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# The Chinese Threat in Perspective

G D Bakshi

*China's national might and military prowess developed greatly during the Korean war and the Indo-China war. The world had to recognise that China is a very powerful country.*

— Huan Xiang

Deng Xiaoping's national security adviser

## The Global Perspective

Much of the current Chinese strategic discourse is inspired by the classical Chinese military literature that deals with the period of the “Warring Kingdoms” in Chinese history (450-300 BC). These classical Chinese military texts include Sun Tzu’s “The Art of War” (*Sun Tzu Bing Fa*), “The Methods of the Su Ma” (*Su-Ma Fa*) and “Sun Bin’s Military Methods” (*Sun Bin Bin Fa*) of the early period. These also include the writings of subsequent Chinese military scholars like Wu- Tzu, Wei-Liao Tzu, Tai Kung and Huan Shi Kung of the later periods of Chinese history. In the late 1970s, paramount leader Deng Xiaoping had highlighted the striking strategic parallels between that ancient period of Chinese history and the current multipolar global order. Col Lu Chungzi of the National Defence University’s (NDU’s) Strategic Department had said that Sun-Tzu’s (Sun Zi) “The Art of War” was the product of a multipolar power structure in China 2,500 years ago. Vice President of the Academy of Military Sciences, Gen Gao Rui, had extolled the virtues of studying the lessons of that distant period of Chinese military history.

Accordingly, the director of research at the General Staff Department of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) had published six volumes of studies on ancient Chinese statecraft in 1996, that contained advice on how to comprehend the

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current and future security environments in the light of past historical experience. The Chinese decision to “shun brilliance and nourish obscurity”, “yield on small issues with the long-term in mind” and “Bu chi Tao – never be the leader” was taken straight from the Chinese classics. Translated in modern Mandarin, it read, “Hide your capabilities, bide your time”. China consciously sought a peaceful periphery to complete its economic and military modernisations unhindered. It deliberately sought to keep a low profile internationally and not get provoked into any premature conflict with the USA before its modernisations were complete. Calculations of the Comprehensive National Power (CNP) by Chinese military think-tanks seemed to suggest that China would catch up with the USA by 2020. Chinese civilian think-tanks were less optimistic. They felt this could not happen before 2030, and may take up to 2050. The differing perceptions of the rate of growth of the CNP of China and its adversaries seem to highlight the sharp differences in perspectives and outlook between the Chinese civil and military bureaucracies. This is a significant new dimension of power equations in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The initial Chinese top leadership had come entirely from the PLA. There is now a sharp and clear demarcation between the civilian and military sectors in China. The top political leadership comprises civil technocrats and engineers. So far, the PLA was content to lie low and build up its military capabilities before asserting itself at the regional or global level—hence, its nod to the energetic propagation of the theory of the “peaceful rise of China” that would threaten no one. By the year 2009, however, there were significant policy shifts in China. The PLA now seems confident that its two-decade-long military build-up has now reached a stage where it can take care of any adversaries in its Asian backyard. The second major development was the global financial meltdown that seriously hit the economies of the USA and Europe. The next factor was that the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) seemed to be militarily badly bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan and had *little residual capacities to intervene anywhere else in the foreseeable future*. The PLA had initially been highly impressed with the American military performance in the Gulf Wars as also in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. The initial awe of the revolution in military affairs (RMA) has now worn off as China savours the extreme American discomfiture in Iraq and Afghanistan. It sees the American military as suffering from battle fatigue and almost desperate to get out of these quagmires.

The Chinese PLA now seems increasingly vexed with its low profile stance of having to smile continually and mouth platitudes about the peaceful rise of

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China. It seems to have concluded that the global environment had transformed at a pace it had not anticipated earlier. The fact that it was able to pull itself out of the global recession so rapidly filled it with hubris. This hubris and self-congratulatory tone was so blatantly in evidence throughout 2009. The Beijing Olympics were China's coming of age party. Next was a series of high profile military exercises significantly targeted not at Taiwan but at overland Asian adversaries like India and Vietnam, or even intervention in the Koreas. The cumulative hubris of these self-congratulatory events led China into throwing its weight about at the global and regional levels in a manner that has seriously rattled the USA. President Obama's visit to Beijing, that was designed to build bridges and cement a new G-2 global architecture, seemed to have been interpreted in China as a sign of palpable weakness. The Chinese respect strength. China seriously snubbed Obama during the climate change negotiations at Copenhagen and has steadfastly refused to fall in line on Iran. The hopes of G-2 architecture have evaporated with a rapidity that is surprising. Obviously stung, the USA has now retaliated by arms deals with Taiwan and Obama's meeting with the Dalai Lama. The US seems equally incensed by the trade imbalance with China caused by the manipulated low exchange rate of the Chinese yuan. Voices in support of protectionism are increasingly being articulated in America.

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### **The Regional Perspective**

The Indian media's strident hype on Chinese tactical intrusions on the Line of Actual Control (LAC) has sidetracked attention and concern from the far more serious aspect of China's "*strategic intrusions*" into India's backyard in South Asia. Over time, these strategic intrusions will prove to be far more dangerous than the tactical intrusions of a few metres or more on the LAC. It is imperative that the issue is seen in the larger perspective instead of being smothered in the details of tactical trivia. China started its economic modernisation in 1978. It, thus, has a head start of almost 12 years over India (whose economic liberalisation commenced only in 1990). China consciously sought a peaceful periphery to pursue its economic modernisation unhindered. Hence, China deliberately tried to create a peaceful periphery to focus unhindered on its

economic modernisation. What is now apparent in hindsight, however, is *China's conscious Grand Strategy to deny India this very same peaceful periphery via its "String of Pearls" stratagem*. The prime component of this strategy was to build up Pakistan's nuclear and conventional military capabilities to a level which would enable it to destabilise and permanently keep India off- balance. Pakistan, thus, became China's primary cat's paw and principle surrogate in South Asia.

Unfortunately, for the last three decades, India has been in a state of denial regarding the *unprecedented levels of nuclear proliferation and conventional military support that China has provided to Pakistan*. Given the stark security consequences of this Chinese support and the levels of nuclear and military parity engendered between India and Pakistan, such denial is dangerous. The harsh reality is that the degree of proliferation support provided by China to Pakistan is simply unprecedented in the history of international relations. Consider the following cold facts:

- China provided the blueprints of a nuclear device to Pakistan and also HEU (highly enriched uranium) for two bombs.
- China tested Pakistan's first nuclear device at Lop Nor in 1990.
- China gave the M-9 and M-11 missiles to Pakistan.
- When the US imposed sanctions on the Chinese firms supplying these missiles, China put AQ Khan in touch with the North Koreans.
- China paid for the No-dong and Taepo-dong missiles purchased by Pakistan from North Korea.
- China is now assisting Pakistan in converting its nuclear arsenal from HEU to lighter plutonium weapons. For this, it is helping Pakistan build a plutonium reactor and will supply two more in the years ahead.

All this support was given precisely in the period that India was making major peace overtures to Beijing. It is noteworthy that in December 1988, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi had visited China in a path-breaking visit to restore ties. This was the period in which the Chinese had given Pakistan blueprints for the bomb. In fact, in 1990, China had permitted Pakistan to test its first nuclear device at Lop Nor. No other country in the world has gone to such lengths to provide this degree of proliferation support to another. This action had disastrous consequences for India's national security, but we seemed to be blissfully unaware, and fully engaged in thawing our relations with China. This level of nuclear proliferation support, therefore, is unprecedented and in itself poses the greatest danger to Indian security. Thereafter, China stepped up delivery of

M-9 and M-11 missiles to Pakistan even as it talked peace and tranquillity with India. This must also be seen in relation to the fact that almost 70-80 per cent of Pakistan's main battle tanks, combat aircraft and artillery pieces are of Chinese origin. China's massive support has given Pakistan notions of nuclear and military parity with India. It is precisely this parity that has emboldened Pakistan to wage a relentless proxy war in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and now a *jihad* in Indian cities. The Pakistani dimension of the Chinese threat needs to be clearly understood for it is the core of the Chinese containment strategy against India. Viewed in the light of the determined Chinese inroads into Nepal, Myanmar and now Sri Lanka, the encirclement strategy becomes apparent.

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### **Creation of Capacity Differentials and Asymmetries**

The second aspect of the Chinese threat comes from the steadily aggravating military power differential that is emerging between the two states. China's defence budget has been rising annually by double digit percentages for over one decade. India's defence budget in 2009 was \$ 30 billion. In sharp contrast, Chinese sources estimated China's defence budget at over \$ 75 billion. The Pentagon points out that this does not include China's massive outlays on defence research and development (R&D) and other heads. If these are factored in, China's defence budget stands at a whopping \$ 142 billion a year. This amounts to almost a 250 per cent differential annually and should be a cause for serious disquiet. India cannot engage in a ruinous arms race with an economically stronger China. However, the capability differentials and asymmetries have to be kept at reasonable levels so that these do not present windows of opportunity to a rising China. Indian capabilities should be sufficient not simply to dissuade but also to deter. Creating huge capacity differentials could simply invite attack/aggression. We simply cannot permit major asymmetries in CNP to emerge to a level which opens serious windows of vulnerability.

#### *Doctrinal Aspects*

China's primary military threat had emanated from the former Soviet Union. With the sudden collapse of the USSR, China felt that its threat perception had

undergone a dramatic paradigm shift. The Chinese doctrine of local wars now stemmed from paramount leader Deng Xiaoping's judgment that *small and medium local conflicts and not general total wars were the most likely threats*. China's military doctrine, therefore, changed from the defence in depth of the "People's War" era, to "Active Defence" and then to "Local Wars under High-Tech Conditions." Gulf War I shocked the Chinese into starting their own military modernisation and switching to "Local Wars under Conditions of Informationisation." However, the Chinese doctrine for limited war envisages very high levels of the use of military force and lays heavy stress on preemption and seizing the initiative.

### *Nuclear Differential*

China currently has some 250 warheads in its inventory. By 2020, these could rise to 500 bombs (ranging from 10 KT, 90 KT, 250 KT to 2.50 MT). It has hardened its nuclear silos, converted from liquid to solid fuelled missiles that are far more manoeuvrable and multiple independently retargeted vehicles (MIRVs). It has 60 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBMs) (DF-31 of 8,000 km and DF-31 A of 13,000 km range). By 2020, it will have 100 ICBMs and 6x Jin-class (Type 094) nuclear submarines each armed with 12xJL-2 sea-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) (MIRVs with 3-4 warheads each). Besides DF-25 class IRBMs, China's Second Artillery Corps has over 1,000 short range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) with conventional warheads that will be fired in salvos to precede major ground attacks or prevent US carrier battle groups from intervening in any conflict over Taiwan. Overall, China has 15 missile brigades grouped into four bases.

### *People's Liberation Army Air Force*

The most disquieting development that has not attracted its due share of media attention is the rapid qualitative upgrade of the Chinese PLA Air Force (PLAAF). This had a vintage fleet of the 1950s and 1960s era F-6 (MiG-19) and F-7 (MiG-21) class of fighters. This fleet is rapidly being replaced by third and fourth generation fighters like the Russian Su-27 and Su-30 and their Chinese copies, the J-11. The mainstay of the Chinese Air Force will be the J-10 (Chinese F-16 equivalent fighter based on the Israeli Kfir design). China already has 150 x J-10s, 97 x Su-30s, 48 x Su-27s and over a 100 J-11s. By 2020, China will have a formidable fleet of 1,200 x J-10s, 200 x J-11s, 200 x Su-27 and some 100 x Su-30. It is jointly developing the JF-17 with Pakistan and will have some 250 of these aircraft. It is now developing a fifth generation J-X stealth

fighter. It already has the airborne warning and control system (AWACS) and air-to-air refuelling capability. Thus, by 2020, the Chinese Air Force could field 2,300 combat aircraft of the third/fourth generation to India's just 750 combat aircraft. So far, the Indian Air Force had the qualitative edge. This will now stand largely eroded. China now will have a significant quantitative edge as well as qualitative parity (if not a clear advantage). This tilt in the air power balance is the most ominous development in security terms. This will not go away simply by admonishments to the air force brass not to demoralise the nation by highlighting this asymmetry. The nation should be acutely conscious of this differential and do its utmost to create the requisite degree of balance in an acceptable time-frame.

### *Ground Forces*

At 1.6 million men, the PLA is the world's largest army. As per the *Military Balance 2009*, it has 40 divisions to India's 28, some 7,660 main battle tanks (MBTs) to India's 3,978 and 17,700 artillery pieces to India's 10,360. Besides there are some 60 divisions worth of the People's Armed Police (the internal security force) the bulk of which are demobilised PLA divisions.

### *The PLA Navy (PLAN)*

Due to the Taiwan-centric focus of Chinese operational thinking, the PLAN has received heavy funding and priority in modernisation. By 2020-30, it could have three carrier battle groups and 60 submarines (10 nuclear) and 78 surface combatants to India's two/three carriers and 17 submarines (1/2 nuclear) and 58 surface combatants. China has a well articulated strategy of "access denial" to stop intervention by US carrier battle groups by firing salvos of medium/short range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and sending in its submarines in packs.

### *Space*

China tested its first anti-satellite missile in January 2007. This year, it has carried out an anti-ballistic missile test. By 2020, it hopes to have 200 remote sensing satellites and a military space station (it has already launched three manned missions and a lunar orbiter). It is planning for nano satellites that will serve as space mines and has invested heavily in cyber warfare capabilities. (There are reportedly 30,000 computer professionals in its military and two hacker brigades.)

### *Infrastructure Differential*

The most pertinent is the major infrastructure differential between the Chinese logistic capacities in Tibet and Xinjiang versus India's in the Himalayan region. China now has a standard gauge railway line up to Lhasa with a capacity of up to eight trains per day. This is being extended up to Nepal and the Chumbi Valley. By 2030-50, two more rail links will connect Tibet with mainland China and Xinjiang. Tibet will have over 60 airfields. The existing road network has been upgraded and this has created a paradigm shift in the Chinese logistical capabilities in Tibet. The scale and velocity of any Chinese build-up has now already gone up by a factor of over 120 percent.

### *Pattern Shifts in Training*

The *Chinese Defence White Paper* of 2006 had identified three phases of a Chinese perspective plan that forms a blueprint for a superpower status:

- *First Stage (to be completed by 2010)* – aims to lay a solid foundation for the country's military posture and produce a modern force capable of defeating a moderate sized adversary (India, Vietnam, Taiwan). This phase has been completed a year ahead of schedule.
- *Second Stage (to be completed by 2020)* – aims to catch up with second tier world powers like Russia, Japan and the European Union (EU) and embrace information-based operations and technologies as the principal focus of its modernisation.
- *Third Stage (to be completed by 2050)* – aims at being an advanced military information power by the middle of this century. This is a euphemism for catching up with the USA and achieving full-fledged superpower status with global power projection capabilities and a blue water navy.

## **2009 – Watershed Year**

The year 2009 will probably go down as a significant year in Asia's recent history. China, which had studiously been maintaining a low profile to focus on its economic development, shed its inhibitions, and began to flaunt its military muscle. The era of "hide your capabilities, bide your time" was over. The global financial crisis has debilitated the US power and encouraged China to strike a far more assertive profile in Asia. This was also the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the PRC and its showcased its military might at the anniversary parade. Its PLA Navy and PLA Air Force held major expositions in 2009 to showcase their strength. What was most significant, however, was a series of some 23 major military exercises culminating in the large

scale military exercise called “Kuayue” (or Stride). Four divisions from four different Military Regions (MRs) of China (Lanzhou, Jinan, Guangzhou and Shenyang) took part in this exercise. All previous Chinese military exercises have focussed on Taiwan and rehearsed for an amphibious assault. This was the first major exercise not focussed on the renegade province but on overland military operations against possible adversaries like India and Vietnam. The Chinese newspapers termed it the “Trans-Military Area Command Exercise”. These exercises entailed high speed mobilisation and long range manoeuvre (to actualise the trans-regional war zone concept in which the resources of many MRs are focussed onto a single conflict zone for a local war under conditions of informationisation). In the Kuayue Exercise, however, these four divisions were not focussed on one single combat zone. Rather, a division each from these four MRs mobilised rapidly – moved almost 2,000 km each to the other MR to carry out two-sided exercises in unfamiliar terrain that entailed assault river crossings of major rivers and culminated in a joint live fire exercise at the field firing ranges. These four exercise sets were:

- *Shenyang-Lanzhou*: Thus, some 10,000 troops and 1,000 vehicles of Shenyang MR were deployed at the foot of the Helan mountains in the northwest of China (to the Lanzhou MR).
- *Lanzhou-Shenyang*: The Mechanised Infantry Division from the Lanzhou MR mobilised and moved to the Taonan tactical training area in the Jenin Province of the Shenyang MR. This force practised a major assault river crossing of the Yellow River. A 250-metre pontoon bridge was launched to enable the divisional crossing.
- *Jinan-Guangzhou*: Troops of the Jinan MR mobilised to the Guangzhou MR. Main battle tanks were moved by rail and lightly armed troops moved by the new high speed bullet trains and civilian aircrafts.
- *Guangzhou-Jinan*: A motor rifle division of the Guangzhou MR was mobilised and moved to Jinan MR in central China. It covered a distance of 2,000 km over four provinces. It carried out a major assault crossing of the Xinjiang River.
- All these exercises culminated in joint live fire drills in the tactical training bases of the four military commands. These used laser combat simulation systems and tested encrypted satellite communications. The long range mobilisation used civilian airlines, rail networks and high speed bullet trains.

The Shenyang to Lanzhou series of exercises definitely appeared as a rehearsal for a scenario with India as the likely target. The reverse direction enabled a rehearsal of North Korea-centric contingencies. The Jinan to

Guangzhou component of the Kuayue Exercise was clearly targeted against Vietnam. Ominously, these exercises practised assault river crossings. These put out the sinister message that in any future conflict between China and Vietnam, the Chinese intend to drive deep beyond the border hill belt and perhaps attempt assault crossings of the Red River or the Mekong River in Vietnam. It is noteworthy that there has been a large number of unreported clashes between Vietnamese Navy patrols vessels and the Chinese Navy in the disputed Spratly and Paracel Island group last year. In fact, the Chinese had warned India's Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC) not to carry out drilling in the block allocated by Vietnam. Alternatively, these river crossings were possibly designed to ensure continued movement in scenarios in which enemy air attacks were to destroy existing bridges on the Chinese induction routes.

Taiwan has already been coerced into submission by a series of high profile Chinese military exercises and missile firings designed to highlight China's will and resolve to use military force. This could render surplus a huge Chinese expeditionary capability. The Kuayue Exercise seems primarily focussed on Vietnam, to coerce that small but brave nation into a meek surrender of its claims in the disputed South China Sea. It is also a warning to the other Southeast Asian countries with claims in this oil rich area. India is another intended target of such "Trans-Military Area Manoeuvres."

### **Airborne Exercise**

The 15 Airborne Corps is the prime strategic reserve (Rapid Reaction Force) of the PLA that functions directly under the Central Military Commission. It comprises the 43<sup>rd</sup>, 44<sup>th</sup> and 45<sup>th</sup> Para Divisions. This corps held a 20-day airborne manoeuvre exercise in 2009 called Kongjiang Jidong (Airborne Movement 2009). This is the largest single exercise executed by this strategic formation so far. It was termed a trans-theatre comprehensive campaign manoeuvre exercise involving 13,000 officers and men, some 1,500 vehicles and 700 pieces of equipment. These troops manoeuvred over 2,000 km between Hubei, Henan, Annuï and Jiangsi Provinces by multiple means and routes. These carried out vertical landings in central Henan by a crack demonstration brigade (deemed one of the best in the PLA). It is noteworthy that some 10,000 airborne troops of this corps had been mobilised in less than 48 hours to quell the Tibetan riots in 1988. Similarly, in the Sichuan earthquake of May 2009, some 4,000 airborne troops arrived in less than 36 hours for disaster relief operations. This airborne corps is likely to spearhead operations, whether in Taiwan, Tibet or Vietnam.

Given the South China Sea territorial disputes and the recent rise in incursions on the Indian border, Exercise Kuayue was an ominous warning signal to both India and Vietnam (as well as the Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand) that the expeditionary capability now rendered surplus from Taiwan could be easily employed against these two primary “combat target nations” of the PLA. In addition to the large scale Kuayue Exercise, China held another series of exercises called the “Vanguard” and “Victory” to test tactical concepts and air support procedures. The threat profile from China is rising primarily because of the steady expansion of the capability differential between the two Asian giants. The only way to ensure that peace endures is to prevent the opening up of such large windows of vulnerability that could, in turn, invite attack.

**The distinct fissures between the Chinese civil and military establishments are now beginning to surface in the Chinese power structure.**

Fig. 1



**China perceives the American decline as having begun much earlier than it had bargained for. This perception was behind the sudden rise in the Chinese levels of assertiveness at the global and regional levels in the year 2009.**

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## **Conclusion**

The distinct fissures between the Chinese civil and military establishments are now beginning to surface in the Chinese power structure. The Dengist phase of “hide your capabilities, bide your time” seems to be definitely over. China perceives the American decline as having begun much earlier than it had bargained for. This perception was behind the sudden rise in the Chinese levels of assertiveness at the global and regional levels in the year 2009. The PLA is distinctly unimpressed with the American failure to subdue its adversaries in Iraq and Afghanistan. These two commitments it feels have seriously overstretched the American military and highlighted its weaknesses (especially its low level of tolerance of casualties and the apparent weakness of national resolve). Iraq and Afghanistan, it feels, have seriously curtailed

America’s capacity for intervention anywhere else. The Chinese military scholar He Xin, an ultra nationalist and strong opponent of the cautious policies of the Dengist era wrote, “Know this – the more the US encounters trouble in other places, the more difficult it will be for it to concentrate its power on dealing with China and the greater the opportunities for China’s existence and development.” The economic decline, heralded by the global financial meltdown has hastened the historical process of America’s long expected decline. The clock seems to have been set forward and China is concomitantly speeding up its reactions. China may soon be looking for willing pupils to teach a second set of lessons in Asia. We cannot afford to be caught flat-footed for the second time in the space of just half a century. Our military capacity build-up needs to be speeded up on an emergent basis.