mohan, 6

been assessed there are roughly eight ICBMs, twenty IRBMs and seventy SRBMs deployed in the TAR.⁷⁸ In 2020, a DF-26, a more advanced and longer range ASBM than the DF-21D, successfully struck a moving naval target in the South China Sea having been launched from Delingha and further platforms are reported to have been deployed to Korla in Xinjiang.⁷⁹ China has significantly expanded its constellation of Yaogan military satellites and the situation of the DF-26 in the Western theatre would enable the targeting of US and Indian naval assets in the northern half of the Indian Ocean, with sufficient depth from the LoC to mitigate both early-boost phase vulnerability to interception and exposure to the tactical aircraft strikes the United States and India would need to use in order to pre-emptively neutralize road-mobile launchers. 'To fight early and in a major manner' states the 2013 strategy, is not a requirement for 'joint long-range warfare', fundamentally, 'it is to establish oneself for the long term'.⁸⁰ While the conventional use of 'lure in deep' therefore, is no longer contemplated seriously under 'informatized' conditions, 'home territory as reliance' nonetheless still appears to privilege the depth of the Chinese interior.

People's War

The final orthodoxy examined in this paper is the mobilization of China's vast population in order to overwhelm a technologically-superior, invasion force. 'People's War' was an integral component of retrograde defence and the threat to create a 'vast human sea in which to drown the enemy' underwrote Mao's brinkmanship with the United States and Soviet Union.⁸¹ Its prominence in PLA thinking also ended in the early-1980s, when PLA reformers estimated that 'informatized local wars' would be more likely than the total wars of the mid-century. Following the 1991 Gulf War, the Maoist principle of annihilating the enemy's effective strength was also abandoned, and since the mid-2000s, the PLA has adopted a systems confrontation approach similar to the Western concept of network-centric warfare.⁸² Both the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* and the 2006 *Science of Campaigns*, published by the National Defence University, prioritize the transition from the 'quantitative scale model towards a precision qualitative model'.⁸³ The need for precision strikes on strategic points is repeated in the 2015 White Paper and the 2020 strategy restates the importance of quality over quantity. The latter publication also confirms the operational shift from 'integrated joint operations' to 'multi-domain integrated joint operations', appearing to reflect an update to the military strategic guidelines.⁸⁴

The 1993 Strategic Guideline known as 'winning local wars under modern high-tech conditions' remains the basis of Chinese strategy today, yet 'People's War' has retained its ubiquity in PLA literature. The 2006 *Science of Campaigns* uses the term thirty-seven times, the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*, a shorter publication, twenty-seven times. Use of the term 'innovate' by contrast did rise significantly from six mentions in 2006 to fifty-eight in 2013 but the former publication nevertheless defends the retention of orthodoxy in the new era by asserting that 'joint campaign guidance' must 'fully embody' People's War: 'the chess board move the enemy fears the most'.⁸⁵ Both publications cite Jiang Zemin's 2003 warning

⁷⁸ V K Saxena Lt Gen, *The Power Behind Arrogance: Assessment of China's Ari and Missile Arsenal*, (Vivekananda International Foundation, 2020), <https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/Power-behind-Arrogance.pdf>, 27

⁷⁹ Harsh Pant, *Keeping a close eye on China's nuclear capabilities*, Observer Research Foundation Commentary, November 22 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/keeping-a-close-eye-on-chinas-nuclear-capabilities/> [Accessed 4 May 2022]

⁸⁰ *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), 134

⁸¹ Chen-Ya Tien, 251

⁸² Burke, Gunness and Cooper, 8, 15

⁸³ *Science of Campaigns*, 88, 98. *Science of Military Strategy* (2013), 115.

⁸⁴ *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 183-185, 350

⁸⁵ *Science of Campaigns*, 75, 91

that ‘no matter how weapons and equipment will develop’, the ‘talisman’ of the People’s War, ‘can never, ever, be thrown away’.⁸⁶ The 2020 strategy, which doubles its usage of both ‘innovate’ and ‘People’s War’ compared with the 2013 publication, also paraphrases Jiang’s definition of the latter as a ‘magic’ weapon.⁸⁷ These cryptic references assume a political as well as an operational connotation however. In his celebrated work on Chinese military theory, Chen-Ya Tien describes all Chinese military philosophy, whether revealed by way of the Confucian or Daoist tradition, as placing a strong emphasis on the morality of war.⁸⁸ The social contract between peasant farmer and state is recurrent throughout Chinese history and its demise often associated with dynastic failure. Examples include the Han ‘Bingnong Heyi’ system and the land-annuity and ‘ten family’ systems of the early-Tang and Ming. Popular rebellions and reforming bureaucrats, the Taiping for example, and Wang An Shih, have also reflected similar aspirations.⁸⁹ The first mass mobilization against an invading enemy in the modern era, occurred at Sanyuanli during the First Opium War when outraged peasants were mobilized by scholars and local military leaders, forcing a British withdrawal.⁹⁰ Communist victory over the Kuomintang, which has been partially-attributed to the Red Army’s immersion among the rural poor, cannot be taken in isolation from this broader historical context therefore and the enduring use of ‘People’s War’ in doctrine relates primarily to its conceptual unity of party, party-army and the Chinese population. The 2013 *Science of Strategy* states that ‘combining active defence and people’s warfare requires upholding the just nature of the war’.⁹¹ The 2020 revision upholds People’s War as a ‘reflection of Marxist historical materialism on the issue of war’.⁹²

The legacy of the Red Army’s ‘three-ladder’ organization of armed masses, local and regular armed forces is illustrated today by the PLA’s ‘three-in-one’ armed force system.⁹³ Like control of the PLA Reserves which had previously been split between the PLA and local party committees, command of the People’s Armed Police (PAP) was centralized under the CMC in 2018, after decades of shared-leadership with the State Council.⁹⁴ The PAP’s peacetime mission set has also been streamlined to focus on domestic security, disaster response and maritime rights protection. The Chinese Coast Guard (CCG), which was transferred from civilian to PAP control in 2018, has doubled its fleet of large patrol ships during the last decade and has increasingly been deployed in the enforcement of sovereignty claims in the South and East China Seas.⁹⁵ Both the 2020 *Science of Strategy* and China’s 2021 Coast Guard law are notable for their elevated language on CCG jurisdiction in the ‘offshore’ and ‘far seas’ zones.⁹⁶

China’s Militia is the largest state-controlled paramilitary force in the world. Despite its long history in the country, no single dynasty has created a militia as large as the People’s Republic. The organization of early-communist armed militias by age, military experience and political background, is perpetuated by the present two-tier militia system and the basic organizing framework remains largely sub-district and municipal. The 1997 National Defence and 2010 National Defence Mobilization laws clarified the role of the militia in maintaining public order and each year, millions of militia personnel are mobilized to participate in emergency rescue and disaster relief.⁹⁷ Unlike the former Military Regions however, the new

⁸⁶ Science of Campaigns, 91. Science of Military Strategy (2013), 178

⁸⁷ Science of Military Strategy (2020), 29

⁸⁸ Chen-Ya Tien

⁸⁹ Chen-Ya Tien, 71. Jacques Gernet, 106, 242, 307, 313, 410. 567

⁹⁰ Chen-Ya Tien, 76-78

⁹¹ Science of Military Strategy (2013), 60

⁹² Science of Military Strategy (2020), 29

⁹³ Science of Campaigns, 31. Science of Military Strategy (2020), 29-30.

⁹⁴ US Defence Department 2021, 73

⁹⁵ US Defence Department 2020, 71

⁹⁶ US Defence Department 2021, 15. Joel Wuthnow, What I Learned From the PLA’s Latest Strategy Textbook

⁹⁷ Science of Military Strategy 2020, 444-445

Theatre Commands do not control Military Districts and Sub-Districts, which are now directly subordinate to the CMC's National Defence Mobilization Department.⁹⁸

Like the armed police, China's militia is both bastion of the party-state and a component of operational campaign strength.⁹⁹ The 2006 *Science of Campaigns* uses the term 'masses' sixty times, and asserts that in 'future campaign operations' the 'relationship between quantitative concentration and qualitative concentration' should be used to reduce the 'superiority and inferiority gap'.¹⁰⁰ The publication also specifically equates 'integrated operations' to 'People's War' and discusses the advantages of population density on the campaign battlefield.¹⁰¹ The 2013 and 2020 strategies mention 'masses' seventeen times and nineteen times respectively and the latter discusses the organization of militia support tasks in 'a people's war under the new historical conditions'.¹⁰² China's militia was mobilized in all major conflicts of the late-Twentieth Century and national war mobilization roles given in the 2020 strategy include air defence, maritime and border defence operations as well as information warfare and the protection of critical national infrastructure. Some of these overlap with the wartime functions of the PAP but the militia is described as able to support the military or 'perform combat tasks alone'.¹⁰³

The past decade has seen the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) increasingly used as a first line of defence in the South and East China Seas. There is no formal incorporation of the PAFMM at the national level, instead militia units are organized around various municipal and commercial entities with varying levels of government subsidy for ad hoc 'official missions'.¹⁰⁴ The latter have included escorted fishing operations at the farthest extent of the Nine-Dash Line and coercion of regional maritime actors during sovereignty disputes. While in the case of the Senkaku Islands, both local CCG and PAFMM units are likely subordinated to the Eastern Theatre Command, the joint integration of the coast guard and militia however, has been described as poor and the relative success of the PAFMM has led some analysts to conjecture that the diversion of resources will prove a source of tension with the PLAN.¹⁰⁵

All tiers of the PLA's 'trinity campaign strength system' therefore are presently supporting forward-edge expansion in three out of four strategic directions.¹⁰⁶ Yet PLA literature continues to invoke 'People's War' in the context of a strategic deterrent. One campaign area where this might be contextualized is air defence. Strategic air defence assets are commanded by the PLAAF, but tactical air defence, which is identified in the 2020 strategy as a major weakness of PLA ground Forces, is a constituent function of the armed militia.¹⁰⁷ The People's Air Defence System, referred to as 'Civil Air Defence' in doctrine, is extensive, with a mandate for defence and evacuation in every region, city and enterprise in China and is, consequently, an important mechanism for party surveillance and control.

⁹⁸ Benjamin Lai, *The Dragon's Teeth*, Casemate, Philadelphia and Oxford (2016), 76. Blasko, *The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms*, 355

⁹⁹ US Defence Department 2020, 29

¹⁰⁰ *Science of Campaigns*, 416

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, 38, 80

¹⁰² *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 222, 442

¹⁰³ *ibid*, 222, 441-442

¹⁰⁴ US Defence Department 2021, 76

¹⁰⁵ US Defence Department 2021, 98. Wuthnow, *China's Other Army*, 2. Defence Intelligence Agency, 79. McCaslin and Erickson, 154.

¹⁰⁶ Joel Wuthnow, *China's Other Army: The People's Armed Police in an Era of Reform*, Institute for National Strategic Studies China Strategic Perspectives 14, Centre for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defence University, 2

¹⁰⁷ *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 355

Both the 2006 and 2013 doctrinal publications discuss the importance of ‘people’s air defence strength’ in anti-air raid campaigns but the 2020 strategy specifically defines Civil Air Defence as a strategic deterrent and highlights the need to significantly upgrade militia and reserve air defence equipment.¹⁰⁸ The optimal ‘reserve force layout’, a term that encompasses the militia, is given as ‘focusing on main directions’, prioritizing cities and important transportation routes.¹⁰⁹ While likely reflecting some assimilation of the US Air-Sea Battle concept, now known as the Joint Concept for Access and Manoeuvre, into a counter-intervention campaign scenario, from references to both ‘border and coastal defence areas’ this cannot be confined to the Eastern Theatre Command alone. ‘Active defence’ has never excluded the use of retrograde defence at the tactical level, and PLA writings continue to concede some depth in the air contest with a technologically-superior enemy. While more than a decade old, the most recent campaign science publication by a PLA-affiliated institution nonetheless discusses ‘luring the enemy into an [Air Defence] ambush’ and organizing ‘air defence strengths to manoeuvre into positions the enemy must cross’.¹¹⁰

Another instructive case study for China’s strategic deployment of militia, is Xinjiang. China has a long tradition of using peasant-soldier colonies to garrison its continental frontier. Han border garrisons were collocated with granaries manned by conscripts and the establishment of military supply colonies was central to the Tang conquest of Central Asia, Ming frontier defence and the Qing re-conquest of Xinjiang in 1878.¹¹¹ In 1954, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) was established with a mandate to garrison and ethnically homogenize China’s North-Western frontier. The XPCC recruits ethnically-Han farmers mainly from other arid and unproductive provinces and is organized on a military basis into divisions and regimental farms along Xinjiang’s border areas and strategic transportation axis. Despite attempts to diversify away from agriculture into profitable urban enterprises, the central government continues to account for ninety percent of the XPCC’s budget and all central ministries treat the organization as an independent unit on the level of a province or municipality.¹¹² XPCC workers were mobilized during the 1962 Sino-Indian War as well as following the 2009 riots in Urumqi and militia training is presently being intensified alongside the streamlining of local government emergency response mechanisms.¹¹³

The non-standard structure of the XPCC however, as well that of the Xinjiang and Tibet Military Districts, which retain command over some combat and support units, might also imply a secondary, defensive role for the Western theatre.¹¹⁴ The 2006 *Science of Campaigns* does discuss the use of guerrilla and militia forces in the enemy’s rear during a positional defence campaign, but in general terms that could apply to any military.¹¹⁵ The 2020 *Science of Strategy* however not only expands further on the subject of guerrilla and independent asymmetric operations but makes several implicit references to Sun Tzu, comparing the impermanence of soldiers to ‘water’, and citing the need to ‘defeat the strong with the weak’.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, the publication makes an unusual restatement of Mao Zedong’s ‘hostile human

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, 209, 224, 227, 442

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*, 446

¹¹⁰ *Science of Campaigns*, 393, 694

¹¹¹ Gernet, 117, 251, 428, 506. Chen-Ya Tien, 100.

¹¹² Yajun Bao, *The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps An Insider’s Perspective*, BSG Working Paper Series Providing access to the latest policy-relevant research, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford (2018), 5.

¹¹³ Yajun Bao, 13.

¹¹⁴ Blasko, *The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms*, 361. US Defence Department 2021, 45.

¹¹⁵ *Science of Campaigns*, 517

¹¹⁶ *Science of Military Strategy* (2020), 264, 288

sea' threat and claims that China 'is fully prepared to fight the People's War deterring foreign enemies' invasion'.¹¹⁷

A review of the major doctrinal publications of the past two decades would suggest that an amphibious invasion is considered as unlikely as in 1985, so the most plausible scenario justifying the retention of these campaign concepts is an unmanageable insurrection in the Western theatre during a confrontation in the primary strategic direction. In the early 1980s, the Lanzhou Military Region deemed Xinjiang 'undefendable' and defence was to be left to guerrilla forces in the event of a Soviet invasion.¹¹⁸ When lost during the Taiping rebellion some Qing strategists advocated abandoning the province altogether, to focus on maritime defence.¹¹⁹ A 2012 instructional volume produced by the Academy of Sciences does anticipate that in the event of a conflict in the primary strategic direction, 'national secessionist forces', will collude with external 'hegemonists' to force China into 'two-front operations'.¹²⁰ This is a tacit reference to Uighur agitation in Xinjiang but it is also likely an acknowledgment of India's longstanding political support for the Dalai Lama.

'People's War' has also found currency as a rhetorical affirmation of Beijing's Civil-Military Integration (CMI) strategy, gradually institutionalized since the 1990s but experiencing a revived impetus under Xi. CMI has been strengthened, in tandem with a national innovation drive under the *Made in China 2025* industrial policy, through six interrelated efforts, half of which relate to next-generation technological and industrial innovation.¹²¹ The 2020 strategy asserts that 'the basic laws of People's War deterrence have not changed' and that the development of 'information technology and artificial intelligence technology has injected new vitality into it'.¹²² The PLA has conducted various CMI exercises exploring combinations of rations, fuel, equipment and facilities and what the strategy envisages as the 'socialization' of logistics, encompasses not only the construction of 'dual-use' infrastructure, including Belt and Road projects, to military standards, but an increased reliance on the 'internet of things'.¹²³

Chinese military writings characterise the cyber domain as offensive-dominant with information superiority ceded to those attacking first. Like the PLARF, Strategic Support Force units are not subordinated to Theatre Commands and the organization's precise role in coordinating information warfare planning between the services, and a distinction between strategic and tactical operations, has yet to be publicly defined. Along with territorial vastness and a large population however, the 2020 *Science of Strategy* lists 'advanced science and technology' as an integral component of the overall credibility of the People's War 'deterrent' and cites the need for an integrated 'mobilization system for reconnaissance, offence and defence in cyberspace'.¹²⁴ While this use of language might be interpreted as a call to address what has been seen as a bureaucratic impasse between China's military and civil intelligence services, the 2020 strategy also advocates the organization of militia reserve teams in industries 'with strong military-

¹¹⁷ *ibid*, 132

¹¹⁸ Fravel, 143.

¹¹⁹ Chen-Ya Tien, 101-103

¹²⁰ Liang Fang, "Indo-Pacific Strategy Will Likely Share the Same Fate as Rebalance to Asia-Pacific," Global Times (Beijing), December 3, 2017, available at www.globaltimes.cn/content/1078470.shtml. Also Ye Hailin, "Prospects for the 'Indo-Pacific Strategy' and China's Counter-Strategy", Indian Ocean Political and Economic Review 2 (2018), 10–11. Zhang Peigao, ed., Lessons on Joint Campaign Command (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2012), 206–207

¹²¹ US Defence Department 2020, 6

¹²² Science of Military Strategy (2020), 131

¹²³ Defence Intelligence Agency, 59. Science of Military Strategy (2020), 414-415, 434.

¹²⁴ Science of Military Strategy (2020), 131, 407, 446

civilian compatibility and high-tech content’, suggesting that the SSF envisages a lower-echelon information warfare role for the militia.¹²⁵

Change with Chinese Characteristics

Other traces of early-communist orthodoxy detectable in present force development and strategy, include the perpetuation of the political works system, a hallmark of the PLA’s Soviet origins. A doubling-down under Xi, of the post-Tiananmen reinforcement of political indoctrination in the armed forces, was motivated by the perceived-support of ‘some officers and men’, noted in the party’s 2014 journal, for a ‘national army’.¹²⁶ This is likely a tacit reference to the support Xi’s principle rival for the premiership, Bo Xilai, was reported to have cultivated within the PLA, prior to his downfall in 2012.¹²⁷ A very personal issue therefore, Xi’s reorganization of the PLA was announced in 2014 as the construction of a ‘people’s military that follows CCP commands’ and has occurred in tandem with the targeting of individual patronage networks and occupational specialities historically prone to corruption.¹²⁸ Both the 2019 Defence White Paper and the 2020 *Science of Military Strategy*, are notable for their strong affirmations of party control over the armed forces. The latter also explores greater use of social media platforms in the conduct of political work.¹²⁹ Published in 2021, the 14th Five Year Plan commits to both the improvement of technological strengths in key areas through CMI and the strengthening of the army through ‘politics’.¹³⁰

Attention must also be drawn to China’s robust and technologically-advanced Underground Facilities (UGF) program. The construction of UGF was an important component of retrograde defence in the 1960s, and Mao’s ‘Third Front’ movement saw strategic industries relocated to the Chinese interior and fortified in caves or mountainous valleys. The construction and use of UGF was revived in the 1990s and today facilities protecting China’s missile, submarine, air and C4I facilities against first strike or air raid attack, may be counted in the thousands. The term ‘rear base’ is not used in the 2006 *Science of Campaigns* except where discussing key-point targeting.¹³¹ It receives brief mention in 2013, as ‘reliance’ for ‘strategic missions’ but the 2020 strategy specifically refers to ‘construction of strategic rear bases’ as part of battlefield preparation for an informatized war.¹³² Alongside other defensive measures that include the segregation of primary from auxiliary runways, the construction of a large UGF complex is presently underway at Shigatse, the Western Theatre’s most proximate PLAAF base to the Doklam Plateau.¹³³ Interestingly, the public affirmations and doctrinal entrenchment during the past two decades, of the need for target-centric offensive operations has not only paralleled widespread UGF construction throughout

¹²⁵ Science of Military Strategy (2020), 131, 407, 446. Science of Military Strategy (2013), 247

¹²⁶ US Defence Department 2020, 33. Yu Guang, “Looking at Casting the Army’s Soul from the Modern Values of the Gutian Conference”, Qiushi, July 31, 2014, available at www.qsttheory.cn/dukan/qs/2014-07/31/c_1111827487.htm

¹²⁷ William Kirby, The Strange Case of Bo Xilai, Harvard Business Review, 28 September 2012, <https://hbr.org/2012/09/the-strange-case-of-bo-xilai.html> [Accessed 14 May 2022]

¹²⁸ US Defence Department 2020, 33. Yu Guang, “Looking at Casting the Army’s Soul from the Modern Values of the Gutian Conference”, Qiushi, July 31, 2014, available at www.qsttheory.cn/dukan/qs/2014-07/31/c_1111827487.htm

¹²⁹ US Defence Department, 32. Science of Military Strategy 2020, 212. Science of Military Strategy (2020), 428, 216

¹³⁰ Nouwens and McGerty

¹³¹ Science of Campaigns, 699

¹³² Science of Military Strategy (2013), 331. Science of Military Strategy (2020), 83

¹³³ Centre for Strategic and International Studies, How Is China Expanding its Infrastructure to Project Power Along its Western Borders?, ChinaPower Project, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (2022), <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-tibet-xinjiang-border-india-military-airport-heliport/>

China but a modest relocation of some strategic industries inland, initiated by Hu Jintao's 'Rise of Central China' plan, away from intended service hubs on the coast.¹³⁴

The inherent conflict therefore, between the declining relevance of its Marxist credo and the party's requirement to fulfil increasingly nationalistic goals is only one of several contradictions qualifying the declaratory aspects of China's 'historic mission'. Aspirational references in the 2020 strategy to 'military democracy', a hallowed tenet of early-communist doctrine and public commitments to overcoming the five operational 'incapables' associated by Xi with the PLA's notoriously hierarchical command culture, also appear incongruous with the renewed emphasis on political works and the centralization of the command structure under the CMC.¹³⁵ The continued reliance on demographic advantages vis-à-vis peer adversaries is evident both from the seamless acculturation of the 'People's War' concept as a campaign strength under informatized conditions and from the societal and operational ubiquity of a militia that now responds to the very highest military authority in the country.

Bringing about the one-time generational shift implied by the scale of the reforms, will rely not only on the continuity of key actors, notably Miao Hua and Zhang Shengmin, both eligible for a second CMC term, but also the maintenance of both the primary, and what is now likely a second, strategic direction in the Himalayas. The Sino-Russian entente, which has been a key enabler of China's focus on the maritime domain, cannot be assumed in the mid to long-term, and any number of flashpoints for its demise may be identified, particularly in Central Asia, where China's twenty-year ascendancy is forcing regional governments into binary choices. Other existential long-term variables include the outcome of the Taiwan impasse. Joel Wuthnow has argued that by virtue of their amphibious capability, the PLA Ground Forces are, along with the Eastern Theatre command, the most institutionally vested in the semi-permanent preparation for a cross-strait invasion.¹³⁶ One unintended consequence of a successful unification would likely be a re-evaluation of the primary strategic direction as the Army manoeuvred to avoid being relegated to the mainland 'constabulary force' implied by the most extreme interpretations of Hu Jintao's historic vision for the New Era.¹³⁷

While an argument can be made that China has never truly been a maritime power, equally it may be said, at least in dynastic terms, that China has never been successfully conquered from the sea. That the greatest threat to national sovereignty, the most conducive axis for contiguous economic and military expansion, and a burgeoning component of far seas SLOC protection, all coincide in a single Theatre Command, cannot be ignored. The Western TC is more prominent in PLA operational thought now than at any time since the mid-1970s and is the theatre most likely to produce a generation of officers with practical combat experience and service kudos. Furthermore, foreign observers acclaiming the expanding role and resources of the other four services at the expense of the Army, often neglect the fact that Ground Forces are but one element of the 'trinity system' and as the PAP and Militia become more centralized under the CMC, their representation and ethos will become more perceptible at the national level.

¹³⁴ US Defence Department 2020, 91

¹³⁵ US Defence Department 2021, 39. Defence Intelligence Agency, 61. Science of Military Strategy (2020), 214

¹³⁶ Joel Wuthnow, System Overload: Can China's Military Be Distracted in a War over Taiwan?, Institute for National Strategic Studies China Strategic Perspectives 15, Centre for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defence University,

¹³⁷ John Chen, "Choosing the Least Bad Option: Organizational Interests and Change in the PLA Ground Forces", Chapter 2 in Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA Assessing Chinese Military Reforms, Edited by Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, National Defence University Press (2019), Washington, 105

The recent reforms have achieved some symbolic milestones in terms of joint operational development and representation but the PLA's continental legacy will continue to influence aspects of force structure and strategic posture through the present decade. Much of this is simply due to the basic demographic and geographical facts of the Chinese state and this is frequently conceded alongside bold doctrinal injunctions to the contrary. Indeed, the 2013 *Science of Strategy* muses that the direct impact that a 'nation's geographical environment has on military affairs has relatively declined, but they are still basic conditions for drafting and implementing military strategy'.¹³⁸



The Changing Character of War Centre (CCW) is an Interdisciplinary research centre for the study of change in armed conflict. We are part of the University of Oxford, based at Pembroke College and the Department of Politics and International Relations. In addition to research projects, we offer bespoke policy advice. CCW is generously funded by the Ax:Son Johnson Foundation (Sweden). Specific projects are funded by grants received from the UK Government and the US Government.

¹³⁸ Science of Military Strategy (2013), 18