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CHINESE ARMED FORCES: DOWN FIVE DECADES

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Prologue:

The Chinese Red Army – an army in rags literally that defeated the mighty Japanese Army and then the West backed Guomindang – was soon transformed into a post-revolutionary armed force for combat across all spectrums. The famous Eighth Route Army that travelled with Mao Zhedong and Zhou Enlai in two phalanxes during the famous Long March became the main body of the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA). The immediate first test was the Korean Conflict against the US forces of General Douglas MacArthur. The reason Mao ordered the mobilisation was because the 'adventurist' MacArthur crossed the Yalu River and set off for the North.

The PLA accounted for itself reasonably well by which the US Army got caught in a quagmire. President Harry Truman had to fire MacArthur for extricating the US forces and leave a divided Korea that came back to bite the Americans now when a young Kim Jong Un, the third generation leader of the Kim Il Sung family, is running rings around the brass of the Pentagon and even the American presidency.

Next confrontation of the PLA was in 1962 against an inept (especially the generals and the ruling political elite) and badly kitted out army across China's southern borders, India. The principle laid out by the Beijing leadership – since Mao had laid down the law that the Party should rule the

guns – was to take ‘punitive’ measures for apparent border transgressions.

The PLA had completed the task assigned to them after a decimation of the Indian army, those who were deployed to take the enemy forces on, and retreated beyond the Macmahon Line. In the north, a line that symbolised the extreme north of Kashmir abutting the Aksai Chin area. This became the Line of Actual Control (LAC) and the Macmahon Line became an unrecognised border.

A war with Vietnam was the next PLA campaign in 1979. That too was a ‘punitive’ war, against a former ally. A longer war, and the lives lost by both sides were quite high. It seemed that Mao’s tenets were more at least with some of the generals on the ground in Vietnam that an objective analyses of the kinetic developments on the battlefields were to be subsumed by the articulations of the Great Helmsman.

Though Mao had died in 1976, some of his pronouncements gleaned from the long war with Japan and a fierce Civil War with Chiang Kaishek’s forces were in vogue. He talked about the PLA being ready for a ‘protracted war’; a ‘manpower over machines’ strategy, and an age-old concept of his about the ‘countrysides encircling the cities.’

All these adages when packaged together formed in a nutshell what was called ‘People’s War.’

There is a belief in this country that China’s Vietnam War gave the PLA a bloody nose. While that seems true from a superb analysis of the military aspect of the War by a Chinese scholar, King C Chen¹, let us examine the circumstances that caused the loss of lives, damage to property in Vietnam, and to some of the fully formed and trained Divisions of the Vietnamese army.

Chen’s account about the casualties taken by both sides gives a clear idea about how the Chinese strategic goal of destroying the leading edge of the Vietnamese Army remained largely unachieved. There was no debilitating strike against those forces the PLA targeted. Second was territory. The Chinese forces were told that their outermost limit in terms of moving into Vietnamese territory was 50 miles. That was only as much their logistics train can sustain. However, there were locations where the PLA penetrated up to 80 miles. But it was not a headlong rush: on the contrary, the PLA by its military posture had made it clear that

¹Chen, King C, *China’s War Against Vietnam, 1979: A Military Analysis*, *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Vol III, No. 1, Spring-Summer, 1963

beyond occupying (but not holding) some border towns, they do not wish to reach Hanoi.

After ten days of combat, the Vietnamese forces attacked and occupied two border towns of China. But that was really a pyrrhic victory. For, within four days of the assault that showed up some weaknesses in the Chinese rear, an important leader Li Xiannian, one of the eight elders who entered the party annals gave an interview in which he claimed strategic achievements of the PLA in the war, and signaled a full withdrawal. He even “warned” the Vietnamese leadership to not attack the withdrawing forces. Chen has thus written that the Vietnamese virtually laid the “red carpet” for the PLA to return to China.

In all these wars, be it in Korea, or India or Vietnam, the PLA showed a certain grit and determination to fulfill strategic objectives, have the right tactical planning and operational capability to achieve for what they set out.

This is due to the fact that Chinese ‘human waves’ overwhelmed opposing forces that were smaller and did not possess strategic weapons like ballistic missiles that could take battle into China. Even then, if one was to believe Mao, China could gamble on major decapitating attacks on civilians

because the sheer number of the total population was too big that could take this punishment.

From an Indian viewpoint, being a democracy it was difficult politically and militarily to take this kind of punishment. Despite this kind of position, the Indian leadership was brave enough to declare to the world that it has adopted a ‘no first use’ policy for nuclear weapons. In other words, India’s strategic philosophy in conventional terms was a ‘defensive offence’ capability. However, to the political leadership and the ruling elite, not losing an ‘inch of territory’ was not acceptable.

Modernising the PLA:

Zhou Enlai first talked about modernising the Chinese capacities in agriculture, industry, science and technology, and military. The premier of China had set these goals in 1963. But it took more than a decade to be rolled out by his one time protégé and vice premier, Deng Xiaoping in 1978. The ‘reform and opening up’ programme that was launched, afforded the nation to leverage its Cold War focussed alliance with the USA to create opportunities for building an economic foundation that was a departure from its usual trajectory.

The 1979 war with Vietnam had showed up for the Chinese leadership the legacy systems they have in terms of professionalisation of the PLA and their obsolescent weaponry. Chen quotes a Liberation Army Daily (Jiefangjun Bao) editorial of 26 March, 1979 that was a scathing critique of the war strategy and tactics of the PLA against Vietnam. The newspaper recorded, “It also helped clear away some erroneous ideas on the question of war and a number of other questions.”

At the beginning of the Deng era this was clearly understood to be a critique of the Maoist idea of ‘People’s War.’ This triggered the military modernisation programme. Deng’s statement about Mao being 70 per cent right and 30 per cent wrong was made a part of the Party history- a hugely important document for a communist body of annals.

On the PLA modernisation programme, Deng called for a “modernised, regularised army.’ The 1979 war with Vietnam was the wake up call that the septuagenarian leader needed to create a PLA that was in tune with the time. This led change in the quality of training for example. There were live fire exercises, competitive red and blue force contests and spread over all the military regions (MRs). The modernisation of the nuclear weapons

and the delivery systems were made. Though China, like India has NFU as a policy, its early decision to have a strategic rocket force defined the way it sought to protect its options of ‘taking back’ Taiwan.

The other wake-up call was the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) of the US armed forces witnessed during the Gulf War 1. That, and the decimation of the USSR, coupled with Tienanmen Square crisis caused the Chinese leadership to wake up to the fact that professionalisation of the PLA required a clear command and control chain.

In terms of military technology China took a path that was controversial but effective. They bought matériel – mostly from Russia – reverse engineered them and made it their own. For example, the MiG-21 and Sukhoi series of aircrafts were reverse engineered and launched the J-series of aircrafts. One example is the early (1980) induction of the Shenyang J-8. The design of this J-8 was inspired by the earlier Chengdu J-7 that was clearly a MiG-21 knock-off. A competition between Shenyang J-8 and Chengdu J-9 was held, The J-9 was a single engine turbo-prop. The former was a clear winner as it had the MiG-21 power plant and a proven design layout.

China's defence expenditure was tough to calculate as a lot of the costs were hidden under other non-defence heads. However, Stockholm International Peace Research data base shows – one of the most reliable – that in 1988 (for constant 2015 \$ and reported for the first time internationally) was \$ 20.2 bn approximately and in 2016, the corresponding figure was \$ 225.7 bn approx.

In other words, a steady increase of six per cent average year-on-year was the rate followed till 2016. China also signed on to double digit growth in terms of annual increases, even in the times of potential crises after the 2008 financial meltdown, thus affecting the economies of the West (in other sectors the diminution of financial flow also choked them off).

While the Chinese roughly divide their economy at a rate of one-third on three heads, the competition for allocation is between the personnel cost and weapons acquisition. A 2.2 million strong PLA, but what has been disaggregated now as the Chinese Navy and Air Force, also are peopled by 255,000 men and women in the Navy and about 400,000 airmen. The recruitment of women in the PLA, Navy and Air Force is almost even in terms of aggregate number.

But these figures of post-1992 period, when Deng Xiaoping laid down all offices of the Party and the State, the reduction in troop strengths was to bring down the size of all arms of the PLA to 2 million-plus. This was the third downsizing of the PLA ever since the 'reform and opening up' programme was launched in 1978 after the Third Plenum of the 12th CPC approved the plan.

The six occasions the troop numbers were reduced since 'reform and opening up' was unveiled that was signed on to by the CPC in 1978 and till Deng's death in 1997, the numbers of the PLA troops of all arms were reduced from 4.238 million troops to 3.235 million. The figure after the last cut was 2.3 million in 2007.

This section should be brought to an end with an international measure of Comprehensive National Power (CNP) – a term of Chinese origin – called the PowerIndex created by the GlobalFirepower.com. This is an index that begins with 0.0000, which is the highest level of CNP a nation can have. China with 0.0945 is the third highest ranking nation, according to the PowerIndex, while India is ranked next to China with 0.1593.

A physical accounting of the Chinese arsenal shows a combination of artillery and armoured focus since the 1980s with the 'human wave' theory of warfare losing its sheen as tactical manoeuvre becomes increasingly mechanised. And the pace of battles too did not allow the real 'grunt' work – marching infantry – being the spearhead of battle. Instead what was witnessed in Vietnam is that the Chinese ground forces would follow massive artillery barrages. And the former will do the mop up the Vietnamese defenders, overwhelming them in terms of sheer numbers, along with being pummelled by tanks.

Geostrategy, Geopolitics and Geoeconomics:

Mao Zhedong had assumed power in China in 1949, three years after Winston Churchill had delivered his famous 'Iron Curtain' speech at the Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri in the USA. As a fraternal communist party of the one ruling in the Soviet Union, the CPC leadership automatically got adopted by the Russian camp. This kind of 'bromance' was to the advantage of both. On the one hand, China being an underdeveloped nation required large infusion of technology to kick-start economic activity through industrialisation amongst an agrarian society.

But as Mao's stature grew especially amongst the post-colonial nation-states, Joseph Stalin's natural distaste for Asians began to exhibit itself. Even though the Soviet Union was an Eurasian landmass, the Asian part of the vast country was faraway from the mind-space of the Russians of European descent and thus, their planning for economic uplift. Indeed, post-WW II, when the allied powers had carved out their areas of interest or zones of influence, Stalin had insisted that Germany in Central Europe should be divided – in reality the Red Army were the first to reach Berlin – would be the Western extremity of the Russian strongman's socialist empire.

During the first proxy war of the Cold War in the Korean peninsula, Mao had constantly sought to remain proximate to the Soviet Union. But he was treated with virtual disdain in Moscow. On one of his visits at the time, the Chinese leader had been kept waiting for a fortnight for an audience with the leader of what the Russians call the 'Great War' – the war with the Axis powers in Eastern Front of WW II.

After the Ussuri River incident in 1969 and other border clashes preceding it and even post-incident, convinced Mao of the brittleness of alliance with the Soviet Union. This fact was underlined

by the key technology denial regimes by the USSR – especially in the field of nuclear energy. Much before that, in 1956, the CPC had an ideological break with the CPSU as during its 20th Party Congress Nikita Khrushchev delivered his most well-known ‘secret’ speech, which was a denunciation of Stalin and the gang, including Leventi Beria, his personal killer, and others. Mao, however, called the Khrushchev line ‘revisionist.’

This led to the Chinese leader’s biggest geostrategic gamble. He had a committee of five superannuated Marshals, to give him a menu of choices that he himself had been considering. They told him that China cannot take on both the superpowers at the same time. He needed to make peace with one of the two. The ‘one’ was the obvious choice, the USA. The rest is a well recorded history.

On the economic and military plane, however, the China’s relations really began paying off as the US president, Jimmy Carter and his Kissingeresque National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski gave official recognition to Beijing and thus dumping the long held ‘Two China’ policy, though after concluding a Guomindang-ruled, Taiwan-centred legislation. The Taiwan Relations Act guaranteed security

for the island, besides underwriting their own military acquisitions and expenditure.

Beijing got even better a deal. They got the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status in the Carter package. But getting it to work for China required the final rehabilitation of thrice purged Deng Xiaoping to begin his ‘reform and opening up’ package the late 1970s. Along with the MFN status, went the various economic and trade sanctions, some of which were at the heart of fears of communist revolutions spreading in rest of East Asia and South East Asia.

At the geopolitical level, on the one hand, the Chinese diaspora spread the word of Deng’s 12 character commandment, which said that essentially proffered a ‘defensive posture,’ because unless there was peace and stability – internal and external – China’s economic growth would be stymied. Tienanmen Square upsurge had thus challenged this paradigm.

Seriousness of the issue was so grave that it divided the normally tightly closed elite leadership of the CPC was totally nonplussed. Deng had to move in though he was he was then almost retired. Such was emotional and political cleavage within the Chinese society that the Deng could not even

fully trust the PLA to sincerely defuse the situation.

One of the most important developments of the largest ever mobilisation in the fore court of the Great Hall of the People and the Mao Zhedong Mausoleum, mostly students and virtually leaderless nature of the gathering gave a lot of young scholars and teachers of mostly Beijing University an opportunity to mould the thoughts of the people. When this spontaneous leadership congealed into a body that could act in unison, on 17 May, about 1000 men of the PLA general logistics department joined the movement. Usually the most corrupt department of any army in the world, they marched into the Square much to the cheer of the students.

Eventually when Martial Law was imposed in Beijing, amidst widespread protests of even the citizens who dared, the troops were drawn from five military regions. They were led by Deng loyalists. He was still the chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC).

Mikhail Gorbachev had visited Beijing in the midst of the unrest. His presence was high on symbolism especially for the students. He had just unpacked his cornucopia of tool-kits full of concepts like Glasnost and Perestroika – the

Russian variant of Dengist ‘Reform and Opening Up.’ The problem was Deng considered the economic element of ‘reform’ would be so overwhelming that the general population will be mollified by the new found wealth. In the process, they would not seek political rights that are against the interests of the CPC.

He has been proved right presently. In today’s Beijing, none of the youth in their hipsters remember the Tienanmen Square unrest; at the very least they do not talk about it. The Beijing University campus is now fully cosmopolitan with a large foreign students’ population.

But in the opinion of this analyst, the biggest mistake the students’ committed was to set up their own take of the Staten Island based, Statue of Liberty, just outside of the New York harbour. This allowed the Chinese elite leadership to wave the red rag of American imperialism, and thus rally the rural Chinese society.

More importantly, the biggest geopolitical fall-out of the ‘movement’ was to send a message of internal weakness in China, This made the Wilsonian Bill Clinton Administration to try and seek trade and economic concessions, besides show off their liberal tag of liberty that the Chinese were to indulge in to enjoy preferential

commercial operations. Washington got active at the UN Security Council; sought to get China the leading edge of international opprobrium; and weaken the elite leadership of the nation; thus take a small step towards decimating another 'communist' nation.

But that was not to be. The non-resident Chinese poured in money into the mainland. And once the British lease expired on Hong Kong, Beijing stepped in with a new formulation 'One Party, Two Systems.' The overall trade boost China received was geoeconomic manna. By then Chinese trade was quite well diversified with the neighbouring ASEAN members.

The World Bank data sets show a decline of almost seven per cent between 1988 and 1989 at 4.18 per cent and through the 1990s Chinese economy grew till 2007 by an average annual growth rate of sizzling 10 per cent. Slowing growth rate really afflicted the nation's economy in 2007. By 2016, the growth rate still showed a healthy rate of 6.9 per cent.

The geoeconomic impact of this phenomenal growth rate was enormous. If the 2012 18th CPC Congress can be called a watershed, it is a departure from Hu Jintao-Wen

Jiabao's careful line of 'peaceful rise.' The sixth generation leaders – the flowers that could have wilted very easily in the heat of the all-consuming Cultural Revolution – took the reins of power by dissing the Deng line of not demanding global leadership. Instead Xi Jinping, otherwise a true heir to Deng, made sure that he used the massive economic leverage of the trillions of dollars economy to push through an alternative world order, where the more equitability amongst nation-states and not overwhelming military force to underline the traditional sources of power.

Xi Jinping's Military Reforms:

Xi's relationship with the PLA is deep-rooted. He was a Mishu – a Romanised version of a Chinese word meaning 'personal assistance' – to the Chinese defence minister, Geng Biao, between 1979–1982. While Xi's first wife, Ke Lingling was an ambassador's daughter. The father was posted at prized station like London, the UK. But the marriage did not last long. Peng Liyuan, who sang for the Tiananmen Square Martial Law troops, and eventually moved up the ladder to become a major general of arts and culture division of the PLA. She has since left the vastly networked army.

All these came into play when Xi became the chairman, of the Central Military Commission (CMC), a body that belonged both to the Party and the State. Unlike his predecessor, Hu Jintao, he did not have to wait for the key job for three years. Instead, Hu Jintao, who had a rocky relationship with the composite PLA – including the navy and the air force. So as soon as he laid down office both as the general secretary of the CPC and the President of the Republic, he transferred the office of the CMC chairmanship to Xi.

Xi is now recasting the PLA, and the supra bodies that look after all facets of the national defence.

The transformation of the PLA from the 'people's war' doctrine, and facing a global conflagration to a 'localised war in a highly informationised environment' was propounded in a White Paper on national defence issued in May, 2015 – three years after Xi was elevated to office of the Party-State.

Xi has proved to be a great centraliser. He now holds the chair of 12 committees that are dubbed Central Leading Groups from subjects like defence and foreign affairs to the economy to internet security and informisation.

For the first time in the history of the Chinese Party-State, a national

security council-like body has been created by merging foreign affairs and defence. Its called the Central National Security Commission (CNSC).² This has undertaken many of the tasks of the CMC and State Council. The comparatively recent doctrinal document on managing natural disasters has shown that the PLA will continue to play its role in the internal dynamic of the nation, while protecting it from foreign aggression.

So, one can aver two strands of thought from this exposition. First, the internal task of the PLA will be basically to maintain social harmony and join in relief efforts during times of natural disasters. Secondly, the Chinese military posture has remained defensive, though in recent times no mention of the NFU (No First Use) mode of nuclear weapons in the White Paper, had created some consternation in national capitals like Washington

But in the opinion of this analyst, the tell-tale omission of the NFU was possibly a function of Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) in nations like Japan and South Korea. In the case of India, debates are arising about the emplacement of

²A New Direction in the People's Liberation Army's Emergent Strategic Thinking, Roles and Missions,' James Char and Richard A. Bitzinger, quoting Joel Wuthnow, in China Quarterly, © SOAS University of London, 2017

BMD and the rejection of NFU. But these are the demands of the military commanders who have very little role to play in this country in framing a nuclear strategy, since the both weaponisation and launch programmes are in the hands of civilians. It is when the launch action needs to be taken, the military forces come into the game as the user agency.

Returning to the changes that Xi has done to the PLA is first to take out the Navy and the Air force out of the ambit of the PLA. Second is the creation of the theatre commands. Western theatre which is the largest amongst all, encompasses all of Indian subcontinent right up to Inner Mongolia. Some experts on the PLA in this country, that the situation may not be greatly ominous and menacing as it appears to be. For, the Western Theatre Command troops will have to take on the task of managing two recalcitrant provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang for maintaining 'harmony.' As the Doklam episode has shown that the Indian tacticians can savour the fact that topographical features in many parts of the LAC actually favour our defences. Besides, Indian strategists have shown that when bequeathed with the right tools and the advantages of natural barriers, they can stare down the Chinese side. The lessons of

Doklam are surely being studied to the minutest detail at the war colleges of the country .

Conclusion:

India increasingly has to countenance the fact that the Chinese are becoming a challenge to the security and stability of both the continental South Asia and the maritime Indian Ocean Region. Added to the fact is that India considers that the region extending from the Gulf of Aden to the Straits of Malacca is their area of influence. Now the US-led Quad formation has extended the maritime space for India south Pacific.

While India may not have all the assets in place yet to at a minimum to maintain its primacy in the continental sub-continent but also the Indian Ocean waters, besides South Pacific. At the moment India's Eastern Naval Command at Vizag deploys the only aircraft carrier the country has with its battle group. But very soon India will have another ready-to-be-deployed with the lethal MiG-29Ks, Light Combat Aircraft-Navy (LCA-N) and the P8I Orions raising the surf.

The defensive-offence strategy that extends in the maritime domain to limited to sea control and in land, translating into hunkering down and defending, both are very effective

modes. Normally, it is always difficult to attack defences where roughly the ratio of troops is 1:9 in favour of defence; in the waters sea control requires calibration from merely showing the flag to just a few notches higher than anti-piracy operations, which requires boarding the crafts etc.

Chinese posture that is incumbent upon its economic superpower status, losing the ability of free movement can actually hurt more. The two ominous choke points at the – at the estuary of Gulf of Aden and at the entrance of the Malacca straits are their weakness. They are developing the Gwadar Port in Karachi to be connected to the highway under China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

But if one recalls the 1971 war and the naval blockade of the Karachi

Port will still need to think twice to depend on Gwadar. Now that Indian armed forces are undergoing their own ‘transformation’ – devised by one of its Chief of Army Staff, now retired, General Vijay Kumar Singh – the quality of operations will also undergo a quantum jump at its end.

On the other hand, the Chinese have not finished their RMA still. They are now providing large amount of resources and manpower on building cyber war capability. But ultimately, warfare today remains the same as it were in times of the Pelopnesian war – based on deception, decoys outflanking enemy troops and most important of all, winning and then holding ground. That is ‘grunt’ work – and the primacy provided to the infantry with the Indian army is to be viewed with that viewpoint.



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