

Introduction

In September 1980, China's senior military officers convened a month-long meeting to discuss China's strategy for defeating a potential Soviet invasion. At the time, the Soviet Union had almost fifty divisions deployed along China's northern border. On the meeting's last day, Deng Xiaoping spoke. In his straightforward style, he said, "In our future war against aggression, exactly what guideline should we adopt? I approve these four characters—'active defense.'" With those brief remarks, Deng not only endorsed changing the military strategy used by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) since the mid-1960s, which had been based on fighting a protracted war deep inside Chinese territory. He also approved a new strategy to counter a Soviet invasion, which the PLA high command had formulated at the meeting and which sparked an effort to modernize China's armed forces.

Since 1949, China has adopted nine national military strategies, also known as the "strategic guidelines" (*zhanlue fangzhen*). These guidelines provide authoritative guidance from the Central Military Commission (CMC) of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for the operational doctrine, force structure, and training of the PLA. The guidelines adopted in 1956, 1980, and 1993 marked efforts to transform the PLA in order to wage war in a new kind of way. When and how has China pursued major change in its military strategy? Why has China pursued major change in its military strategy at these three moments and not at other times?

The answers to these questions are important for several reasons. First, theoretically, the variation in China's approach to military strategy offers a rich set of cases with which to deepen understanding of the sources of change in military organizations. Generally speaking, existing scholarship has examined a relatively small number of cases, limited largely to the advanced militaries

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in democratic societies and especially the United States and the United Kingdom.¹ In addition, most studies investigate two moments in time: the interwar period between the first and second world wars and the period since the end of the Cold War.² Apart from Japan in the interwar period, non-Western states such as China have received less scholarly attention.³ Similarly, apart from the Soviet Union, military change in socialist states with party-armies remains understudied.⁴ Moreover, with the exception of the United States and the Soviet Union, scholars have produced few studies of change over time in the military strategies of individual countries, despite the benefits that this research design offers for explaining strategic change by holding background factors like culture and geography constant.

Examining change in China's military strategy since 1949 represents an opportunity to enrich the existing literature on military doctrine and innovation in several ways. First, it permits the assessment of existing theories in a new and important case—contemporary China. Second, it allows scholars to probe the effects of a broad range of potential variables. Consider many of the attributes of China since 1949: a non-Western state with a distinct and rich cultural heritage, a socialist state with a party-army and not a national one, a revolutionary state with a violent birth, and a late modernizer of its armed forces relative to the other great powers. If theories derived from Western cases can explain military change in China, then they will have passed a series of important and difficult tests. However, if existing theories fail to account for strategic change in China, then scholars should reconsider the scope of their applicability.

Second, empirically, there is no comprehensive and systematic study of change in China's military strategy since 1949. Within the study of contemporary China, a small but vibrant group of scholars across several generations has examined the evolution of the PLA as an organization, its role in society and politics, and in China's defense-related policies.⁵ Although existing studies have contributed greatly to understanding China's approach to defense policy, they are limited in three ways.

To start, the empirical scope or the temporal domain of existing studies of China's military strategy is restricted. Typically, China's military strategy has been examined from two perspectives. The first approach is in surveys of the PLA's organizational development that examine strategy alongside other topics such as training, force structure, organization, political work, and civil-military relations.⁶ The second, and more common, approach is through book chapters or journal articles that document contemporaneous changes. Since the mid-1970s, Paul Godwin has written more than any other scholar on the subject, along with Li Nan and David Finkelstein, among others.⁷ Although these works represent the state of the art at the time of publication, the literature lacks a comprehensive study of China's approach to military strategy, despite its role in guiding most other aspects of force development and modernization.⁸

In addition, most of the existing scholarship on Chinese strategy written before the 2000s relied on a limited number of translated Chinese language sources. In the past decade, however, materials from China on both current and past strategies have become available.⁹ The limited availability of Chinese sources in earlier periods matters for two reasons. First, many studies of China's military strategy do not explain the phenomenon in the terms that the PLA itself uses. The importance of the concept of the strategic guideline, which reflects the essence of China's strategy in different periods, has only recently attracted the attention of Western scholars.¹⁰ Despite its importance within the PLA, most previous scholarship has not examined the adoption and content of these strategic guidelines systematically.¹¹ Second, some of China's past military strategies have inadvertently been mischaracterized. For example, many scholars (this author included) have described the PLA's strategy in the early 1980s as embracing "people's war under modern conditions" because several noteworthy generals used the phrase in the context of a desire to modernize the PLA.¹² The CMC itself, however, never used this label when describing China's military strategy. Moreover, senior Chinese generals first used the phrase in the late 1950s and it remained in use well into the 1990s—both periods when China pursued different military strategies.¹³ Similarly, China's military strategy before the 1980s is often characterized as "people's war."¹⁴ During this period, however, the PLA adopted four different strategic guidelines and only two of them could be characterized as approximating what Mao Zedong had described as people's war.

Lastly, existing scholarship on the PLA lacks sufficient integration with the literature on military doctrine and innovation from political science. This lack of integration likely reflects insufficient access to primary sources. Whatever the reason, the lack of integration is costly: it hinders findings from the "China case" from engaging arguments in the broader theoretical literature, inhibits comparisons across cases involving one of the world's great powers, and prevents new frameworks from being applied to the study of Chinese politics.

The third and final reason is that understanding China's military strategy has never been more important than it is today. With four decades of rapid economic growth, China is now the world's second largest economy. Apart from the United States, China now spends more on defense than any other country. With two million soldiers in uniform, the PLA is one of the largest armed forces in the world. Yet some of the most important questions about China, including how it will use its growing military capabilities and for what ends, cannot be answered by simple metrics such as GDP or defense spending. A key part of the answer lies with military strategy. Understanding China's past and present approaches to strategy provides a crucial baseline for assessing future changes. It also carries important implications for the net assessment of

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Chinese military power, the role of coercion in Chinese statecraft, the intensity of security competition in East Asia, and the potential for high levels of escalation should conflict erupt between China and the United States.

Overview of the Argument

To explain when, why, and how China has pursued major change in its military strategy, I offer a two-step argument in this book: China has pursued major changes in military strategy in response to shifts in the conduct of warfare—but only when the CCP is united and stable.

The first part of my argument focuses on the motivations for pursuing a change in strategy. In extending arguments that highlight the role of external sources of military change, such as immediate threats, I argue that one reason to pursue strategic change has been overlooked: a significant shift in the conduct of warfare in the international system, as revealed in the last war involving a great power or its clients. Such a shift should create a powerful incentive for a state to adopt a new military strategy if a gap exists between the state's current capabilities and the expected requirements of future wars. The effect of these changes should be particularly salient for developing countries or late military modernizers such as China that are trying to enhance their capabilities. These states are already at a comparative disadvantage and need to monitor closely their capabilities relative to stronger states.

The second part of my argument turns to the mechanism by which a change in strategy occurs, which is shaped by the structure of civil-military relations. In socialist states with party-armies, the party can grant substantial autonomy for the management of military affairs to senior officers, who will adjust military strategy in response to changes in their state's security environment. Because these officers are also party members, the party can delegate responsibility for military affairs without the fear of a coup or concerns that the military will pursue a strategy inconsistent with the party's political objectives. Such delegation, however, is possible only when the party's political leadership is united around the structure of authority and basic policies.

Taken together, a major change in China's military strategy will occur in response to a significant shift in the conduct of warfare that arises when the party is united. If the party is united but no significant shift in the conduct of warfare occurs, then senior military officers are more likely to pursue only minor changes in military strategy. When the party is divided, however, strategic change is unlikely to occur. Even when, externally, there is a significant shift in the conduct of warfare that provides a motive for strategic change, the military may become involved in intraparty politics or top party leaders may disagree about policy, be unwilling to delegate responsibility for military affairs to the armed forces, or seek to intervene in military affairs—all at the

expense of the formulation of military strategy and management of military affairs more broadly.

Overview of the Book

Chapter 1 has three objectives. The first is to describe what is being explained: major changes in a state's military strategy. The second goal is to consider the competing motivations and mechanisms that can explain when and why states pursue major changes in military strategy. The chapter emphasizes two variables that are central to understanding changes in China's military strategy. The first is shifts in the conduct of warfare in the international system, which create strong motivations for adopting a new military strategy. The second is the unity of the ruling communist party, which empowers senior military officers to formulate and adopt new strategies without civilian intervention. The final goal of the chapter is to discuss the study's research design, including methods of inference, the measurement of variables, and data sources.

Before turning to the major changes in China's military strategy since 1949, chapter 2 reviews the military strategies adopted by the CCP during the civil war from 1927 to 1949. Some of these strategies were defensive, others were offensive. Most of the strategies emphasized regular units engaging in mobile warfare, while others gave greater prominence to the use of irregular units engaging in guerrilla warfare. This chapter reviews these strategies, along with the key terms that form China's strategic lexicon, such as "active defense" and "people's war," and the challenges the PLA faced when the PRC was established.

Chapter 3 examines the adoption of China's first national military strategy after the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. The timing of the 1956 strategic guideline is puzzling for two reasons. First, when the strategy was adopted, China did not face immediate or pressing threats to its security and instead focused its resources on economic development through socialist modernization. Second, although China was allied with the Soviet Union, which made available thousands of military advisors and experts along with enough equipment to arm more than sixty infantry divisions, China did not emulate the Soviet strategy. Instead, China rejected the basic elements of the Soviet model, including the emphasis on first strikes and preemption.

Changes in the conduct of warfare and party unity best explain when and why China adopted its first military strategy in 1956. The principal motivation for the new strategy was an assessment of a shift in the type of war that the PLA would be required to fight. During the early 1950s, China not only sought to absorb the lessons from World War II and the Korean War, but also considered the implications of nuclear weapons for conventional operations. Senior military officers, especially Peng Dehuai, initiated vital military reforms and the formulation of the 1956 strategic guideline. Such military-led change was

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possible because of the unprecedented unity within the CCP, which created no incentives for the PLA to become involved in party politics and gave the PLA substantial autonomy for the management of military affairs, including military strategy. The chapter concludes by examining alternative explanations for the adoption of the 1956 strategic guideline, especially arguments about emulation.

Chapter 4 examines an anomalous but fascinating change in China's military strategy in 1964. It was an instance of reverting to a previous strategy—in this case, the idea of “luring the enemy in deep” from the Chinese civil war. It was also the only change in strategy initiated by the top party leader and not by senior military officers. Its adoption illustrates how leadership splits that create party disunity can distort strategic decision-making. In May 1964, as Mao became increasingly concerned about revisionism within the CCP, he overturned economic policies focused on agriculture to push for the industrialization of China's hinterland or the “third line.” Mao's justification for this reversal was the need to create rear areas in case of a major war. Calling for the development of the third line enabled Mao to take control of economic policy for the first time since the Great Leap Forward and thus attack party leaders and the party's centralized bureaucracy, whom he viewed as revisionist. Yet Mao's justification for the third line—the need to prepare for a large-scale war—required a military strategy consistent with the threat he invoked. The third line as economic policy and luring the enemy in deep as military strategy were complementary efforts to weaken the bureaucracy of the party-state, foreshadowing Mao's frontal assault on the party leadership in 1966.

Chapter 5 examines the second major change in China's national military strategy in October 1980. Representing a stark departure from the strategy of luring the enemy in deep, the 1980 strategic guideline envisioned defeating a Soviet invasion through a forward defensive posture and the development of a mechanized force that could conduct combined arms operations. The timing of this change in strategy, however, presents a puzzle. China had identified the Soviet Union as a potential military adversary in the late 1960s and, after the 1969 clash with Soviet forces over Zhenbao (Damansky) Island, a Soviet invasion from the north was the main national security threat that China faced. Nevertheless, for more than a decade, the PLA did not adjust its strategy to address this threat, even as the Soviet Union deployed more than fifty divisions along China's northern frontier by the late 1970s.

Changes in the conduct of warfare and party unity help explain when and why China changed its military strategy in 1980. Although the Soviet threat was an important factor, a key impetus for adopting a new strategy was China's assessment of the kinds of operations that the Soviets would conduct, which were associated with shifts in the conduct of warfare as revealed in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. The PLA's veteran generals began pushing for a new strategy as early as 1974 in response to these changes. Disunity in the party, however,

delayed a change in strategy. Senior party members were engulfed in the factional conflicts of the Cultural Revolution, as reflected in Deng Xiaoping's short-lived rehabilitation in 1975. In addition, because the PLA had been used to restore order during the Cultural Revolution, it had focused on internal governance at the expense of combat readiness. Moreover, it had become bloated through an expansion of the officer corps in noncombat administrative and political roles. In the late 1970s, unity in the party was gradually restored, first through the arrest of the Gang of Four in October 1976 and followed by Deng's consolidation of power at the historic Third Plenum in December 1978. When PLA officers again pushed for a change in strategy in 1979, they were successful.

The third major change in China's military strategy, the adoption of the 1993 strategic guideline, is examined in chapter 6. This strategy required the PLA to be able to fight and win a local war on its periphery that would be characterized by "high technology." The adoption of this strategy is also puzzling from the standpoint of existing theory. In the early 1990s, China's senior party and military leaders maintained that China's regional security environment was the "best ever" since 1949, owing largely to the dissipation of the Soviet threat. Yet, despite the absence of a clear and present danger to the nation's security, China adopted its most ambitious military strategy to date by seeking to develop the capability to conduct joint operations in a wide range of contingencies on its periphery.

The conduct of warfare and party unity can best explain when and why China changed its military strategy. The principal motivation was an assessment of profound shifts in the conduct of warfare as revealed by the 1990–91 Gulf War. For Chinese strategists, modern warfare was now seen as being characterized by the use of high technology, including precision-guided munitions as well as advanced surveillance and reconnaissance with space-based platforms. China did not change its strategy until 1993, however, because of the conflict within the party and the army after Tiananmen. By late 1992, unity in the party had been restored through Deng's efforts to rebuild consensus around his reform policies. Immediately after the Fourteenth Party Congress, which reflected the restoration of unity in the party, the PLA began to draft the new strategic guideline that was subsequently adopted in early 1993.

Chapter 7 examines recent developments in China's military strategy in two adjustments to the 1993 strategic guideline. In 2004, the strategic guideline was altered to focus on "winning local wars under informatized conditions." In 2014, the strategic guideline was adjusted again to further emphasize informatization in "winning informatized local wars." Limits on the availability of source materials prevent a detailed analysis of the decision-making behind these two changes. Nevertheless, they should be viewed as minor, not major changes in military strategy, as each adjustment further highlighted the role of

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informatization as the core of high technology in warfare and the need to be able to conduct joint operations. Examination of the 2004 strategy suggests that the PLA was altering its assessments of trends in the conduct of warfare based on the 1999 Kosovo War and the 2003 Iraq War. The 2014 guideline was adopted to provide top-level guidance for the single largest organizational reform of the PLA since the mid-1950s. A primary driver for these reforms is to improve the PLA's ability to conduct joint operations, which had been identified as the future of warfare in the 1993 strategy. Even though the 2014 guideline did not envision waging war in a new way, the reforms it justified are poised to have a significant effect on the PLA's military effectiveness if implemented successfully.

Chapter 8 examines the evolution of China's nuclear strategy. China's nuclear strategy is puzzling for two reasons. One reason is that, based on achieving deterrence through assured retaliation, it has not changed substantially since China exploded its first nuclear device in October 1964. Moreover, China did not seek to change its strategy to overcome its vulnerability to a first strike by the United States or the Soviet Union. This contrasts with the dynamic nature of military strategy for conventional operations in the strategic guidelines. Another reason is the lack of integration between China's nuclear strategy and the many conventional strategies described in this book, even after the adoption of the 1993 strategic guideline.

This chapter suggests that nuclear strategy is the exception that proves the rule. Unlike conventional military operations, top party leaders never delegated authority over nuclear strategy to the PLA. Nuclear strategy was deemed a matter of national policy to be determined by the party leadership, in consultation with senior military officers as well as civilian scientific experts. Although senior military officers, especially in the 1950s, advocated for the development of a large nuclear program, these proposals were consistently rejected. Because nuclear strategy was never delegated to the PLA, the views about nuclear weapons held by China's top party leaders, especially Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, have had an especially powerful effect, even today. Because these leaders viewed the utility of nuclear weapons as limited to deterring nuclear coercion or attacks, nuclear strategy was not integrated with conventional military strategy and has remained focused on achieving assured retaliation.

The conclusion reviews the main findings of the book, the implications of these findings for international relations theory, and the prospects for future changes in China's military strategy.