

# **Pitfalls in Making Assumptions About Chinese PLA's Military-Political Behaviour**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# Pitfalls in Making Assumptions About Chinese PLA's Military-Political Behaviour

## ABSTRACT

Assumptions are a necessary part of statecraft and military planning. However, there are dangers in making incorrect presuppositions, especially those related to social, cultural or quasi-cultural aspects of an adversary that are then predicted to have an impact on military-political outcomes. This paper examines some of the most common political-military assumptions about the Chinese People's Liberation Army that are inherently problematic, as they are based on either incorrect premises or inadequate analysis. The paper outlines a case against falling into these beliefs, because they are taken to imply the reverse attribute for one's own side, and tend to become the basis for formulating losing strategies.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“When you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning or losing are equal. If ignorant both of your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril.”*

-Sun Tzu<sup>1</sup>

Military strategists, operational planners, and tactical-level executors, all deal with assumptions that are a necessary part of war planning and warfare. Assumptions need to be made at the highest levels of statecraft—either within the political establishment or with allies— as well as *for* and *by* military establishments. Indeed, armed forces everywhere formally consider assumptions in their written estimates of the situation.<sup>2</sup> These assumptions may cover a range of issues, including about the enemy, one's own side, neutral parties, the weather, and the international environment. If these presuppositions are carefully, logically and dispassionately formulated, the margins of error may be low. However, as a study on the subject of “assumptions” advises, “battles are lost and campaigns fail because commanders make classic, but avoidable, errors in military thinking from which come the faulty planning assumptions upon which their losing strategies are based.”<sup>3</sup> In his major work on joint operational warfare, US Naval War College Prof. Milan Vego cautions against the pitfall in thinking of an assumption as “certainty instead of a probability”.<sup>4</sup>

This paper deals with an aspect of assumptions that is not only inherently more problematic, but also leads to poor outcomes for the side making them improperly. These assumptions usually relate to social, cultural or quasi-cultural aspects of an adversary that are then predicted to have an impact on military and military-political outcomes. As this paper will show, certain assumptions about an adversary may be problematic because the premises are incorrect, to begin with, and there is inadequate knowledge or analysis of history. These assumptions are

also vexed because postulations of a negative nature about an enemy could imply the reverse attribute for one's own side. That too may be incorrect. Assumptions can also be dangerous because decision-makers might then prepare differently, be less ready, or else overly confident.

This paper focuses on some assumptions that are commonly made with respect to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China not only in India but elsewhere in the West. These assumptions find space in traditional mass media, social media, and scholarly discussions in military educational institutions.<sup>5</sup>

## DISCUSSION

The commonly held beliefs about the PLA are discussed in turn in the following sections.<sup>6</sup> They are considered not necessarily in order of significance.

### **“China's military has no combat experience since 1979.”<sup>7</sup>**

A refrain that perhaps provides comfort to China's rivals is that the PLA “has had no combat experience since 1979.” Yet, China's combat experience did not stop that year, when China lost to Vietnam in the Vietnam Border War in the Spring of 1979.

In the years leading to the creation of the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Chinese were at war for much of the time. These wars were often intense, involved large numbers of troops, movements, and firepower, and caused casualties unlike anything that countries like India have experienced in contemporary, post-World War II times.<sup>8</sup> China has also fought several wars since the PRC was established:<sup>9</sup>

- Korea, 1950-53; Indo- China, 1950-1954; Quemoy and Matsu, 1954 & 1958

- Indian border war, 1959; Indian border war, 1962
- Vietnam War, 1964-75 (with active participation at some stages and with advisers and hardware assistance almost until the end)
- Soviet border war, 1969
- Vietnam border war, 1979

The Vietnam war, in particular, was a watershed for China, and should be discussed more thoroughly given prevailing myths in Indian discourse.

- While it lasted for only about a month, the war was intense for both sides.<sup>10</sup> PRC fought with some 300,000- 330,000 troops; of these, 26,000 were killed, and another 37,000 were wounded. (This casualty count is higher than India's in all its wars post-1947.) For its part, Vietnam lost 30,000 soldiers, and 32,000 others were wounded. China lost 420 tanks and Vietnam, 185. While unsurprisingly, these figures have been disputed by both sides, they are likely close to the truth.
- The border regions in Vietnam suffered massive damage. Ironically, these were the areas left largely unharmed by US bombers because they did not want to risk angering the Chinese if bombs fell across the border.
- The PLA leadership was found wanting during this battle. Mainly, however, the army's weakness was in their lack of both sophisticated hardware and effective tactics. There was also Soviet pressure on behalf of Hanoi that led them to withdraw. At the same time, the battle-hardened formations of the Vietnamese Army were actually in Kampuchea and it was essentially their militia that did the bulk of the fighting even while lacking the combat experience of

regular units. The militia and the regular components fought back fiercely and helped turn the tide.

- The decision to withdraw the PLA was taken after a fair bit of punishment had been meted out to the Vietnamese, especially by the third phase (early to mid-March 1979). In some ways the withdrawal was not different from that of the PLA in NEFA (Arunachal) in 1962. In retrospect, the Chinese may think of these as poor political-military decisions but that is what war is often about. As Chen points out, the PLA continued to be destructive during the withdrawal phase in Vietnam, causing ruin to infrastructure, mines, and small factories.<sup>11</sup>
- The outcome was not a total rout for the Chinese as is believed in India. In discussions this author has had with Vietnamese officers, both veterans and of younger generations, one is struck by their humility in victories and realism in thinking of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict as a close-run affair. They gave the impression that they are good students of Clausewitz's dictum—that in war, nothing is certain.
- Both sides learned lessons from the war. For the PLA and the CCP, especially, the loss to Vietnam led to soul-searching that would result in the modernisation and indigenisation of the forces that is seen in full motion today.
- we see in full motion today.

Less known in India is that the Sino-Vietnamese border war, as it officially ended, continued to manifest as a low-intensity conflict for almost the entire 1980s.<sup>12</sup> This took place in the mountainous regions along the border, mainly in the Laoshan area. The fighting involved regular skirmishes and became known as “artillery diplomacy”.<sup>13</sup> Some accounts suggest that more than a few million shells were used by each side during the decade-long war.<sup>14</sup> The following is a brief excerpt from



Xiaoming's book, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991*".

*"The 1980s border conflict between China and Vietnam can be divided into four phases. During the first phase (April 1979–November 1980), both sides sought to reconfigure their border defenses and to harass each other on a small scale. The second phase (May 1981–November 1984) saw the PLA forces take more offensive actions against Vietnamese occupied mountain ranges along the border. The third phase (December 1984–October 1987) featured intensified fighting in the Laoshan area, with both sides committing a large number of forces to offensive and counteroffensive operations. The last phase (November 1987–March 1990) was a stalemate, with the PLA forces conducting special operations until the withdrawal of the last field army unit from the border region."*<sup>15</sup>

## Defining 'Combat Experience'

What is "combat experience"? Even more difficult, albeit rhetorical, is the question, How does a soldier, airman or sailor acquire "combat experience" for the future? A corollary would also be equally fair: *"Lack of past combat inexperience is no guarantee of future defeat. Combat experience of previous wars, lesser conflicts or even the last conflict may not necessarily be relevant in the next one."* Combat experience, combat lessons, combat preparation and combat readiness are all different. Drawing lessons from conflicts, whether one's own or another's, is important and requires serious analysis, integrity in approaches to learning itself, as well as strong teams for doctrinal and warfighting improvement as well as agile leadership within the armed forces. Combat preparation and readiness are aspects which occupy—or *ought* to occupy—much of military leaders' time, energy, resources and efforts especially in visualising and training for the changing character

of warfare across the spectrum of warfare (SoW) as reasonably as it can be envisioned.

Armed forces that have been able to initiate changes in how fighting is to be done—and thereafter have innovated, trained and reorganised themselves for the likely future battlefields and environment—have tended to do better than those who did not. The PLA, as a constituent and instrument of Chinese statecraft, has for almost two decades been carefully contemplating future warfare. What they try to ensure is combat *preparedness*, given that combat *experience* cannot be acquired outside of combat. In any war, campaign or battle (at the strategic/operational/tactical levels), warfighting experience is acquired fundamentally by only those who take part at these three levels of warfare. Planners as well as rear headquarters also acquire valuable experience even if they might not be at the frontlines of combat.

Likewise, the much unfairly derided “tail” also gains operational logistics and administrative experience as envisioned in the old principle of war called “Administration.” Yet, there is little to be gained in assertions that the entire armed forces or an entire service gains “combat experience.” In the Kargil war of 1999, for instance, only those troops and air force crews who fought, gained combat experience. Twenty years later, how much of that experience is likely to be available and what proportion of it may be useful against the type of enemy and the changed conditions of warfare?<sup>16</sup> In doing so, it is perhaps necessary to emphasise that militaries need to distinguish between combat *experience* (which is acquired by those actively involved in combat) and drawing lessons from combat which could then go into the development of tactical prowess for the larger competence of that service. Both these feed into each other. However, even in the absence of combat experience that may be gained by a large body of warriors in a longer, intense conflict, developing tactical competence through training, exercises and hard-nosed

professionalism has always been possible. This may be something to think about before de-emphasising someone else's experience or extrapolating one's own. There is also the matter of combat experience and prowess that could be gained by an enemy at a particular segment along the SoW for which a larger Army may not be correspondingly prepared or proficient. An example could be the prowess that the "Tamil Tigers" showed against the Sri Lankan armed forces as well as when fighting Indian forces (Indian Peace Keeping Force, IPKF) at various periods of the Tamil "Eelam" conflict.<sup>17</sup>

In many popular forums of discussion in India—including in some military seminars, reportage in mass media, conversations in social media—there is a notion, either expressly stated or implied, that the Indian Army has much greater combat experience than the PLA. There could be a problem here. *'Esprit de corps'*, or fighting spirit is important but *a priori*, while combat experience is obviously *a posteriori*, and one should not be confused for the other. That the Indian security forces and especially the Indian Army have long conducted Counter-Insurgency and Counter-Terrorism (CI/CT) operations within the country's own borders in measured ways, is well-recognised. However, CI/CT should not be conflated with combat experience that comes out of more conventional warfare including of the more intense type that can occur in the so-called grey zones of conflict. Neither should competence in CI/CT under highly challenging environments—as happens within one's own sovereign territory—be conflated with preparation for combat of the type that India may find itself in with adversaries like China or Pakistan. Moreover, both the Pakistan Army and the PLA are, or have been engaged as well in their own versions of CI/CT over the past decades. The PLA, for instance, assists in "internal security" duties in Tibet and Xinjiang. At any rate, it is doubtful if the PLA believes that its own form of CI/CT experience would give it significant benefits of "combat experience" in the types of warfare it is gearing for.

Few militaries in the world are as alive as the PLA in preparing themselves for future wars across the spectrum of war itself and across the three levels of warfare. Even in the open domain, their military theoretical work and practitioners' value additions are apparent to serious China-watchers around the globe. To be sure, what they make available to the world could be partly "bluff", and partly robustness used for strategic signaling. It could also be meant to encourage other scholarship within Chinese think tanks, as well diplomatic and economic instruments of statecraft to be mutually coherent in enabling China to realise the "Chinese Dream." If anything, this is all part of "informatising" warfare and statecraft.<sup>18</sup> *Unrestricted Warfare*, the 1999 book by two PLA senior colonels is only a two-decade old reminder of the work that is being done by the PLA.<sup>19</sup> Is that unusual? The PLA—like the Soviet Red Army especially in the late 1920s and early 1930s—has had an intellectual tradition of internal discussions as robust or perhaps even more so than in more politically-free societies and their militaries. Mao Zedong is himself an illustration of this. His writings in the 1930s, while in the midst of what was called Revolutionary Civil War, is a famous example.<sup>20</sup>

### **"PLA is not geared for 'Mission Command'."**

There is a perception, in India and in the West, that the PLA is less geared to the exercise of "mission command"; to use a simpler term, this is "initiative of the subordinate", as explained by Admiral Dudley Knox in a 1913 essay he wrote as a young officer in the US Navy.<sup>21</sup> The perception is based on two premises. First, for militaries in most democracies, the very idea of a political officer at all levels— not necessarily subordinate to the commander—seems wrong and unworkable. Second, the difficulty of having someone who is politically but not militarily trained along the same framework as the commander and unit/force they are attached to, giving orders is anathema. There is

some substance to these reservations but not as much as may be thought by military officers in apolitical armies of democracies.

It is easy to forget that the PLA or the erstwhile Red Army in the USSR were armies of their communist parties and not of the motherland.<sup>22</sup> This distinction is not only relevant to the PRC, but Xi has felt the need to reiterate this and remind the PLA of its loyalty to the CPC. A party's army has to be subordinate to the party, and having a political officer/commissar is perhaps necessary. There is evidence from the Second World War that Soviet commissars carried out their duties spiritedly, generally supported their commanders well, and in many cases were able to boost the morale of their troops. Their duties went much beyond executing officers and soldiers in their units for not showing adequate vigour in fighting unto death. Contemporary research in the West as well as in Russia shows that earlier estimates of indiscriminate executions of soldiers retreating from battle by "blocking battalions" were highly exaggerated.<sup>23</sup>

In the PLA and in Soviet Armies there were internal phases when the wings of political officers were indeed clipped; at other times, their importance was enhanced. Overall, it worked for them. In studying the PLA, it would be ill-advised to think that this diarchy will be an advantage for the adversarial side in a conflict. There is not enough evidence to support such an assumption and future wars, naturally, have not yet occurred. The *Wehrmacht* in WW II is also a case in point. While it had no political officers, it had become political and many soldiers and generals were Nazi party members and fanatically devoted to Nazi ideology. This politicisation did not diminish its level of mission command. Even until the bitter end, younger officers and non-commissioned officers continued showing initiative and decision-making abilities.

In the PLA's case, it seems that the commanders concentrate on narrower warfighting readiness and training, and the political officers

assist in party-work, indoctrination, counseling and maintaining focus and morale that the CPC expects of its troops. A paper by Srikanth Kondapalli gives a comprehensive account of the political-officer system.<sup>24</sup> Considering the flexibility in major reorganisation, restructuring, networking and integrating cyber and space instruments into potential warfighting, it may be reasonable to think that the PLA may be training well for greater mission command effectiveness at the tactical and operational levels of warfare. Larry Wortzel's analysis of the PLA's General Political Department's (GPD) growing roles in the "three warfares" in the chapter titled, 'GPD and Information operations' and in an earlier chapter analysing their use of networks for operations, indicate that the initiative of the subordinate is being factored in.<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to embark on such ambitious programmes without effective doctrinal thinking—formulated centrally and to be executed decentrally.

In examining the precepts and the practice of mission command in the Indian Armed Forces, the constraints of political officers are absent; if indeed they are a constraint in the PLA. Are India's forces doing enough to train themselves for mission command? In an age of network enabled capabilities (NEC), how will the negatives of the so-called "1000 mile screwdriver" be prevented, or the increasing tendency to clear everything with at least a level higher?<sup>26</sup> The Americans are certainly worried about this. Milan Vego, who has visited various Indian military colleges, has written about the centrality of training for mission command in a recent article.<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere, too, he has been a strong advocate for mission command/ initiative of the subordinate.

A prognosis maybe ventured here. The very collapse of a communist party may result in severe shocks to its armed forces that exist to preserve and protect the party. What would they preserve and protect when the CPC is no longer there? The political roots of the Army could then be found to have been weak as happened in the USSR, for erstwhile

Warsaw Pact members and in nations like Ethiopia and Angola. When that happens, the PLA may well be weakened and remain adrift for a while.

**“With a One-Child Policy, they may not have the will to fight.”**

At societal and macro-economic levels, China's one-child policy (OCP) has had negative consequences, some of them potentially serious.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, at the level of macro and micro-economics, the policy has been studied closely by China-watchers across the world. Chinese leadership has made course corrections to try and reduce the impact of the policy in several areas—even as there have been perceived benefits from the policy—conceived by the party leadership and enforced sternly. In the absence of such a policy, according to China's National Population and Family Planning Commission, about 400 million Chinese more would have been born between 1980-2016.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, no contemporary forecasts on numbers as well as impact can be made in such a way that they turn out to be socially, culturally or militarily accurate when evaluated at some point in the future. There could be some eventual quantitative accuracy in forecasts about patterns like demographic age profiles, healthcare costs, consequences of aging, and decline in availability of working members. It is the qualitative impacts that are far more difficult to infer. Even here, the role of technology and politics in how humans work, eat, socialise, and conduct their lives, can change with time as has happened in the past; it may skew the forecasts either way.

What should be considered is possible military impact. It may be inaccurate to use suppositions of the OCP to deduce that Chinese people may not be good fighters and combatants for much longer, or that Chinese mothers and grandmothers may be so anti-war that leaders may hesitate to consider these options. The assumption is qualitatively



risky. The military benefits may seem superficially plausible and, therefore, comforting to nations which are finding it difficult to contend with China's growing military power.

Nations and their political-military leaders make cultural predictions of their actual or potential adversaries that have often turned out to be wrong. In their own turn, the Russians and the Americans learned this about the Japanese; the Germans about the Slavs; the British about the Zulus and about the Marathas, the Sikhs and the Afghans; the Americans, again, about the Vietnamese; the Pakistanis about Bangladeshi guerilla fighters as well as steely Bangla citizens all through 1971; the Indians about Tamil fighters in Sri Lanka..<sup>30</sup>

The OCP is also a problematic assumption because it echoes what was said about the US' aversion to casualties in the wake of their withdrawal from Somalia in 1993. Yet, the Americans got embroiled in Afghanistan and in Iraq only a few years later with casualties of US combatants having reached almost 7,000, and more than 50,000 wounded in action.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, assumptions that are based on self-comforting cultural outcomes can be dangerous. Such assumptions also contain equally problematic reverse inferences that Indians, in the absence of OCP, will be deadly combatants.

Nonetheless, it must be said that some aspects of the OCP may result in a shrinking base of conscripts. This may also be a factor why the PLA seems to be ramping up its effectiveness while simultaneously reducing its manpower. In India, the Army has begun to take modest steps to reduce manpower. The primary drivers for this have been to achieve an increase in combat effectiveness as well as to ease future pressures on the revenue budgets and perhaps free up some capital for modernisation.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, in China, one driver seems to be to attain greater combat effectiveness via technological modernisation,



harnessing outer space, cyber, missile and information power. China's requirements for "boots-on-ground" are correspondingly reducing. Simultaneously, influence at strategic levels including of deterrence, operational cohesion through reorganisation and jointness and combat capabilities at tactical levels are seeing phenomenal improvements.

Two inferences related to the OCP are therefore worth considering. What if the PLA reduces the overall impact of "body-bags" as seen by single-child parents and grand-parents if its war-fighting transforms to the imposition of high casualties on the enemy while reducing one's own? In effect, this has been the American way of war where their preponderance of firepower has resulted in greater numbers of enemy dead and wounded than US killed or injured. Second, with a change in policy now from the OCP to two-child policy (TCP), would the supposed lack of "willingness to fight" under OCP's influence reduce in about two decades when there might be fewer "little emperors"?

One could say that the sheer pace and scope of the PLA's modernisation and continued transformation make any assumptions out of the OCP, or even of the TCP on their willingness and desire to fight well, quite unhelpful. India should concentrate on matching—and in some areas, perhaps out-matching—China's military transformation.

**"Loss of Face' is a uniquely Chinese socio-political characteristic."**

The concept of "loss of face"—hinged on supposed values of honour—is a socio-cultural attribute that has always been a factor in discourse between individuals, tribes and nations all over the world. It would be incorrect to think of it as a uniquely or even a predominantly Chinese characteristic. It is not exclusively "oriental" either, even if several business etiquette advisories for Japan and China seem to convey so. In India, after all, the Hindi phrase "*naak kat gayee* (literally, the nose has been cut)" forms one of the turning points in the ancient epic,

Ramayana. The European, and later American custom of dueling with swords and pistols was about protecting one's honour, i.e., preventing loss of face. US politicians and even presidents have dueled in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries over "loss of face" issues. Even when it was deemed to be a crime by law, judges sympathised with what was thought to be a culture of honour.<sup>33</sup>

Some commentators have over-interpreted "loss of face" in analysing the way Chinese leadership thinks or predicting their reactions to events.<sup>34</sup> Escalation dynamics are important, but predicting these dynamics and subsequent military actions from a "loss of face" premise seems problematic. The better way of looking at it is through the Thucydidean postulation of "fear, honour and interest".<sup>35</sup> The Athenians argue with the Spartans in defence of their "*empire to its present height; fear being our principal motive, though honor and interest afterwards came in.*" In fact, Colin Gray calls this formulation from around 400BCE thus: "*the general theory of war is economically, indeed parsimoniously, best expressed in Thucydides' timeless triptych...(fear, honour and interest)...it explains why wars occur...also why peace prevails.*"<sup>36</sup> That "fear, honour and interest" were always and would remain the drivers for war and peace seems to be ignored by those who view the concept as uniquely Chinese. The three Thucydidean drivers, singly, or usually in combination dictate the choices that nations and societies make in choosing or avoiding war. The idea of loss of face is inherent in honour. Avenging loss of face or lumping it perhaps to bide one's time is governed by complex, contextual evaluations by national and military leadership, keeping "fear and interest" in mind.

The threshold for "loss of face" is determined by combinations of the ways in which political-military evaluation of fear, honour and interest play out. China has, in many instances, accepted loss of face; so has the US, so has India. Sometimes, however, they do not, since fear, honour,

and interest come to play in all situations. Above all, for Indian strategists, analysts and military leaders to over-interpret notions of loss of face would be incorrect. Second, if this is thought to be uniquely Chinese, then what are uniquely Indian, American, Israeli or Brazilian (to use nations at random) cultural characteristics that should be strategically and militarily evaluated, leveraged as applicable, and countered?

### **“The Chinese Go by Sun Tzu.”**

This author has encountered this particular assumption in various academic settings where he has lectured on some of the masters of military strategy, such as Sun Tzu and Mao Zedong.<sup>37</sup> Both are important as theorists in China and for the PLA. Mao, however, was also a military leader and then Chairman for decades. His imprint exists and also tends to be overstated within PRC-PLA sometimes because of the Party-Army connect. However, as mentioned earlier, Mao's military thoughts are rarely studied in India, unlike the easy-to-read book by Sun Tzu. Therefore, some assumptions on how Chinese military-political interfaces may act or react tend to persist. The one that is taken out of context the most is the assumed Chinese preference for “winning without fighting” as the “acme of generalship.” In Griffith's authoritative book, this maxim is translated in this manner: *“Thus, those skilled in war subdue the enemy's army without battle. They capture his cities without assaulting them and overthrow his state without protracted operations.”* In further dialogue involving Li Ch'uan, it becomes clearer that “they conquer by strategy” which is not the same as not fighting.<sup>38</sup> This quote is quite a bit different from the oft-used formulation of the “acme of generalship” and is from Sun Tzu's Chapter III “*Offensive Strategy*” for which fighting is very much on the cards.

To be sure, many of Sun Tzu's maxims have been universal in application, and sometimes seen in writings elsewhere even before

translations became available in the Anglophone world. The trouble with an over-simplified aphorism, however, is that it is sometimes taken to mean that the Chinese would never be keen on going to war. Over-simplification and inadequate analyses often lead to the risk of simplistic inferences. The other danger is to misquote Sun Tzu. This has happened often enough but a recent commentary is a grim reminder of the lack of scholarship that leads to “everyman’s” Sun Tzu. *The Art Of War* should be read in the context of their history, the contemporary emphasis of the PLA’s need to be ready for war and combat, and the deep concerns about China’s power, willingness to use force and its great steps in military modernisation. Sullivan’s commentary shows the dangers of misquotes from Sun Tzu or even cases of attributing almost anything “catchy” to him to score a point.<sup>39</sup>

There is also a distinct danger in Sinologists needlessly mystifying the results of their studies and China-watching. The same author, John Sullivan, in another recent commentary has pointed out several infirmities and perhaps deliberate distortions in Michael Pillsbury’s famous book, *“The Hundred-Year Marathon”*. These concern some ancient texts that are presented as having been read by a select few due to their unavailability in English. (Which according to Sullivan are easily available.)<sup>40</sup> The critic cautions, “Although tales of fearless warriors and cunning strategists of yore may influence the collective imagination of Beijing’s leadership, one can reasonably argue their current strategic playbook echoes Mackinder and Mahan just as much as Mencius or Mozi.”


Four more points need to be made. First, at the level of strategic education and operational studies, the Chinese are internationally oriented, and not given to the mind-trap of preferring only Chinese theorists among whom are other ancients besides Confucius or Sun Tzu. As pointed out by Sawyer, the other six ancient military texts of China also need to be kept in mind.<sup>41</sup> There now is growing evidence about the

seriousness with which they think tanks, military colleges and military journals read, evaluate, and write about the works of other theorists and evaluate them against changes in practice. Additionally, the Chinese have developed a fairly dispassionate attitude to lessons of history—whether their own or those of others. Goldrick points out that the Chinese have been studying the works of Alfred Thayer Mahan as much to understand why British sea power succeeded while the French's failed.<sup>42</sup> Second, as happens in classroom discussions on Sun Tzu, the book is not called "Art of Peace", to begin with; it is "The Art of War" and a great portion of it deals with fighting smartly. In a sense, Sun Tzu also cautions against convenient assumptions beginning in the first chapter with "Estimates." Third, ancient or contemporary strategic texts and thinkers within a nation certainly contribute to the body of strategic knowledge. That alone does not mean that the nation has a developed and beneficial strategic culture. As a corollary, discernible canons of strategic culture within a nation or even alliance do not automatically result in strategic successes. Fourth, and consequently, no nation "owns" Sun Tzu, or Kautilya, Clausewitz or Colin Gray. They— and several others— all educate, inform and guide on the ground. The PLA is not dogmatic about Sun Tzu, any of their ancient texts or even Mao. Rare would be a theorist of statecraft or of war who would have intended their work to be seen as dogma.

## CONCLUSION

Some other assumptions that are occasionally voiced relate to the quality of Chinese military hardware which is assumed to be often "problematic". Alongside this is the assertion that the progress China seems to have made in high technology is perhaps exaggerated and it is part of their "information warfare" attempts at winning without fighting. Another aspect is the belief that Chinese weapons and hardware are not combat-proven. This is analogical to the assumption of lack of combat experience for soldiers examined in an early section of this paper.

It is true that a fair bit of Western hardware has been used in combat right through the 1990s to the present time. Not everything worked well, as can happen. Further, Western platforms, soldiers and weapons were essentially deployed in asymmetric warfare where their adversaries had much less military power to throw against them. Similarly, much of Indian hardware (platforms, sensors, networks, weapons), are also not combat-proven. Does that mean that hardware may not perform to expectations? Therefore, would it be prudent to derive confidence from comforting hardware assumptions that India, or any other nation may make about the PLA? Yes, estimating an adversary's strengths and vulnerabilities including estimates of hardware is vital as are consequent assumptions. These remain an ongoing task for all militaries and security analysts. Assumptions in these areas require separate examination but what can be mentioned in this paper is that errors in estimating their technological progress as well as prowess, or drawing self-comforting inferences from inadequate analyses, could exacerbate problems instead of reducing them.

For political-military leaders, making assumptions remains a policy-strategy necessity. However, making them with biases, or with incomplete analyses or misplaced confidence in intuition, individual experience or gut-feeling can rarely be advisable. Further, one should never over-interpret and extrapolate what could be called socio-cultural assumptions about adversaries and even allies or friends. As a general principle, presumed beliefs made about any adversary, should err on the side of caution that favours the adversary by giving them the benefit of doubt. Finally, it would generally be a grave error to think that the obverse of such assumptions could be beneficially applied to one's own side. Sun Tzu's advice at the head of this paper may be worth a revisit. In any case, hope is rarely a good strategy for statecraft or warfare. 

## ENDNOTES

1. Samuel B. Griffith, trans, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War*, (Oxford University, 1963), 84. These two sentences are final maxims numbered 32 and 33 in chapter III, titled *Offensive Strategy*.
2. The aspect of assumptions is an important consideration in drafting the Commander's Estimate of the Situation (CES). An instructional workbook used by the Joint Military Operations Department of the US Naval War College *NWC4111F*, 19 Aug 2002 explains thus: "Key characteristics of assumptions are that they are reasonable suppositions—logical and realistic; and they must be essential for planning to continue", 1-32.
3. Gale E. Heavelin, Lt Col, USMC, "War Planning Assumptions and Errors in Military Strategy", *Research Report*, US Air War College, (Maxwell AFB, Alabama, Mar 1986.) Accessed 04 Feb 2019, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a177846.pdf>.
4. Milan Vego, *Joint Operational Warfare: Theory and Practice*, (US Naval War College, R.I., 2009), IX-32.
5. This is based on the author's own experience of several years of teaching in military institutions and in seminars, conferences.
6. The author owes such an approach to Colin Gray's masterly thesis, "Understanding Airpower: Bonfire of the Fallacies," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*; (Winter 2008). 43-83. In this monograph, Gray paraphrases certain oft-held beliefs about airpower and air forces into sharp statements. By discussing these in detail, he finally rephrases them in a way that explains the inferences much better.
7. Timothy R. Heath, "China's Military Has No Combat Experience: Does it Matter?" *Foreign Policy* commentary 27 Nov, 2018. This is a thoughtful article that does not support the question in the title..
8. Edward L. Dreyer, *China at War: 1901-1949*, (Singapore, Longman, 1995). The Indian experience in the World Wars arose out of British



imperial interests. While India suffered large numbers of casualties, in an actual sense, these were lesser than many of the European belligerents. When seen comparatively as a proportion of the national population, Indian casualties were significantly lower than many more of the belligerents on either side of the divide. While this does not reduce the aspect of individual losses and personal tragedies, the societal impact of casualties does seem to be lesser for India in these World Wars than for many other nations.

9. King C. Chen, *China's War With Vietnam*, (Stanford University, Hoover: 1987). While this book covers the Spring 1979 war, its wide analysis and comparisons give much to think about.
10. Chen, Table 7.1, 151.
11. Chen, *China's War*, 105.
12. Chakravorty, P.K., "Update on India-Vietnam Relationship", Commentary, Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi, Oct 4, 2016, accessed 21 Dec 2016, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2016/october/04/update-on-india-vietnam-relationship>. The article gives the impression that after the early 1979 conflict, China resolved the border issue and in fact provided aid to Vietnam. This was hardly so as detailed accounts exist of the dispute, their continued mutual animosity and suspicions.
13. Xiaoming Zhang, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict Between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991*, (University of North Carolina, 2015).
14. Nicholas Khoo, *Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance*, (New York, Columbia, 2011), 142 and Xiaoming, 139-144. In this intense war, artillery fire was intense at several times. To illustrate, Xiaoming writes, "from 12-22 June(1984), more than 30,000 shells and 2,000,000 bullets were supplied to the Vietnamese in the Laoshan area." From the section on Plan MB-84 Counterattack.
15. Xiaoming, pdf version, 130.



16. An example of such extrapolation is found in the ORF Defence Primer: *An Indian Military in Transformation*, Pushan Das and Harsh Pant, ed, 2018 by the ORF, New Delhi India. In a chapter by AVM Arjun Subramanian, "A Doctrinal Capability Appraisal of the IAF and PLAAF," 35.
17. Nira Wickremasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History*, (OUP, 2014), 301-305
18. While references are made to the Chinese "informatisation" of warfare, it deserves very deep scrutiny by those who have or may eventually have a more adversarial relationship with China. A 2014 study by the US Army War college is one such example. See, Larry M. Wortzel, "The Chinese People's Liberation Army and Information Warfare", (US Army War College Press, March 2014).
19. Qiao Liang & Wang Xiansui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, (Beijing, Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999). Calling the authors "a decade and a half before their time" seems to be no exaggeration as stated by David Barno and Nora Bensahel writing for the Texas National Security Review, "A New Generation of Unrestricted Warfare", April 19, 2016, accessed September 15, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/a-new-generation-of-unrestricted-warfare/>.
20. Mao Tse-Tung (sic), *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse-Tung*, (Peking, Foreign Language Press, 1967). This book, rarely studied in Indian military institutions, is required reading in many US equivalents. This author's knowledge of Mao's writings began while on course at the US Naval War College, in 2002. A good place for an Indian reader to start reading up on the PLA's historical antecedents, political foundations and evolving strategies especially in the context of the Indian Ocean, is M.H. Rajesh's well-researched book: *China in the Indian Ocean: One Ocean, Many Strategies*, (New Delhi, Pentagon, 2018). The Soviet military leadership of the late 1920s and upto 1936-37 developed several new concepts of warfighting like the deep battle and joint- arms rapid advance as well as operational art as we now understand it. Stalin, unfortunately for his own purposes

executed or imprisoned most of the leadership reaching down to regiment level. It hardly helped the USSR in the early months of the Nazi invasion in 1941 and much of 1942.

21. Dudley W. Knox, "Trained Initiative and of Action: The True Bases of Military Efficiency, *USNI Proceedings*, (1913, Vol 39/1/145), 59. Accessed, 05 Feb 2019, [https://www.usni.org/document/knox-dudley-w-1913-39-1-145?magazine\\_article=33153](https://www.usni.org/document/knox-dudley-w-1913-39-1-145?magazine_article=33153).
22. M.H. Rajesh, *ibid*. In many sections of the book the author reiterates that it is important that the CPC-PLA links are close and need to be understood.
23. Michael Sontheimer, "An Inside Look at World War II's Bloodiest Battle", *Der Spiegel*, 01 Feb 2019, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/frank-interviews-with-red-army-soldiers-shed-new-light-on-stalingard-a-863229.html>, accessed, 05 Feb 2019. Anthony Beevor's estimate of 13,000 Russian soldiers executed in Stalingrad has been revised to merely 300. Marshal Chuikov wrote that he had a few generals and their commissars shot to set an example.
24. Srikanth Kondapalli, "China's Political Commissars and Commanders: Trends & Dynamics" (*Working Paper 88*) <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/rsis-pubs/WP88.pdf>. Accessed, 30 Jan 2019.
25. Wortzel, *qv*, Note 18.
26. CIMSEC blog. Interview with Rear Admiral James Goldrick by Christopher Nelson accessed Jan 23, 2017, <http://cimsec.org/naval-history-books-coal-interview-rear-admiral-james-goldrick-ranret/21914>. The term, "1000-mile screwdriver is, of course, a generic term to describe the ways in which rear echelons can control or influence events perhaps even a continent away. While this is possible, it is often not necessary or useful.
27. Milan Vego, "Mission Command and Zero Error Tolerance Cannot Coexist", *USNI Proceedings*, July 2018, Vol 144/7/1385,

<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2018-07/mission-command-and-zero-error-tolerance-cannot-coexist>.

28. Praggya Surana, "China's One Child Policy: Military Implications," *Centre for Land Warfare Studies*, (New Delhi, 27 Dec 2017), <http://www.claws.in/1851/china%E2%80%99s-one-child-policy-military-implications-praggya-surana.html>.
29. Mara Hvistendhal, 'Analysis of China's One-child Policy Sparks Uproar', *Science Magazine*, Oct 18, 2017, accessed on 16 April 2019, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2017/10/analysis-china-s-one-child-policy-sparks-uproar>
30. It is of interest to note that many military "assessments" of an adversary's lack of fighting abilities stem from racial and cultural prejudices. Sometimes they come from worries, insecurities or simply arrogance. A good example of this is the steady build-up of the myth of "martial races" that were chosen to serve British imperial interests after the shocks of 1857. Racial and cultural prejudices led to the West Pakistanis looking down upon East Pakistani officers and soldiers as poor fighters right from Pakistan's creation in 1947..
31. These figures are an approximation. Accurate figures are available on the UD DOD website. Accessed Apr 27, 2019 <https://dod.defense.gov/News/Casualty-Status/>. During his Joint Staff course in 1994, a year after the US withdrawal from Somalia, this author recollects that several faculty members, student- officers as well as distinguished military and civilian speakers thought that the Americans had lost the stomach for casualties altogether. It was an assumption that turned out to be off the mark.
32. For a crisp brief on the restructuring announced by the Indian Army, see Nitin Gokhale's, podcast on [www.bharatshakti.in](http://www.bharatshakti.in), "Restructure and resize: The Indian Army's Mantra for 2019." Accessed on 12 April 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFfGqdl16ck>
33. S. Banks, "Very Little Law in the Case: Contests of Honour and the Subversion of the English Criminal Courts, 1780-1845," from a

comprehensive discussion on dueling accessed at Wikipedia on 27 Jan 2019. Twenty years before he became the US President, Andrew Jackson duelled and killed lawyer Charles Dickinson in 1806 for casting aspersions on Jackson's wife. The famous Russian poet Alexander Pushkin died dueling his brother in law in 1837. Alexander Hamilton, former Secretary of the Treasury died saving face in 1804 at the hands of Vice President Aaron Burr. Accessed 27 Apr, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/8-legendary-duels>.

34. The problem lies in over-interpretation because as explained, drivers for war, avoidance of war or in urging of peace: fear honour and interest. A cross section of references are given here: (1) PK Chakravorty, "Implications of Permanent Court of Arbitration Ruling Award on the South China Sea Dispute, (Bharatshakti.in, 19 Aug 2016). <https://bharatshakti.in/implications-of-permanent-court-of-arbitration-award-on-the-south-china-sea-dispute/>. (2) Paper for National security Colloquium, "Two-Front War: What does it Imply?" (VIF India, Aug 2018), p 10, <https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/national-security-vol-1-issue-1-colloquium.pdf>. (3) P.R. Shankar, "Chinese Threat: A Reality Check, (Bharatshakti.in, 07 July 2018), <https://bharatshakti.in/chinese-treat-a-reality-check/>. (4) Bharat Karnad, 01 May 2016, "Losing Face and Its Awful Consequence" Securitywise blog. <https://bharatkarnad.com/2016/05/01/losing-face-and-its-awful-consequences/>. While Karnad implies in the beginning that this is a typically Chinese and hugely important attribute, he ends with the possibility of Indian loss of face.
35. Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York, Touchstone, 1996), 43.
36. Colin Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford University, 2010), 101-2. This author has used the same argument in another essay about China in the IOR to be published by the USI, New Delhi in the Strategic Yearbook, 2019.

37. An abridged essay from 2013, based on the author's experience of teaching this course was published in, Sudarshan Shrikhande, "Understanding Masters of Strategy: Introducing Some Original Works to Tomorrow's Strategists," *NWC Journal* 2013, (Goa) (pp 1-16).
38. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans Samuel B. Griffith, (OUP, 1963), 79, axiom 10.
39. John F. Sullivan, "It's Sun Tzu's Time in the Barrel," on the Small Wars Journal website, accessed, March 15, 2019. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/its-sun-tzus-time-barrel>
40. Sullivan, "Reviewing the Hundred-Year Marathon: Running on Flimsy historical Grounds", April 11, 2019, accessed on 12 Apr, 2019, [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/04/11/reviewing\\_the\\_hundred-year\\_marathon\\_running\\_on\\_flimsy\\_historical\\_grounds\\_114326.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/04/11/reviewing_the_hundred-year_marathon_running_on_flimsy_historical_grounds_114326.html).
41. Ralph D. Sawyer, *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, translation and commentary by Sawyer with Mei-Chin Sawyer, (Boulder, Westview Press, 1993). Apart from Sun- Tzu, the other six books are by T'ai Kung, Ssu-ma, Wu-tzu, Wei Liao-tzu, Huang- Shih-kung and Questions and Replies between T'ang T'ai-tsung and Li Wei-kung.
42. James Goldrick, "Reflections on the Rise of China's Navy", *Defense Security Brief*, (Taiwan) Vol. 7, Issue 2, Dec 2018), 41-44.

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