

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
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OPERATIONAL ART IN MODERN CHINESE WARFARE

by

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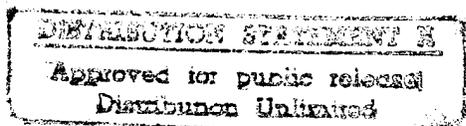
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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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This paper investigates the Chinese concept of operational art in the twentieth century. A dichotomy has traditionally existed in Chinese doctrine which professes a lead-power status in Asia while emphasizing anti-professionalism in the military. This political-military relationship has severely limited the PLA to function effectively at the operational level of war for past and possibly future power projections operations. This paper will examine the limitations that traditional Chinese military dogma and Maoist doctrine has placed on the PLA's operational level of war capabilities in conventional campaigns beyond China's borders. This impact will be assessed in the Korean War (1950), the Sino-Indian War (1962), and the Sino-Vietnam War (1979) case studies. Finally, the lessons China learned from these wars and resulting revisions of its military will be provided for assessment purposes in operational planning.

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## **Introduction**

An investigation of the Chinese concept of operational art in the twentieth century reveals a tendency to attempt to satisfy "maximal political ends with limited military means."<sup>1</sup> Therefore, a traditional dichotomy has existed in Chinese doctrine which professes a lead-power status in Asia while emphasizing anti-professionalism in the military. This political-military relationship has limited the ability of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to function effectively at the operational level of war in power projection campaigns required to preserve such status. This paper will examine the limitations that traditional Chinese military dogma and Maoist doctrine have placed on the PLA's operational level of war capabilities in conventional campaigns beyond China's borders.

The operational commander must avoid mirror imaging in assessing People's Republic of China (PRC) military capabilities and intentions. To do so requires an understanding of the framework from which the PLA's operational level of war concepts have been derived. Initially, this paper will assess the effect that a historical and modern denigration of military professionalism has had on the PLA in its attempt to develop a rational operational design in modern warfare. Secondly, the PLA's version of "operational art" will be assessed during the Korean War (1950), the Sino-Indian War (1962), and the Sino-Vietnam War (1979). Finally, the operational commander must be aware of the lessons China learned from these wars and resulting revisions of its military doctrine.

## **Traditional Influences**

For many centuries, Chinese warfare has stressed creativity in the utilization of mass,

surprise, and intelligence in a bold strategic maneuver. Success of such a maneuver was measured in terms of military *and* psychological effectiveness.<sup>2</sup> If an overpowering operational advantage had not *initially* been secured versus the enemy, political means would often be utilized to settle the conflict to avoid a protracted military campaign.

Although the armed forces were utilized to secure political objectives, they were granted only enough power to perform somewhat limited military tasks. Military commands were factionalized, divided between regional and central control under both civilian and military authority to ensure that a military dominated government would not emerge to challenge the central power structure. Therefore, relatively few standing armies existed and the military profession disappeared during peacetime. In effect:

Chinese society was to a large extent divided between those who were literate and those who were not, and military men fell unambiguously into the second category. The military were confined to basic battlefield tasks and were prevented from having a significant effect even on military planning.<sup>3</sup>

This legacy of social disdain for military professionalism has led to a traditional lack of military administration and minimized the professional military's role in the defense of China.<sup>4</sup> Civilian control was traditionally exercised at all levels of warfare and military institutions were not created to develop strategic and operational concepts to meet political ends.

Since political talents of civilians played the major role in the strategic and operational levels of wars, which were "seen to be won by natural intelligence and psychological warfare rather than some special study of the mechanics of troops and weapons, [then] weapons could be relatively de-emphasized in favor of superior men and skill."<sup>5</sup>

## Twentieth Century Influences

This "anti-professionalism" ideology which stressed the human element over advanced weaponry was firmly consolidated in the PLA's operational concepts in its offensive campaigns from 1950 to 1979. Mao Tse-tung assimilated many of the ancient military teachings of Sun-tzu in his military doctrine, emphasizing creativity in such principles as mass, maneuver, surprise, and intelligence. These operational concepts stressed *knowing the enemy and yourself* to skillfully maneuver troops into a position of overwhelming strength.<sup>6</sup>

But Mao broke with Sun-tzu by advocating rather than discouraging protracted warfare, when protraction became a requirement in combatting a foe having superior resources.<sup>7</sup> From this he developed the three phases of the "people's war" which stressed operational principles that were, in essence, a pragmatic approach to professional and technological constraints.

This people's war doctrine depended not only on a friendly population for support but a *cooperative adversary* who would play by Mao's rules. These were the sources from which they would replenish themselves with arms and personnel. This logistics system severely limited the PLA's operational sustainment capabilities. Within such limitations, the PLA could not extend its operational reach to secure tangible objectives in power projection campaigns versus an enemy with equally high morale and superior weaponry.<sup>8</sup>

Mao minimized the importance of professionalism in the military for a number of reasons. First, by emphasizing the human element in war rather than warfare technologies, he reduced the requirement for a professionally trained officer's corps while providing China with a rationale for limiting military procurement in a constrained economic environment.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, it allowed the party to superimpose its political apparatus upon all echelons of the

standard military organization.<sup>10</sup> Except for a brief period after the Korean War, ideological political training was stressed over professional training. As a result, a cumbersome political commissar system developed which could not produce a modern warfare command structure requiring a *unity of effort* to operate rapidly and smoothly. Maoist doctrine only paid lip service to unity of command, which in practice, became implausible due to the lack of professionalism in the PLA.<sup>11</sup>

China's leaders have traditionally been more concerned about internal, rather than external, threats and Mao was no exception. He stated:

Every communist must understand this truth: political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.... Our principle is that the Party commands the gun; the gun shall never be allowed to command the party. But it is also true that with the gun at our disposal we can really build up the Party organization.<sup>12</sup>

This led to a factionalized regional military command structure under both local and central control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which was intended to thwart any military threat to the central leadership. During times of external crisis, ad hoc commands were set up to combine these regional forces. It seems obvious that the PLA's operational level of war concerns were overlooked to enhance Party security. Therefore, although Mao also recognized the inherent role of China as the leader of Asia, he inadvertently created an operational power projection void in which regional political aims could not be satisfied. The resulting repercussions will be evaluated in the three case studies.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Korean War**

An analysis of Chinese concepts at the operational level of war in Korea reveals that the nature of that war did not correspond to Mao's rational calculus, requiring familiar territory

with popular local support and an inferior enemy with low morale.<sup>14</sup> They were initially quite successful in the utilization of operational maneuver and surprise to compensate for their technological and logistical inferiority. Over 300,000 Chinese troops crossed the Korean border in late October of 1950 without being detected because they relied primarily on the human element in an "army that swept away its tracks in the snow with a broom."<sup>15</sup>

The first engagements were successful as the U.N. troops were caught unaware in this operational ambush. Then, rather than committing its full strength to an all-out offensive against the disrupted U.N. defenses, Peking conducted a unique form of operational pause to allow Washington time to *re-evaluate* the Chinese threat. It is certain that the PLA had the adequate strength to sustain this initial limited operation, and could have very easily lost the initiative, had not the U.N. troops been trapped and routed three weeks later in the November 26th offensive.<sup>16</sup> This decision was in keeping with China's tradition of psychologically attempting to gain maximum political ends with rather limited military means.

Although, they were able to rout the U.N. forces in the *initial* actions, weaknesses in their operational concepts began to surface. They began to realize a poor assessment had been made of the enemy and that the morale of their U.N. opponents was as strong as their own. This sorely questioned the validity of the human element theory, as the vastly superior U.N. firepower shook the morale of many Chinese divisions. Serious questions should have become evident concerning the PLA's professional ability to determine sound operational objectives and to extend the operational reach required to achieve those objectives.<sup>17</sup> But tactical successes began driving political aims and viable military objectives were lost in a strategic and operational void.<sup>18</sup>

Peking had obviously overlooked the logistical shortcomings of the PLA as they slowly pursued the U.N. troops in the longest retreat in U. S. military history. The logistical principle of living off the land and replenishing themselves with captured enemy arms and supplies had worked well for the communists within the friendly territorial confines of China against the demoralized Nationalist troops. But Korea proved a different story as operational sustainment became a decisive issue. In some regiments only one soldier out of five had rifle and the others were expected to arm themselves with captured enemy weapons.<sup>19</sup> Command was not unified, due to a lack of a functional command, control, and communication structure to coordinate action between operational commanders and cadres. U.N. troops "soon found that Chinese forces could not fight lengthy continuous battles without having to stop for supplies and new instructions to get to the front."<sup>20</sup>

When U.S. forces combined superior firepower, logistics and communications in joint operations, the tide began to turn against the Chinese and linear battle lines were drawn. But even in these early defeats, Peking did not seem to recognize the PLA's operational weaknesses. Only when incredible casualties began to mount from "human wave" tactics did the leadership determine that the human element could not, alone, overcome the effects of a professional army utilizing modern warfare technologies. In fact, hardships created by enormous casualties and poor logistics led to an erosion of the Chinese soldiers' morale. This effect on morale "was devastating, and since high morale was crucial to reliance on the human element, its erosion led to increasing disintegration of front line units."<sup>21</sup>

In sum, the political leaders in Peking let early military tactical successes drive their political and strategic objectives. When the PLA pursued the U.N. forces far beyond their

operational reach, they became mired in a war of linear battle lines in which they became dependent on their operational weaknesses in logistics and unity of command. Only the influx of Soviet arms and equipment allowed the PLA to forge a stalemate from which a truce was eventually reached.<sup>22</sup>

PLA commanders learned during this war that Maoist doctrine was no substitute for modern weapons and organization. Thus began the modernization of the PLA in the 1950's which emphasized a Soviet-inspired professionalism and de-emphasized the Maoist military doctrine. Chinese officers began assimilating strategic and operational concepts which departed drastically from the norms of Maoist doctrine.<sup>23</sup>

This trend was disrupted in the late 1950's by the breakdown in Sino-Soviet relations and radical internal politics of the "Great Leap Forward." Thus, a climate of anti-professionalism and the people's war doctrine were reestablished in the armed forces, providing a rationale for reductions in conventional force expenditures. Because the human factor was once again stressed to compensate for technological shortcomings, the political indoctrination of the PLA was placed ahead of military training. "Red over expert" once again prevailed, precipitating a "sharp decline in the professional standards of the PLA."<sup>24</sup> This trend would be perpetuated by events in the Sino-Indian War.

### **The Sino-Indian War**

The border war with India in 1962 is interesting from an operational perspective for a number of reasons. First, Mao's operational doctrine was applied successfully against a very cooperative adversary. This perpetuated the people's war philosophy and its impact on the PLA force structure through the 1960's and 1970's. Secondly, although the military results

were considered successful at the operational level of war, Peking once again failed to define operational and strategic objectives in accordance with political aims which were, as in Korea, changed in reaction to operational successes.<sup>25</sup> Finally, as in the Korean War, an operational pause was conducted to let the enemy digest the psychological and military implications of this initially limited but *shrewd* operational success.

Generally speaking, the Indian troops distinguished themselves very well in battle with their bravery. But in operations in the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA) and Ladakh along the northwestern frontier, Indian troops were deployed into "militarily indefensible positions for political purposes" only.<sup>26</sup> Both regions were logistically cut off from the rest of India by a lack of road networks and were reliant on air drops.

Although the Chinese were limited logistically in operational reach, they held a strong *initial* logistical advantage. As a result of her 1950's conflict with Tibet, which borders both regions, a good transportation network had been established to support short-term logistical requirements. There were also 13 divisions which had been occupying the high plateau of Tibet and were acclimatized to the high altitudes of this mountainous region.<sup>27</sup>

On October 20, 1962, with a manpower advantage of as much as ten to one, they skillfully applied the principles of surprise and mass to gain the initiative on both fronts. By October 25th, the Indians had been driven from all of their northern positions in disorder and "the Chinese initiated an operational pause and offered a ceasefire.... to negotiate a settlement."<sup>28</sup> But, because the victory was quite limited, India publicly rejected the ceasefire.

Three weeks later, after their superior logistics allowed them to replenish their military strength, the Chinese launched a second offensive in the NEFA area and overwhelmed the

Indian forces with their superior numbers. With swelled political objectives influenced by these military successes, China unilaterally proposed a ceasefire along both fronts. But the terms offered India were so publicly humiliating that nothing less than *complete military defeat* could have made them acceptable to New Delhi and China failed in her major objective of bringing India to the negotiating table.<sup>29</sup>

Once again it was evident that because Peking's political aims were so influenced by military fortunes, decisive operational objectives could not be identified. Much has been written about China's brilliance in achieving her limited objectives in this war. It is quite evident that her strategic objectives were constrained not only by international political concerns, but by the lack of operational reach to achieve operational objectives in the lower plains which could have successfully prompted negotiations. The PLA was composed of essentially lightly-armed forces depending for transport on Tibetan coolies, yaks and ponies. This would have caused severe logistical problems in sustaining operations to the plains where the Indians could reinforce with infantry, armor, and artillery.

In sum, the PLA skillfully applied the principles of surprise and mass to provide a stunning initial victory and substantial psychological shock. But it could not project the operational reach necessary to secure objectives which would satisfy Peking's ultimate political aims. Peking claimed victory in "that the bringing back of politics into the Army had in no way affected its ability to wage war, but had actually increased its morale and fighting spirit."<sup>30</sup> No such claims would be made following the Sino-Vietnam War.

### **The Sino-Vietnam War**

This war provides another example of China's propensity to attempt to secure maximum

political objectives with insufficient military means; means which had not been developed because of an overwhelming political control of the PLA in which the old soldiers in positions of power perpetuated the people's war doctrine which had been successfully applied in the Sino-Indian War.<sup>31</sup> But, unlike in 1962 versus India, Vietnam was a technologically superior military opponent with substantial experience.

China's main objective in this war was to punish Vietnam for its invasion of Kampuchea and show the Asian community that Peking would retain the right to determine the nature of political arrangements in its backyard. To do so would require a successful strike against the Vietnamese Army (VNA) to substantially weaken its resources and its reputation in S. E. Asia. A secondary objective was to deter Hanoi's extension of its power across the Chinese border itself. Finally, convinced that the Soviets were using Vietnam as a bridgehead to the South, Peking wanted also to punish the Soviet Union. By attacking Moscow's chief ally in Asia, China would demonstrate her own strength while displaying Soviet weakness to S. E. Asia.<sup>32</sup> Although a "razor-sharp military instrument was needed to ensure success, [China's] blunt sword failed to deliver its blow" and none of China's political objectives was met.<sup>33</sup>

The PLA "counter-offensive" launched on February 17, 1979 was designed and controlled by Peking through an *ad hoc* operational command structure. Troops, totaling as many as 300,000, were drawn in from ten different military regions across the country to launch this punitive operation. In its initial strike, the PLA was once again able to establish local superiority through the principle of mass against only 75,000 to 100,000 Vietnamese militia and border troops. The principle of surprise was also achieved by launching the offensive before a significant Soviet military presence could be deployed in Vietnam

and while much of Vietnam's leadership was absent from Hanoi.

As the fighting wore on, it became evident that the PLA did not have the capabilities necessary to obtain the swift, overwhelming victory required to achieve Peking's objectives. The Vietnamese "irregulars" proved to be strong adversaries with a superiority in firepower versus the obsolete Chinese arsenal. Command, control, and communication problems were evidenced by the poorly trained and educated PLA commanders inability to coordinate attacks with infantry, armor, and artillery units. Furthermore, PLA operational sustainment capacity was severely reduced by people's war logistics which quickly deteriorated as the distance between its deployed forces and its immobile civilian "support-the-front" groups increased.<sup>34</sup> Finally, Peking's lack of operational planning was evidenced when the provincial capital Lang Son was not identified as the strategic objective *until one week into the war*.

As in the Korean and Sino-Indian wars, the PLA conducted an operational pause after its initial thrust. This time, though, there was no psychological advantage to exploit due to the stiff resistance from the Vietnamese "irregulars." When fighting resumed a week later, Mao's operational doctrine proved unable to cope against a modern army engaged in positional warfare. By the time Lang Son was finally secured, only twelve miles from the Chinese border, the PLA had sustained unacceptably high casualties (20-30,000) by again reverting to "human wave" tactics. Despite Peking's claim to the contrary, very few of the VNA units were engaged during this campaign, most having been committed to the defense of Hanoi.<sup>35</sup> Rather than move beyond Lang Son to the Red River delta and risk a possible escalation which would certainly have exacerbated her operational liabilities, China claimed victory on March 5th and announced a unilateral withdrawal.<sup>36</sup>

It became readily apparent that the broad political aims of Peking were undermined by the limited nature of this operation with its inherent political and military constraints. Although damage to its countryside created severe economic problems, Vietnam not only failed to halt policies which China had repudiated, but confirmed that they, rather than the PRC were the force to be reckoned with in S. E. Asia.<sup>37</sup> In response to their *lesson*, the Soviets strengthened their relations with Vietnam and rapidly increased their military and economic presence in S. E. Asia.

### China's "Lessons Learned"

China, instead, was on the receiving end of many lessons it had *forgotten* from the Korean War. Weaknesses in Mao's operational doctrine were as "decisive in limiting the conflict in military terms as any Chinese propensity to self-restraint during the operation."<sup>38</sup> Why, then, had this "territorial defensive" doctrine been utilized to project offensives beyond China's borders? It seems that this legacy was more than just a pragmatic response to very limited economic means. Chinese leadership had "band-wagoned" the people's war doctrine to power and to deny its capability to meet the demands of modern warfare would have been politically perilous. Therefore:

If you do not have the *means* to pursue a strategy of victory.... and if you are not psychologically capable of accepting almost certain defeat, myths are a reasonable avenue of escape, particularly when they are politically attractive. Such was the case with the "human sea" idea.<sup>39</sup>

With this preponderance of the human element in the doctrine, and lack of a legitimate enemy to test it for almost thirty years, the party had minimized the need for "professionals" and maintained firm control of the PLA throughout the operational level of war.

After the Sino-Vietnam War, Peking determined that it would be more politically dangerous to maintain an antiquated force and the doctrine upon which it was built. They determined that effective modernization could only be achieved by discarding revolutionary myth and synthesizing the people's war with "modern conditions." Deng Xiaoping induced a military training program to produce professionals with skills to derive relevant operational concepts in which modern technology could be projected offensively as well as applied defensively. "They were no longer prepared to put their faith primarily in the political attitudes of the soldiers."<sup>40</sup>

As a result, operational concepts have been developed which question the application of Mao's operational principles, primarily in regard to logistical requirements for operational sustainment. A "five-combat potential" program stressed joint operations, quick reaction, electronics confrontation, logistical needs, and field endurance to meet the dynamic nature of modern military operations.<sup>41</sup> China's military researchers recently focused on providing a relevant operational framework for fighting a fast-paced war against the Vietnamese in the Nansha Islands. They derived the principles of *surprise, focused attacks (mass), three dimensional warfare (joint operations), enhanced rear services support (logistics), and rapid decision with strict controls (unity of command)*.<sup>42</sup>

Despite these changes, Peking has continued to obstruct the PLA's advance toward "professionalism" during periods of political instability. In the aftermath of Tiananmen Square in 1989, the Central Military Commission enlarged the political studies portion of the training curriculum to 70 percent.<sup>43</sup> Thus, if only for a short time, this reversed the trend that had been established in the 1980's and reflected the volatility of Chinese political-military

relationships and its impact on the PLA to function effectively at the operational level of war.

### Conclusions for the Operational Commander

The U. S. operational commander can make the following assumptions concerning Chinese tendencies and capabilities at the operational level of war, based on traditional Chinese military dogma, the case studies, and more recent doctrinal changes. First, the traditional use of surprise, mass, intelligence, and maneuver will be stressed initially, to create a limited military, but psychologically demoralizing, advantage. At this point, an operational pause will likely follow to capitalize on this *psychological condition* and induce negotiations. This operational sequence would be in keeping with China's propensity to strive for maximum ends with minimal means. That point in time may present a potential weakness for the operational commander to exploit. Because China envisions limited fast-strike operations beyond her borders, operational sustainment capabilities may continue to be a weakness in operational design.

Secondly, the operational commander should be aware that, although the modern PLA is developing much greater professional and technological *means* for a substantially greater power projection potential than was evidenced in the past, the PRC will likely continue to pursue policy objectives without adequate concern for operational planning. This will make it difficult for the PLA to develop a relevant operational design to sustain campaigns in an extended conflict unless Peking severs its operational level political constraints.<sup>44</sup>

An effective concept of operational art can only be designed and utilized by a well educated, professionally trained officers corps. As Sun-tzu wrote, "He whose generals are able and not interfered with by the sovereign will be victorious."<sup>45</sup>

## NOTES

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