

Question for M. Taylor Fravel, author of *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton University Press, 2019)

1. *What are the most important factors that have consistently influenced the formulation and revision of China's military strategy since 1949?*

The book identifies the nine national military strategies, or “strategic guidelines” (*zhanlüe fangzhen*), that China has adopted since 1949. Three of these strategies, adopted in 1956, 1980, and 1993, constitute what I describe as major changes in China's military strategy. These three strategies contain new visions of warfare that the PLA should be able to conduct—visions that require an overhaul of the existing operational doctrine, force structure, and training.

Two factors are central to understanding when and why these major changes in strategy have occurred. The first is rooted in a group of arguments about the sources of military doctrine that identify external motivations, such as imminent threats. I focus on one likely external motivation that has been overlooked—a significant shift in the conduct of warfare in the international system, as revealed in the most recent war involving a great power or its clients. As a late modernizer in terms of its military forces relative to the other great powers, shifts in the conduct of warfare have been critical in motivating the PLA to pursue major changes in its military strategy because they help identify the character of future wars that China may have to fight and how to allocate scarce resources for defense.

The second factor is party unity. By party unity, I mean agreement among the top party leadership about the basic policies that should be pursued (i.e., the “party line”) and about the structure of power and authority within the party. When the party is united, the top party leaders delegate substantial autonomy to the PLA high command to manage military affairs. When the party leadership is split, however, the PLA is either unwilling or unable to pursue a change in military strategy.

Let me say a word about the other changes in strategy. The strategies adopted in 1960, 1977, 1988, 2004, and 2014 contain only minor changes in strategy or no change at all. A minor change in strategy is one in which the existing strategy is either adjusted or refined, but these tweaks do not require a transformation of the PLA's operational doctrine, force structure, or training. Nevertheless, minor changes can only occur when the party is united.

Finally, the strategy adopted in 1964 represents an anomaly. It is the one case in which the top party leader, not the senior military officers, initiated a change in strategy. In this case, Mao Zedong's purpose was not to better defend China against those threats it faced at the time but rather to use military strategy to attack the “revisionists” within the CCP leadership. Thus, Mao called on the PLA to return to the strategy of “luring the enemy in deep” (*you di shen ru*) that the Red Army had used in the early 1930s.

2. *Can you discuss the process of how China's military strategy is formulated? For example, where does the initial impetus come from? Which organizations or institutions become involved? Who are the most critical players? How are differing views reconciled to produce a coherent strategy?*

In all but one case, the impetus to change military strategy has come from the PLA high command—not the top party leaders. Given their responsibility for military affairs, senior PLA officers closely monitor China's external security environment and propose changes in strategy that are dictated by the environment. In this way, the basic motivations for changing strategy mirror such motivations in many other countries.

The content of a new strategic guideline is usually drafted by either the General Office of the Central Military Commission (CMC) or by select officers within the General Staff Department. Historically, neither the National Defense University nor the Academy of Military Science has played a leading role in the drafting of new military strategies, though individuals at either institution may be involved in the process. Differing views about strategy within the PLA leadership are reconciled during the drafting process, usually in a series of meetings held by the drafting group as well as in work meetings of the CMC.

Once drafted, a new strategy is approved by the top party leader in his capacity as chairman of the party's CMC. Nevertheless, with the exception of the 1964 strategy, the top party leaders have not initiated or led the process of changing China's military strategy.

Finally, a new strategy is usually introduced in the form of a speech or a report to an enlarged meeting of the CMC. Such enlarged meetings gather senior officers from units under the CMC, the military regions (now the theater commands), and the services. Similar to a party congress, these meetings are used to introduce new policies and, in some cases, new military strategies, in order to “unify thought” among the PLA leadership.

*3. You argue that the formulation of military strategy is significantly influenced by party unity? Can you elaborate on how political differences at the top can influence what appears to be a complex military issue?*

Perhaps the most important reason is that a lack of unity within the party leadership can paralyze the strategic decision-making process. For example, the PLA leadership may become involved in party politics at the expense of focusing on military affairs. Even if the PLA leadership does not become directly involved, the party leadership may be unwilling or unable to approve a new strategy, which might easily become politicized. Elements in the party leadership may even seek to intervene in military affairs in order to win the support of the PLA or to use defense policy as a cudgel in the case of a leadership split. When Mao intervened to change military strategy in 1964, for example, he was seeking to weaken those elements in the party leadership that he deemed to be revisionist and who were opposed to his continuous revolution.

*4. China made a major change in its military strategy in 1993 and adopted what you consider minor changes in 2004 and 2014. How can we evaluate how successfully these changes have been implemented?*

To evaluate the success of a change in strategy, one should examine key indicators of organizational change. In my book, I focus on three indicators—the formulation of new operational doctrines that outline how the PLA should conduct military operations, changes to the force structure to enable such operations, and new training regimens to implement these doctrines throughout the force. Based on these indicators, the 1993 strategy was generally

successfully implemented, but the 2004 strategy was not, even though it was only a minor not a major change in China's strategy. For example, following the adoption of the 2004 strategy, new operations regulations (*zuozhan tiaoling*) were drafted, but they were never implemented. The PLA continued to explore how to conduct joint operations but apparently it could not decide how to do so. Given the breadth and depth of the reforms announced in November 2015, the inability to successfully implement the 2004 strategy has been rectified.

*5. The most far-reaching organizational reform of the Chinese military since 1993 has been Xi Jinping's reorganization of the Chinese military in November 2015. Do you think that the newly revised military strategy under Xi requires such a reorganization? Based on what you know today, what new information would you add to this section in your book?*

The reorganization announced in November 2015 constitutes the most significant PLA organizational reforms since the changes to the General Staff structure were made in the 1950s. From an organizational standpoint they are perhaps more important than those changes that followed the 1993 strategy, even though those changes were also critical. However, the 2014 strategy did not require reforms. That is, the vision of warfare in the 2014 strategy was similar to the 2004 vision, emphasizing the role of information technology in warfighting, or what the PLA calls “informatization” (*xinxihua*). In contrast, the purpose of the new strategy adopted in 2014 was to provide a top-level rationale and justification for reforms that the PLA should have undertaken a decade earlier in order to conduct joint operations. Thus, in this case, the minor change in strategy helped to facilitate unprecedented organizational reforms that were required by previous strategies.

Let me explain this in a bit more detail. One of the main elements in the 1993 strategy, which was affirmed by the 2004 strategy, was to emphasize the PLA's ability to conduct joint operations among the services—especially given how the application of new technologies, such as information technologies, were changing warfighting. Nevertheless, the necessary organizational reforms to improve the PLA's ability to conduct joint operations were not undertaken during the Hu Jintao era. Thus, by the time Xi came to power in 2012, the need for such reforms had reached a critical stage. As Xi Jinping said in December 2013, “we have extensively explored the command system for joint operations, but the problem has not been fundamentally resolved.”

Because the reforms were only being implemented when I was completing the book, I would have liked to discuss them in more detail. I would also have liked more information about the July 2014 decision to change military strategy. Much of the book relies on party and military history sources, such as biographies, memoirs, and documentary collections. Unfortunately, such sources remain unavailable for the current period.

*6. China's relations with the United States have deteriorated precipitously in recent years. Based on your theoretical framework, how do you think the turn toward adversarial competition with the United States will affect China's military strategy? In other words, how different will the next Chinese strategic guideline and operational doctrine be from its 2014 version?*

The turn toward much more explicit competition and perhaps confrontation in U.S.-China relations will likely play a critical role in the next change in Chinese military strategy. Although

past major changes in China's military strategy have been undertaken in response to shifts in the conduct of warfare, external threats have also played an important role. Given the deterioration in U.S.-China relations and the identification of China by the United States as its principal national security challenge, China's next military strategy will likely be framed around how to respond to this challenge. Nevertheless, the next strategy will still likely remain focused on how to prevail in the local wars that have dominated China's strategic planning since the end of the Cold War, such as in Taiwan or in the South China Sea. Unlike past strategies, however, the next strategy may very well cast these local conflicts as direct clashes between Washington and Beijing.

In addition, the conduct of warfare is changing. In the past, China often acted in response to how other states were applying new technologies to change how to wage war and to conduct military operations. Looking forward, however, China may very well take the lead in warfighting innovations as it explores the applications of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies on the battlefield. China's most recent white paper, published in July 2019, notes that although "war is evolving in form towards informationized warfare," nevertheless "intelligent warfare is on the horizon."



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