



*REVIEW ESSAY: From Border War to War in the Near Seas:
Forty-Years of Chinese Military Reforms*

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Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang and Joel Wuthnow, editors, *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019.

It has now been over forty years since China last fought a war. In 1979, under leader Deng Xiaoping, China launched an assault on its neighbour and erstwhile ally Vietnam. While Deng meant to *teach it a lesson*, by most accounts, it was China that received one from a battle-hardened Vietnamese army. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) thus learned the hard way that its size could not make up for its other deficiencies. As it turns out, it was a blessing in disguise. The Vietnam *débâcle* allowed China to begin a process of military renewal, shedding in part its past by identifying its military's flaws as well as reviewing its Maoist approach to war at the dawn of a new era that would later be known as the revolution in military affairs. The results have been astonishing.

The Vietnam Incursion as a Relic of Cold War Politics

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has raised with new urgency the concern for war around the fate of Taiwan, the island province China considers a renegade. Over the years, a slew of studies and commentaries have appeared on the subject as well as on the military capabilities of the various powers that may be involved. As military conflicts in the 20th century have shown, objective figures on firepower are one thing, while experiences of fighting are another. And yet, combat experience is a crucial factor in assessing troop readiness.

Further, reports have also provided extensive details on China's growing military stock of equipment from missiles to aircraft carriers. Rarely mentioned is the Chinese military's actual combat experience, the most recent being the aforementioned conflict with Vietnam over forty years ago. That conflict which China launched against its southern neighbour was by most accounts a failure. What would the prospects today be, given the stunning advances in military technology of various types? Given the scarcity of material to work with, the publication of books on China's last war becomes that much more precious. Not only do these studies allow us to assess China's performance then and identify its weaknesses, but it also affords analysts the opportunity to measure what progress the Chinese military has made in filling these earlier gaps.

We owe it to Professor Xiaoming Zhang for having delved into this conflict once more. A number of books have appeared in the past on the subject covering various angles but they appeared at a time when archives in the former Soviet Union and memoirs from some of the military leaders in China were not accessible. To a larger extent, this has now been remedied.¹ Still, the picture will remain incomplete as long as Vietnam keeps a tight lid on its own records even as China further opens its archives to academic researchers.

China has been involved in a variety of conflicts over the years along its borders, whether in the north (former Soviet Union), the northeast (Korean War) or the southwest (India). In that sense, the war with Vietnam was not a new phenomenon. What is unique about the latter is that for many years during the Vietnam War, both countries were close allies. China even sent thousands of its nationals to work in Vietnamese factories while it fought the United States in the South. As socialist countries, they were not supposed to fight one another. The Cold War and the presence of US troops in South Vietnam contributed to bonding both countries together. Ironically, it was the growing tensions between China and the Soviet Union – another socialist country – that led China to revisit its relationship with its southern neighbour and the United States.

Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia, then under the boots of the Khmer Rouge, was interpreted by the Chinese as an attempt to establish its hegemony over the entire Indochinese peninsula at the behest of the Soviet Union, a scenario China could not accept. In taking a tough stand against Vietnam and the Soviet Union, Zhang believes Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping was also trying to ingratiate himself in the eyes of the United States, at a time when China was seeking to gain access to American investments and technology while it was in the early stages of its own economic reforms. Relations between the two former allies would not improve until the downfall of the Soviet Union and Vietnam's withdrawal of its troops from Cambodia.

¹ Numerous books have been written on the China-Vietnam border war of 1979. A representative sample would include the following: King C. Chen, *War with Vietnam, 1979* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1987); Odd Arne Westad and Sophie Quinn-Judge (eds.), *The Third Indochina War: Conflict Between China, Vietnam, and Cambodia, 1972-1979* (London: Routledge, 2006); and William Duiker, *China and Vietnam: The Roots of Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: Institute of East Asian Studies, 1986).

The domestic situation also preoccupied the Chinese leadership in 1978-1979. Mao had recently died (1976) and the Chinese Communist Party was recovering from a self-inflicted campaign (the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976) of purification, an operation that had also affected its military. Zhang dwells at length on the inner debates involving top political and military leaders and the role of Deng in bringing some unity in preparation for the great economic reform program that he was about to launch. In addition to a lack of military preparedness (soldiers, equipment, training, supplies), the troops were poorly motivated to fight what some considered China's "little brother." What contemporary Chinese documentary sources reveal is that soldiers and pilots were not confident they could overcome their Vietnamese counterparts in equipment and combat experience. These factors (poor training and going to war against a former ally) forced the leadership to intensify political indoctrination campaigns to whip up support for its war plans against Vietnam.

The main story of the actual invasion is covered in chapter four. Zhang provides a summary of the Chinese forces involved: half a million poorly trained troops with no recent war experience. Facing them was a battle-hardened army whose elite troops were in Cambodia, leaving fresh but inexperienced soldiers to fight the Chinese invasion in the north. Still, despite overwhelming numbers, the Chinese troops did poorly, a conclusion that Zhang attributes to Chinese planners' failure to take into account the presence of Vietnamese militia troops in the area defending their home territory. In the village of Soc Giang in particular, Chinese troops suffered their worst losses due in large part to fierce resistance but also inhospitable terrain.

Professor Zhang identifies six areas of particular concern to the PLA that needed to be addressed (134-138):

- The war revealed that the PLA's reconnaissance capability and battlefield situational awareness and intelligence were limited.
- PLA planners failed to consider the large number of militia forces in their calculation of Vietnamese military strength.
- While the 1979 operation combined tank, artillery, and engineering elements in support of infantry attacks and assembling an air and naval force to provide cover, backwardness in doctrine and tactics prevented Chinese forces from

carrying out the kind of coordinated operation that could have been undertaken at that time (i.e. joint operations).

- Poor command and control centering on cultural traditions that emphasized close personal relationships between top officers and troops as well as poor combat experience among the frontline officers.
- The PLA lacked a modern logistics supply system and structure to support a fast-moving, distant, offensive action in which the average daily consumption included 700 tons of ammunition and another 700 tons of fuel.
- The war caused the PLA to reconsider its thinking about a “people’s war” as applied to conflicts beyond China’s borders. It showed that it was almost impossible for huge PLA forces to operate outside the country without popular support for the war at home.

These areas of concern became the focus of Chinese reform efforts.

China’s Revolution in Military Affairs

While the Vietnam campaign brought the Chinese military rather abruptly face-to-face with their across-the-board weaknesses, it was the Gulf War of 1990-1991 that truly shocked the PLA about its backwardness. The ability of US forces to work together as one impressed on the Chinese military psyche what was most lacking in their own approach to war. Ironically, there is a lack of consensus within the US military about the effectiveness of jointness in winning the Gulf War.² In fact, it may at best have been a contributing factor to the victory of Allied forces against Iraq. It appears that jointness played a more determinant role in the more recent operations involving Iraq and Afghanistan.

Jointness, also known more technically as Cross-Domain Synergy, emerged as a result of mixed results or outright failures in US military operations involving Iran (Operation Eagle Claw -1979) and Grenada (Operation Urgent Fury - 1983). Faced with an inability to carry out a reform in the approach to war operations in the military, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General David C. Jones urged Congress to

² Christopher G. Marquis, Denton Dye, and Ross S. Kinkead, “The Advent of Jointness during the Gulf War, A 25-Year Retrospective,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 85 (April 2017): pp. 76-83.

mandate necessary reforms to achieve jointness. The result was the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986.

Cross-Domain Synergy (CDS) is defined thus: "In military application, cross-domain synergy is the use of two or more domains [land, sea, air, space, and/or cyberspace] to achieve a military advantage. This frequently involves the application of capabilities from one domain to another, with the principal aims of improving operational performance and reducing unnecessary joint force redundancies."³ While achieving complete CDS can take years, it can never be taken for granted. In peacetime, in particular, there is always a temptation for services to return to their earlier practices. None other than General Martin E. Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of the Staff (2011-2015), cautioned about this as recently as 2013.⁴

The concept of joint operations became the central focus of the various Chinese leaders that succeeded Deng Xiaoping (Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping). Much of the media has focused on the impressive shopping that the PLA has engaged in over the years, particularly for the Navy. However, Chinese leaders have been very much aware that such weaponry would likely expose the PLA to certain defeat in any war scenario unless it could harness the various arms of its military into an integrated force where synergies could be exploited. There are many challenges involved in implementing CDS, including, but not limited to, streamlining operations, offices, and lines of communication. However, the fiercest and most enduring challenge remains to change the human culture that predominates in typical fashion in the military world. Protecting turfs, maintaining control of forces under one's command, and inexperience with other elements of the armed forces are just some of the obstacles that military and political leaders have to overcome if they wish to strengthen control and implement a truly mobile and flexible structure upon the military.⁵

³ William O. Odom and Christopher D. Hayes, "Cross-Domain Synergy: Advancing Jointness," *Joint Force Quarterly* 73 (April 2014): p. 124.

⁴ Martin E. Dempsey, "The Future of Joint Operations: Real Cooperation for Real Threats," *Foreign Affairs* (June 20, 2013), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2013-06-20/future-joint-operations>.

⁵ This review focuses on the Xi Jinping period (2012-). For earlier assessments, one can consult David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2002) for the Jiang Zemin period (1989-2002), as well as Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner, eds., *Assessing the People's Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, 2014) for the Hu Jintao period (2003-2011).

What the evidence thus far reveals⁶ is an across-the-board reorganization of the Chinese military, from the overall structure (from seven military regions to five theatre commands) to greater centralization with the Central Military Commission (the CMC itself has seen its membership reduced from 11 to 7). One of the more challenging areas concerns what can only be described as a Promethean struggle to overcome bureaucratic resistance as well as inexperience in what the military is trying to achieve. Chapters by Mark R. Cozad as well as Joel Wuthnow and Phillip Saunders, for instance, describe the efforts of the PLA to develop training programs that would form new profiles of the officers geared to carry out joint operations. As a result, China witnessed the mushrooming of military schools of various types to develop the requisite skills in various fields. Joint operations being a relatively new and untested concept, the PLA found much inspiration from observing the US military's campaign in the Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The authors describe a military working clumsily to develop and strengthen training with no first-hand experience among its troops. The PLA has attempted over the years to improve its inter-operability through increased exercises involving various PLA units and foreign militaries (Russia among them), as well as peacekeeping operations in Africa, with mixed results. Other fields covered in Saunders' book include logistics, missile forces, civil-military relations, and procurement among others. Given that the PLA has not been involved in actual military operations as of yet, measuring its effectiveness in conducting joint operations is difficult. China's recent exercises in the Taiwan Strait have provided a limited but much-needed opportunity to assess its readiness. Thus far, early and cursory assessments suggest that the PLA has made improvements.⁷

Timing is of the Essence

Given the current state of our knowledge of military reform efforts in the PLA, any assessment of its readiness in the event of a conflict can only be preliminary. However, according to David M. Finkelstein, a contributor to the Saunders book, Xi

⁶ The collective effort of Phillip Saunders and his colleagues is based on two conferences held in Arlington (2016) and Taipei (2017). The book was published in 2019.

⁷ Cyril Ip and Lawrence Chung, "PLA's Taiwan Live-Fire Drills 'Highlight Military's Joint Warfare Advances'," *South China Morning Post*, 7 August 2022.

Jinping and PLA leaders see their efforts as “a race against time.”⁸ Tensions in the Taiwan Strait have increased recently for which China blames the United States. It appears that China senses that it is not in total control of the calendar and is fast-tracking its efforts at reform in order to be ready for any eventuality.

Conclusion

What the war in Ukraine has revealed is that the United States and NATO no longer respect the concept of spheres of influence in Europe, a concept that had prevailed since at least World War II. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant the end of socialism as an organizing politico-economic system, not the end of the security system built by NATO and the Warsaw Pact following the stalemate created at the end of the war when American and Soviet forces came face to face along the Elbe River in Germany.

Professor John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago has detailed extensively in various talks the genealogy of the current crisis, which we cannot detail here. Suffice it to say that the situation in Europe has not been lost on the Chinese government. The war in Ukraine and its lessons thus far have added urgency to China’s program of military procurement, training, and reforms as it prepares for a Taiwan contingency.

The Chinese have been following the war in Ukraine intensely; China’s CCTV (state television) has been covering the war daily since it began in February 2022. The coverage of the war on such television programs as “Focus Today” (今日关注) has revealed two trends that should be of utmost concern to the West. First is the use of gradually more powerful weapons by each side in the war in the hope of gaining an advantage. Going down this road will bring us closer to nuclear Armageddon. Second is the uncompromising stand of each side that their interests must prevail. These trends augur ill about the outcome of this conflict.

⁸ See David M. Finkelstein, “Chapter One-Breaking the Paradigm: Drivers behind the PLA’s Current Period of Reform,” in *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*, edited by Phillip Saunders, et al., p. 63.

China has taken note of NATO's role in bringing about this crisis and will surely adjust its plans accordingly. It appears that its procurement program in ships, for instance, has not slowed, indeed to the contrary.⁹ As the United States and its allies, including Canada, position themselves with increasingly little ambiguity to defend Taiwan, they will be well-advised to contemplate all possible scenarios and their implications.

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⁹ Liu Zhen, "Destroyer Photos Offer Clues About Chinese Navy's Growing Fleet," *South China Morning Post*, 23 August 2022; see also: Kristin Huang, "Lessons From Ukraine: Chinese Marines Need Better Air Defence Capabilities, Magazine Says," *South China Morning Post*, 8 August 2022.