

Review Essay

Is there a Chinese Way of War?

ANDREW SCOBELL

Many English-language books have appeared during the past 15 years on the subjects of warfare, strategy, and violence in China. Before the 1990s, volumes published on such subjects, while certainly not unknown, were few and far between and could be tracked fairly easily by those interested in Chinese military affairs. This essay reviews five of the more recent works to evaluate their usefulness and ascertain what they tell us about Chinese approaches to warfare.

Political Success Trumps Operational Victory

Bruce Elleman's 2001 book, *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*, is billed as a history of the subject. He devotes 18 chapters (and 363 pages) to examining 25 foreign and domestic conflicts spread out over almost 200 years of Chinese history. While this is an admirable undertaking, it falls short on a number of counts. Elleman does a good job of outlining in a coherent fashion the basic facts of more than a score of wars and providing the context for each. However, the author does not have much to offer in terms of analysis concerning how the Chinese conduct warfare or identifying patterns of how and when China goes to war—these matters are left up to the reader to discern. Elleman is content to categorize each war within a “dynastic cycle” framework without teasing out the larger implications of this conception.

In fact, *Modern Chinese Warfare* is not really about warfare at all. There is remarkably little in the way of coverage or analysis of actual military operations. Rather, most of the pages are heavily descriptive, recounting the political and diplomatic context of each conflict, although the author does offer some nuggets of astute commentary on each. For example, the chapter on the 1979 Vietnam conflict focuses on the level of grand strategy and geopolitics rather than on how China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) actually fought the war. Elleman's discussion of the logic and aims behind Beijing's launching of the border conflict is quite good; it underscores the reality that Chinese leaders tend to have their sights set on achieving political and diplomatic goals rather than operational successes. Ultimate victory for them lies at the level of grand strategy rather than on the field of battle. As Elleman points out in the preface, the Chinese, drawing from strategists such as Sun Tzu, tend to view winning without fighting as the ideal option, and Elleman insists that “diplomacy *is* war”—indeed, he justifies the volume's preoccupation with diplomacy on this basis.

Use Force Sparingly; Repeat as Often as Needed

Patterns in China's Use of Force: Evidence from History and Doctrinal Writings, a RAND monograph published in 2000 by Mark Burles and Abram Shulsky, contends that China tends to use military power readily and tolerates considerable risk of escalation. Examining the historical record of Chinese military actions since 1949 and doctrinal writings, the authors identify several key elements driving Beijing. In employing military force, China seeks to exploit the elements of surprise (or "deception"), "psychological-political shock," and "opportunistic timing"—all toward achieving a desired political end. Burles and Shulsky caution that China is not easily deterred by a stronger enemy, even when the "overall military balance is very unfavorable to them." In an appendix, the authors take an in-depth look at the concept of strategic culture, drawing heavily on the work of Sun Tzu and Alastair Iain Johnston to analyze China's proclivities to employ military force.¹

There is now a significant amount available in print on the topic of Chinese strategic culture, including a book by this reviewer.² Adherents of strategic culture emphasize the key influence of culture in the way a country approaches matters of war and peace, and specifically its use of force. Conventional scholarly wisdom holds that traditionally Chinese strategists favored a pacifist and defensive military posture largely attributed to Confucianism. Until the trail-blazing work of Johnston, the presumption was that Chinese strategic culture was monistic and consistent with Confucianism. The conclusions of Burles and Shulsky, echoing the scholarship of Johnston, belie the conventional scholarly wisdom and assert that China's strategic tradition is actually more diverse and that contemporary China displays a readiness to employ the military instrument of national power.

Burles and Shulsky review patterns in China's actual use of force, then extend their analysis into the future, contemplate likely continuities and differences, and next review recent changes in PLA doctrine and force modernization. All this is useful and concise, but perhaps the most valuable part of *Patterns in China's Use of Force* can be found in Chapter Six. This is where the authors explore the most likely ways in which the PLA will employ force against the armed forces of the United States. While it should come as no surprise that all are linked to some kind of Taiwan scenario, the precise manner in which China might use its military could surprise.

Allen Whiting's *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina* focuses extensively on a "systematic reconstruction of the Chinese decisions which . . . led to war with India" in 1962 and then carefully compares this case study with Chinese decisionmaking to intervene in the Korean War in 1950 and the Vietnam War in the mid-1960s. Originally published in 1975 and soon thereafter out of print, this classic work was reprinted in 2001. While the original holds up remarkably well today, it is unfortunate that the publishers have chosen to simply reprint it without significant updating (the author has added a new eight-page foreword). Fortunately, readers do not have far to go to find Whiting's insightful reassessment of his original thesis. The fall 2001 issue of the journal *International Security* carried an article updating *Calculus of Deterrence* which utilizes scholarship produced in the intervening quarter century with a focus on Taiwan.³

Calculus of Deterrence is based on a meticulous mining of the limited sources available to the author in the early 1970s and Chinese diplomatic and military activities toward India in the lead-up to the 1962 war (Chapters 1-5); it provides a concise analysis of the same process in Indochina in 1964-1968 (Chapter 6); and it then examines these two in comparative perspective with the early case of Korea (Chapter 7). The volume paints a picture of China as a cautious and conservative power that uses force as a last resort only after repeated signaling has failed to deter its adversary. With the benefit of hindsight and the rich detail provided by internal Chinese documents, memoirs, and histories, the author is more sanguine about Chinese thinking on military force. Writing in the 2001 article, Whiting adjusts his earlier assessment of Chinese caution and observes that in addition to being deliberative and calculating, Chinese leaders have exhibited an alarming propensity for risk-taking. Burles and Shulsky reach the same conclusion, and they label it “disturbing.”

Seize the Operational Initiative

While Chinese strategists start at the level of grand strategy, they do not neglect actual military operations. Indeed, as the contributors to *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949* observe, Chinese military leaders pay careful attention to operational details. This 2003 book, edited by Mark Ryan, David Finkelstein, and Michael McDevitt, focuses on eight case studies of specific Chinese employments of military force, one overview of the use of naval power, and another survey of the use of airpower, all zeroing-in at the operational level. The volume contains an excellent introduction that summarizes the contributors’ main findings, a tour de force overview of the evolution of Chinese doctrine, a comprehensive bibliography of both English and Chinese publications, and a useful array of more than two dozen maps.

This edited volume identifies key themes in China’s employment of military force. An examination of the evidence reveals a distinct pattern of Chinese operational preferences. Chinese strategists and warfighters seek to seize and maintain the operational initiative. To attain it, they demonstrate a preference for offensive operations using the elements of deception and surprise. PLA generals prefer mobility and maneuver over defense and positional warfare. Rather than focusing on seizing and holding terrain, Chinese military leaders work to create a one-sided “battle of annihilation” where the PLA can concentrate superior force and firepower at the chosen point of attack.

Some of the most interesting case studies include He Di’s coverage of Beijing’s 1949-1950 “unrealized plan” to invade Taiwan, Thomas Robinson’s account of the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict, Alexander Huang’s analysis of the Chinese use of naval power, and Xiaoming Zhang’s review of China’s employment of airpower.

Man is Central but Technology is Crucial

The writings of Mao Zedong, notably Mao’s doctrine of People’s War, trumpet man as the decisive factor. While true, neither Mao nor his successors have ignored technology. Mao is of course famous for labeling nuclear weapons as “paper tigers,”

but this did not stop him from insisting in the mid-1950s that the acquisition of nuclear capability must become a national priority. Indeed, China's leaders have long recognized the importance of technology in warfare. Civilian and military leaders alike have been painfully aware of the technological dominance of adversaries such as the United States and the Soviet Union.

China's Techno-Warriors: National Security and Strategic Competition from the Nuclear to the Information Age, by Evan Feigenbaum, debunks the myth that Chinese civilian and military leaders have not taken technology seriously until very recently. Right from the early 1950s it was a matter of great seriousness. The importance attached to technology has only grown over the years, particularly since the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, for the past decade the PLA has been urged to prepare for "limited war under high technology conditions."

Published in 2003, *China's Techno-Warriors* is most welcome because it contains a wealth of inside information gleaned from interviews, memoirs, and histories about a remarkable group of individual civilian leaders, soldiers, and scientists whom the author dubs "strategic weaponeers." By mining such rich and varied sources, Feigenbaum provides valuable background, detail, and context about how key decisions regarding major strategic programs—such as Program 863—were made, who made them, and how China's defense technology community is organized and run. The volume is so rich, indeed, that the sheer amount of information threatens to overwhelm the reader. Fortunately, the digesting is made easier since the text is enlivened by a judicious use of photographs, figures, and appendices.

Some readers, however, might be misled by the word that Feigenbaum uses to describe the overarching trend he identifies in post-Mao China. According to the author, "demilitarization" was the watchword of the reform era of the 1980s and 1990s. This term is employed deliberately to contrast with the "militarization" that characterized the Maoist era of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. If used in a narrow sense in reference to China's heavy industrial sector, demilitarization might be technically correct. But the danger is that readers might erroneously conclude that under Deng Xiaoping, China was demilitarizing across the board. Nothing could be further from reality.

In the early 1990s, in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, many analysts and policy wonks, hopeful about more positive trends in international security, tossed around terms such as "defense conversion" and "peace dividend." The former term was often used to describe what China was doing (indeed the author resurrects this term). But it would be inaccurate to characterize what China was doing (and continues to do) as "defense conversion" or as a "large-scale demilitarization of industry." What Deng Xiaoping actually had in mind was restructuring China's national economy so it was not skewed so heavily toward functioning as a defense industrial complex. The aim was to diversify so that China's industrial and technological base was more balanced and could contribute not just to national defense but also to economic growth and civilian prosperity.⁴ Deng's famous 16 character guidance issued in the early 1980s (and cited by Feigenbaum) makes this clear: "Integrating military and civilian production; but making sure to balance the military requirements; maintaining military capability; and using the civilian economy to serve military modernization" (*junmin jiehe; pingzhan jiehe; junpin youxian; yimin yangjun*).

To Conclude

So, is there a Chinese way of war? This question cannot be answered definitively in this short essay. But these books under review suggest there is a distinct set of characteristics that guide how China's strategic thinkers approach matters of war and strategy. First, geopolitical criteria rather than operational performance provide the primary basis for evaluating military success. Second, while serious thought and calculation appear to go into determining when and how military power is to be used, Chinese strategists do not demonstrate much reluctance to use force. Indeed they are prone to significant, albeit calculated, risk-taking. Third, when employing military power, the emphasis is on Chinese forces seizing and maintaining the operational initiative. Fourth, it is imperative that China leverage modern technology to gain the edge in any conflict.

In the final analysis, although Beijing's approach to warfare does have Chinese characteristics, its approach may not be so different from those of other states. Nevertheless, it is only prudent for other states to gain a deeper understanding as to how, when, why, where, and to what end 21st-century China is likely to employ military power. The books reviewed here are a good place to start.

NOTES

1. Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Chinese Grand Strategy in the Chinese History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1995).
2. Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003).
3. Allen Whiting, "China's Use of Force, 1950-95, and Taiwan," *International Security*, 26 (Fall 2001).
4. Feigenbaum argues for a more nuanced appreciation of what the term "demilitarization" means. Unfortunately a "nuanced" approach is unlikely to be grasped by all readers. He also acknowledges that there are likely to be different interpretations. "To some," Feigenbaum writes, "the largely civilian, 'national' high-tech focus enshrined in [Project] 863 may be dubious, less a demilitarization of the country than a new way of organizing defense modernization—in short, a transition from the strategic weapons era model of spin-off to a subtle, if more technically broad-ranging, commercial-to-military 'spin-on.'" *China's Techno-Warriors*, p. 218.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Burles, Mark, and Abram N. Shulsky. *Patterns in China's Use of Force: Evidence from History and Doctrinal Writings*. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2000.
- Elleman, Bruce A. *Modern Chinese Warfare, 1795-1989*. New York and London: Routledge, 2001.
- Feigenbaum, Evan A. *China's Techno-Warriors: National Security and Strategic Competition from the Nuclear to the Information Age*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003.
- Ryan, Mark A., David M. Finkelstein, and Michael A. McDevitt, eds. *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949*. Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 2003.
- Whiting, Allen S. *The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence: India and Indochina*. Michigan Classics in Chinese Studies No. 4. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies, 2001. (Reprint of 1975 edition.)

The Reviewer: Dr. Andrew Scobell is associate research professor at the Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, and adjunct professor of political science at Dickinson College (Carlisle, Pa.). He joined the Strategic Studies Institute in 1999 and is the institute's specialist on Asia-Pacific security. He is the author of *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).