

6. Transformation and Refinement of Chinese Military Doctrine: Reflection and Critique on the PLA's View

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The concepts of “people’s war” (or military doctrine) and “active defense” (military strategy) are two fundamental components of Mao Zedong’s military thought. “Military doctrine” (*junshi zhidao sixiang/zhunze*) provides both the political vision on the nature of warfare and military guidance for the armed forces to follow. Because military doctrine must adapt to reflect changes in the strategic and political environment, it is not surprising that the doctrine of people’s war (*renmin zhanzheng*) has undergone substantial revision in the last 20 years and that these changes have mirrored changes in China’s security environment and national priorities.

However, despite these changes in the doctrine of people’s war, a decade-long debate still rages within the PLA over whether this doctrine, changes and all, is, in fact, obsolete. On the one hand, some officers argue that advances in military technology and the RMA have rendered Mao’s concepts untenable. However, official publications and statements by the PLA and related institutions maintain that the concept of people’s war remains a key feature of modern warfare.

Accordingly, this chapter addresses two fundamental questions: (1) Is the doctrine of people’s war truly obsolete, despite Deng Xiaoping’s modifications to adapt it to “modern conditions”? and (2) How does Deng’s concept of “people’s war under modern conditions” differ from Jiang Zemin’s emphasis on high technology? To highlight both the changes and continuities in Chinese military doctrine and to evaluate various official interpretations, this chapter relies on a close textual reading and critical examination of the PLA’s own views on the evolution of people’s war as expressed in official publications and personal interviews. Through this effort, the author hopes to contribute to a more complete understanding of the PLA’s doctrinal transformation in the past 20 years which might serve as a guide to future doctrinal developments.

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The Concept of People's War: A Status Report

In Chinese military publications, the term “people’s war” embodied several different concepts, including military thought (*junshi sixiang*), military strategic thought (*junshi zhanlue sixiang*), military theory (*junshi lilun*), military school of thought (*junshi xueshuo*), military doctrine (*junshi zhidao sixiang/junshi zhunze*), and operational forms (*zhuozhan xingshi*).

Similarly, in the West the term “people’s war” had multiple meanings, depending on the context in which it was used. From a political perspective, it described the revolutionary nature of the PLA and the unique relationship between the CCP and the military. When used in the context of military doctrine, “people’s war” referred to a continental defense based on cooperation between regular and irregular military forces (i.e., between the “army” and the “people”). Operationally, people’s war referred to a type of warfare based on mobility, attrition, and other guerrilla-type tactics.

Irrespective of which definition of people’s war is used, the real question remains: Is “modernized” people’s war (*xiandaihua renmin zhanzheng*) still a traditional Maoist type of people’s war? According to the original definition of people’s war as “war conducted by a suppressed class or nation (*minzhu*) through mass mobilization in order to liberate itself,” the term is outdated and no longer relevant to China’s current security challenges. However, alternative definitions of people’s war put forth by various PLA analysts and researchers offer a more fruitful avenue for discussion and analysis. The following section presents a collection of views based on the author’s interviews with PLA officers in Beijing and Washington, D.C. These views can be classified into the three categories described below.

People’s War Is Obsolete

Proponents of this view point to a statement allegedly made by Deng Xiaoping that the era of war based on “millet and rifles” (*xiaomi jia buqiang*) has passed, meaning that the old forms of people’s war such as sparrow warfare (*maquezhan*), tunnel warfare (*didaozhan*), and other forms of guerrilla warfare are no longer effective because of advances in military technology. Therefore, the doctrine of people’s war has no relevance to present military and security challenges.

Furthermore, the concept of people’s war is predicated on a war fought within China, which explains Mao’s emphasis on the “three combination” (*sanjiehe*) of

regular army units, local army forces, and the people's militia. However, changes in the international environment make conflict on or beyond China's borders increasingly plausible and advances in military technology render reliance on the masses for logistics and other combat support untenable.

Finally, the cost of conducting people's war as envisioned by Mao would be prohibitive, as China would not be able to sustain the resource requirements for maintaining a militarized society for any length of time. Also, deploying relatively untrained and underequipped militia against a technologically advanced adversary would likely be suicidal and could rapidly lead to a political crisis.

People's War Is Forever

Other PLA officers hold a diametrically opposed position—namely that the doctrine of people's war encapsulates timeless principles of warfare that are the product of accumulated PLA warfighting experience. According to adherents of this position, the essence of people's war can be expressed in a famous Chinese idiom, an unending process of “crossing the river by feeling the stones beneath the water.” Because this doctrine is based on China's domestic situation, changing security environment and stage of military development, it remains a source of guidance for Chinese army building.

In addition, the doctrine of people's war embodies ideals of justice, the use of military for only defensive purposes, and unity between the army and the people. Thus, as stated by a retired senior PLA officer, a renunciation of people's war could imply that China will abandon its long-standing defensive military posture, which would cause alarm among China's neighbors.

While proponents of people's war recognize that modern warfare relies more on a standing professional army than on the mobilization of the masses, they stress that the role of ordinary people is still important, particularly with respect to computer warfare and passive BMD. Also, they point to the fundamental and indispensable role of public support of the state in any national crisis. Therefore, officers, researchers, and analysts in this camp conclude that while the form of warfare must change in accordance with advances in technology, the core principles of people's war that address the relationship between man and weapons and between the army and the people remain not only valid but essential for guiding the development of the PLA.

People's War Cannot Be Abandoned Yet

A third group occupies the middle ground in this debate by adopting a more pragmatic view that while the doctrine of people's war possesses little utility and relevance in the conduct of modern warfare, the PLA currently lacks the equipment and ability to plausibly engage in such conflicts. Therefore, immediately abandoning the doctrine of people's war while the PLA can only think or talk about high-tech warfare does not represent a prudent option.

Precisely because the debate on the salience of people's war remains unsettled, the current state of PLA doctrine is difficult for outsiders to ascertain, especially as a wider range of opinions is tolerated in official publications. However, it is safe to say that actual changes in doctrine are probably much smaller in degree than suggested by a review of the literature. First, views stated in official publications still represent divergent perspectives that have not matured and gained mainstream acceptance. For example, a number of articles in PLA publications are simply copied from foreign military publications and serve more to inform various PLA constituencies about foreign developments than to serve as authoritative guidance. Also, the transition to a new doctrine must most likely be preceded by the acquisition of appropriate hardware and other resources. While the PLA lacks such equipment in sufficient quantities, there will be little incentive for changing the status quo. Therefore, while it may be obvious to those inside and outside the PLA that the doctrine of people's war is not well suited to warfare under modern conditions, changes in doctrine will only come about slowly.

Observations

As can be seen from the above discussion, the concept of people's war addresses three issues: (1) the political nature of warfare and the unique relationship between the PLA and the CCP, (2) actual guiding principles for the conduct of warfare, and (3) specific operational and tactical guidance for the conduct of military campaigns. Those who claim that people's war is obsolete base their views on changes in China's security environment and advances in military technology. On the other hand, those who argue for the continued relevance of people's war point to the political and organizational aspects of warfare, in particular the relationships between the army and the people and between the army and the Party. As such, the retention of the doctrine of people's war actually implies that it possesses relevance in the political sphere. As such, it will retain relevance so long as China maintains a defensive strategy

(i.e., fighting wars only to protect its own sovereignty) and as long as the Chinese people are mobilized in any manner to support the attainment of military objectives.

Doctrinal Evolution with Chinese Characteristics

Deng Xiaoping's modernization program was animated by two concepts: "liberating thinking" (*jiefang sixiang*) and "seeking truth from facts" (*shishi quishi*). This pragmatic approach, summarized in eight Chinese characters, also serves as a justification for updated interpretations of Chinese military doctrine.

Legitimacy of Change

In the last 20 years, Chinese military leaders transformed their military doctrine to better match a new security environment. However, to maintain ideological continuity they labeled such changes "creative development" (*chuangzao fazhan*) to avoid accusations of apostasy. Thus, in 1985, Deng replaced Mao's tactics of "luring the enemy deep" and "preparing to fight a total war" with "extended depth of defense" and "local war in China's periphery," respectively. However, Deng was also careful to include these drastic changes under the politically acceptable rubric of "people's war under modern conditions," thereby demonstrating an explicit linkage to Mao's revolutionary thinking.

After the Persian Gulf War of 1991, the PLA addressed the issue of high-technology weapons and concepts in the conduct of modern warfare. Following Deng's strategy, Jiang Zemin chose to call these efforts "Deng Xiaoping thought of army-building in the new era" (*Deng Xiaoping xinshiqi jundui jianshe sixiang*) to provide political cover for this divergence from the Maoist line. Note that some observers identify three stages in the evolution of Chinese military thought: Mao's era of "revolutionary doctrine," Deng's era of "modernization doctrine," and Jiang's era of "high tech doctrine." But most Chinese military journals consider the current emphasis on high technology to fall under the Dengist doctrine of modernization.

Initiative (xianfa zhiren)

The doctrine of people's war addresses the question of initiative at two levels, which is consistent with the moral precept of using military force only for national self-defense. Mao wrote that, with respect to strategy, the PLA would

respond only to an enemy's first attack (*houfa zhiren*) but, operationally, the PLA should not hesitate to launch a first strike (*xianfa zhiren*).

However, modern high-tech warfare may compel a preemptive strike if a superior enemy is to be defeated. If so, does this mark a departure from Mao's edict of allowing the enemy to strike first? There is no consensus on this point as some PLA officers state that China's defensive strategy and philosophy of fighting only moral wars means that both active defense and *houfa zhiren* still apply. Interestingly, proponents of this view interpret the 1996 Taiwan crisis as an application of this principle, as the United States is considered to have initiated an attack by allowing Lee Teng-hui to visit, thereby interfering with China's domestic affairs and necessitating a Chinese response consistent with letting the enemy strike first. On the other hand, arguments are put forth that the demands of high-tech warfare mean that Mao's concept of *xianfa zhiren* must also apply at the strategic level to provide adequate freedom of action for the military.

Overcoming the Inferior with the Superior (yilieshengyou)

According to Mao, the key to victory in people's war lies in defeating a superior enemy with backwards equipment by avoiding one's shortcomings and expanding one's strengths. Because China's military capabilities are still weak despite 20 years of defense modernization, many Chinese military researchers have sought to identify ways of fighting a modern high-tech war with inferior equipment. Particular issues of concern in this area include concealing troop movements from an adversary's all-weather reconnaissance capabilities and engaging in night fighting without night vision equipment. More important, many military journal articles propose exploitation of enemy weaknesses and developing "magic weapons" (*shashoujian*) to inflict surprise attacks that overcome inherent weaknesses in the PLA. To many PLA officers, this demonstrates the continued relevance of the concept of "overcoming the inferior with the superior."

Three Basic Forms of Warfare

Mao described three types of warfare that could be used to oppose a superior enemy: (1) mobile warfare (*yundong zhan*), (2) positional warfare (*zhendi zhan*), and (3) guerrilla warfare (*youji zhan*). Each of these forms of warfare also includes related "magic" weapons (*fabao*). The PLA believes that each of these forms of warfare can be improved on and applied to modern high-tech warfare.

In mobile warfare, modern technology permits much faster troop movements that call for the establishment of fist units (*quantou budui*), RRUs (*kuaisu fanying budui*), and rapid logistic units (*kuaisu baozhang budui*). In positional warfare, the PLA abstracted the Maoist prescription for “leaner defense” (*xianshi fangyu*) by digging tunnels and hardening shelters on the battlefield to the more general proposition of “resolutely defending” (*jianshou fangyu*) “key points” (*yaodianqun*). Accordingly, strengthening air defenses and improving the survivability of China’s C3I nodes and prosperous coastal cities have become a top priority. Even guerrilla warfare has a role to play in high-tech warfare, if adapted to modern circumstances. For example, Mao believed that guerrillas could play an important role in support of regular army operations while Deng called for the provision of local militia with anti-tank missiles. However, the PLA expects that guerrilla warfare under high-tech conditions will rely on professional soldiers and not on the militia or the masses. For example, specialized electronic jamming units and air assault teams are necessary for the successful prosecution of future warfare.

Mobilization of the Masses

For Mao, mobilization of the masses was the key to the formation of a united front that could carry out the communist revolution to a successful conclusion. Today, however, China’s security must depend on a professional standing army able to fight and win wars under high-tech conditions. Nevertheless, PLA strategists believe that China’s landmass and population can still serve as a useful deterrent. For while high-tech warfare may take place on China’s borders and in its territorial waters, an enemy must still invade the mainland if a decisive victory is to be gained. In Mao’s day, this deterrent was encapsulated in the phrase “three combinations” (i.e., the regular army or *zhengguijun*, guerrillas or *youjidui*, and the militia or *minbing*). Under modern conditions, China could still draw an enemy into a sea of people composed of the People’s Liberation Army, the People’s Armed Police, and the reserve forces—an updated version of the three combinations.

While these revisions represent genuine changes in Chinese military doctrine, it should not be overlooked that many PLA officers regard these developments merely as a continuation and perfection of existing doctrine. For example, one military analyst notes:

We must exploit new means of war (*zhanfa*) to win people’s war under modern conditions, but general principles will remain the same. On the overall guiding thought (*zong de zhidao sixiang*), we still insist on striking key points within a general operations

framework, and emphasizing the power of people's war. On the guidance of operations, we still emphasize the annihilation of the enemy by a concentration of force and local superiority. On the form of operations, we still practice interior defense and exterior line offense, as well as positional and guerrilla operations. On tactics, we still need to uphold our specialty of close war fighting under night cover. As long as we can initiate new ideas based on traditional principles and crystallize them to meet the requirements of modern warfare, we will be able to gain victory in future people's war.

Jiang Zemin's Doctrinal Refinement

In the past 20 years, China has adjusted its military policies in accordance with its perceptions of the international strategic balance and its domestic politico-economic environment. For example, the Enlarged Meeting of the Party Central Military Commission in 1985 marked a dramatic shift in China's threat perceptions, as the resulting "strategic transformation" (*zhanlue yi zhuan* or *zhanlue zhuanbian*) demonstrated. Subsequently, Chinese military doctrine continued to develop as PLA thinkers and planners grappled with the theoretical question of how future warfare will be conducted under "modern conditions."

The performance of the United States in the Gulf War illustrated the devastating effectiveness of high-tech weaponry against a less-advanced opponent. Since then, "winning local wars under high-tech conditions" has become a ubiquitous fixture in any discussion on contemporary military affairs in China. However, the widespread usage of this term shorn of the traditional people's war prefix raises the question of whether this formulation represents a deliberate departure by Jiang from Mao's legacy of people's war. It also raises the question of whether Jiang's high-tech doctrine is a departure from Deng's doctrine of people's war under modern conditions. An examination of several key Chinese military concepts places us in a better position to answer these questions.

The Two Armaments (liangge wuzhuang)

This idea calls for imbuing the PLA with two kinds of intangible resources. First, arm the PLA with thought and theory (*sixiang lilun wuzhuang*)—according to Jiang Zemin, the PLA will uphold Deng Xiaoping's theories on army building in the new era as the guiding principle for defense modernization and military development. Second, arm the PLA with high-tech knowledge (*gaokeji zhishi*

wuzhuang)—when Deng initiated his defense modernization program in the early-1980s, he stressed the importance of modern technology and military education. Jiang merely added high technology to Deng’s previously articulated reforms.

The Two Fundamental Transformations (liangge genbenxing de zhuangbian)

This concept encapsulates the PLA’s assessment that the geographical loci and nature of its most likely missions have changed from the heartland to China’s borders and from open-ended full-scale conflicts to those limited in terms of objectives, space, time, and means. As such, the first “transformation” states that “the base point of preparation for military struggle in the new era, is to shift from conventional (local) warfare under ordinary conditions to winning local war under modern technology, especially high-technology conditions.”

It is important to note that the concept of local war first arose in the mid-1980s and was not formulated by Jiang Zemin. According to the PLA, local war means warfare with limited objectives and warfare fought with constraints on space, time, and means. However, the PLA should still strive to “consciously control its limited objective, maintain freedom of action within limited space, make best use of limited time, and define limited means by high-technology weapons.”

While at least one book published by the PLA states that winning local wars under high-tech conditions is the military strategic guideline of the new era (*xinshiqi junshi zhanlue fangzhen*) and represents a significant step in the development of the active defense strategy, what remains unclear, however, is whether the concept of winning local wars under high-tech conditions should be considered a doctrinal change or an adjustment of military strategy. As such, this question may represent a fruitful area for future research.

Regarding army building in general, the emphasis should shift from quantity to quality and from relying on manpower to utilizing technology. As such, Deng reduced the PLA by one million soldiers while stressing the importance of improving military education and upgrading weapon systems. His view that “science and technology are the top sources of productivity” remains the most quoted phrase by Chinese political and military leaders today. Jiang Zemin’s slogans of “building an army with quality” (*zhiliang jianjun*) and “strengthening the army with science and technology” (*keji qiangjun*) can be directly linked to Deng’s initial emphasis on the role of science and technology.

The Five Sentences (wujuhua)

According to Jiang the PLA must possess the following five qualities (*xin shiqi jundui jianshe de zongyaoqiu*) in the new era: political qualifications, military competence, good work style, strict discipline, and adequate logistics. These principles are reminiscent of the old tensions between being “red” and “expert.” For while Deng set about transforming the PLA into a modern and professional army and stressed the need for experts, he never contemplated yielding the absolute authority of the Party over the PLA. In Jiang’s five sentences, one finds that three of the five (political qualifications, good work style, and strict discipline) relate to political indoctrination. Thus, we see that the ideal of soldiers who are both red and expert endures.

Conclusion

In the past 20 years, Chinese military doctrine evolved from people’s war to people’s war under modern conditions, which began with Deng’s defense modernization and marked a sharp divergence from traditional Maoist doctrine. The Gulf War served only to further illustrate the need for the PLA to transform itself from a large but backwards army to a smaller, more competent, and technologically sophisticated one. Jiang’s emphasis on high technology should be seen as a refinement to Deng’s doctrine and not as a departure from it. Therefore, if we consider Mao’s doctrine of people’s war to be “old wine in old bottles” and Deng’s real departure from Maoist orthodoxy suitably camouflaged as “new wine in old bottles,” then Jiang’s refinement can be called “new wine in new bottles with an old label.”

Chinese political leaders and military researchers may find it convenient to constantly inject new concepts into existing military doctrine by appealing to the political liturgy of Mao and Deng. However, in the past 20 years, the gap between doctrinal innovation and actual military capability has significantly widened. The PLA under Mao was an army in which “what you saw was what you got.” But now when Chinese leaders speak of winning local wars under high-tech conditions by engaging in five-dimensional warfare and launching surgical strikes against an enemy’s C3I nodes, the PLA becomes an army in which “what you think is what you cannot do.” One PLA officer described this phenomenon by citing two Chinese maxims:

- Great ambition exists when the objective is unclear (*mubiao buming zhixiangda*).
- Plentiful ideas surface when the initiative is undetermined (*xinli meishu dianziduo*).

It seems that this debate within the PLA will continue well into the next century.