China's Use of Military Force

Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March

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Introduction

SINCE the mid-1990s, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been identified as a looming strategic threat.[1] Some have asserted that China is "on the warpath."[2] There have also been concerns about a Chinese military buildup – rising defense budgets, reported actual or attempted purchases of foreign military hardware, as well as indigenous defense research and development efforts. In terms of military capabilities, most experts contend that China poses only a modest challenge to the region and the world – at least in the short term.[3] Others see more serious problems posed by China's military modernization.[4]

Even if one goes by the modest assessments of China's military modernization, this does not mean Beijing can be written off as essentially harmless. Recent events demonstrate that China is more than capable of disrupting regional stability. During the 1995–6 Taiwan Strait Crisis, for example, troop exercises and missile tests by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) forced the rerouting of international air and sea traffic in the region. The crisis sent tremors throughout East Asia, and the United States felt it necessary to dispatch two aircraft carrier battle groups to the area. For some analysts, the strait crisis confirmed that China's military is a "nuisance threat."[5] But any threat from China is likely to be a *big* nuisance; even a weak or modestly armed China can cause major disruptions. And weak states, as Arthur Waldron notes, do start wars.[6]

Considerable attention has been given to China's assertive rhetoric and militant behavior, particularly its saber rattling during 1995–6 in the Taiwan Strait and its military moves in the South China Sea. Beijing has been depicted as increasingly belligerent, often attributed to the undue pressure of hawkish and hardline soldiers on moderate and mild-mannered statesmen.[7] This perception is in direct conflict with the earlier image of China: an ancient culture possessing a weak martial tradition (especially in contrast to Japan); a predisposition to seek nonviolent solutions to problems of statecraft,

as exemplified by the thinking of sages like Sun Tzu and Confucius; and a defensive-mindedness, favoring sturdy fortifications over expansionism and invasion.[8]

Which of the two dominant images best represents China's propensity to use force? Is China more belligerent today than it was in earlier years? Are Chinese soldiers more hawkish than Chinese statesmen? And, if so, do they defer to the wishes of political leaders?

This is a study about China's use of military force. More specifically, this study is about the impact of Chinese strategic culture, civil-military culture, and military organizational culture on decisions to employ armed force at home and abroad. I contend that China's strategic culture does not reflect a single defensive, conflict-averse tradition symbolized by the Great Wall, and that post-1949 China's civil-military culture is not as harmonious or as one-dimensional as the Long March depiction suggests. China's military and civilian leaders do not approach decisions to use force at home or abroad from a single perspective. Rather, China's strategic behavior is more accurately conceived of as the outcome of the interplay between two distinct and enduring strands of strategic culture that are filtered through an evolving civil-military culture and tempered by military culture.

Earlier depictions of a nonmilitary, pacifist China, as this study will show, are more myth than reality. China has always been prepared to employ force to further policy goals.[9] It did not suddenly become bellicose in the 1990s. China's strategic disposition has not changed fundamentally; rather, its civil-military culture has shifted. It is this latter transformation that seems responsible for creating an impression among many observers that China has become more belligerent. Moreover, it is the Chinese statesman who often has been willing to use military force, and the Chinese soldier who invariably has been more reluctant.

CULTURAL LAYERS AND LINKAGES

What is China's propensity to use military force in the twenty-first century? Three concepts are particularly useful in addressing this question: strategic culture, civil-military culture, and organizational culture. Strategic culture, or the set of fundamental and enduring assumptions about the role of war in human affairs and the efficacy of applying force held by a country's political and military elites,[10] has been useful in addressing this and other questions.[11] Also central to addressing this question is civil-military relations, or "civil-military culture," defined here as the distribution of values, norms,

and beliefs within a country regarding military doctrine and the identity, format, and function of the military in domestic and foreign affairs.[12] Civil-military culture is widely seen as a critical dimension for analyzing post-Deng China.[13]

Though strategic culture and civil-military culture have become central topics in China studies, both are fraught with controversy. Scholars disagree on the fundamental tradition and orientation of Chinese statecraft and on the conceptualization of military politics in the People's Republic. Related to a country's civil-military culture is the military's organizational culture that affects how soldiers act in crises. The military's values, norms, and beliefs "shape [the] collective understandings" of individuals within the institution.[14] The military tends to be a particularly cohesive corporate entity that possesses a distinct organizational culture.

The core bailiwick of the armed forces is usually defined as the "management of violence." Strategic culture entails collectively held assumptions about the nature of war. It follows therefore that strategic and civil-military cultures are closely linked. Though many scholars acknowledge that civil-military culture has an important influence on the impact of strategic culture, on defense policy, and on the employment of military force,[15] the precise nature of the relationships remains unclear.

If cultures are conceived of as complex and multilayered phenomena that can exert powerful influences on the way individuals behave and how human interactions are structured, it is very likely that in any given situation an individual or group of individuals will be influenced by more than one culture. If, for example, a military commander is ordered to employ his troops in the streets to confront his fellow citizens, he is likely to be affected by multiple layers of culture. Not only would the commander's response be conditioned by his country's political culture but also by its strategic culture, civil-military culture, and military organizational culture. These different cultures might be conceptualized as component parts of a multilayer cake, each different layer prepared as part of the same recipe. While each layer has its own distinct texture and flavor, the taste of the cake comes from a combination of all the layers. Just as it would be inaccurate to judge the taste of the cake from sampling only one layer, so it would be imprecise to analyze strategic culture and declare it the crucial element in determining when and how a country uses force. Using the layer conception, on the foundation layer one would find "political culture," on the second layer "strategic culture," on the third layer "civil-military culture," and on the fourth or top layer "organizational culture."[16]

Political Culture

Political culture comprises the patterns of behavior, values, norms, and beliefs concerning politics and society held by the people of a country.[17] Recently scholars have conceived of political culture in broader, more holistic terms and as a more interactive dynamic than earlier conceptions. This newer interpretation views political culture as very fluid, and the individual as much more than a passive subject of political socialization. Political culture now tends to be seen as an arena for and repertoire of discourse and activity for both state and societal actors. Today, manifestations of political culture include symbols, rituals, and language.[18] In each country, the political culture is the bedrock upon which the layers of strategic culture, civil-military culture, and military culture within society are embedded. This book limits its examination of Chinese political culture to understandings of the military profession.

Strategic Culture

Strategic culture is an important concept in understanding the security policies of different states. The concept was employed during the Cold War to explain national differences in the strategic outlook and behavior of the two superpowers.[19] In the 1990s, international relations theorists incorporated a cultural approach in their analyses.[20] Strategic culture has only recently been explicitly incorporated into scholarship on Chinese foreign and military policy.[21] In fact, cultural interpretations have been at the core of the majority of studies of China's foreign relations, although a few scholars use the term *strategic culture*.[22]

The Great Wall is not merely a symbol of the many glorious accomplishments of China's ancient civilization, it also epitomizes, for many scholars, Chinese preference for defense over offense, positional warfare over mobile warfare, and maintenance over expansion. The wall is held up as the prime example of a Chinese strategic tradition that is very different from that of Western countries. Waldron's research suggests that what we now call the Great Wall appears to date back not more than two thousand years but rather some six hundred years to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Although Waldron's path-breaking study has gone a long way toward debunking the myth of China's cultural predilection for wall building, this perception persists.[23]

Moreover, belying China's pacifist defensive-minded reputation, research by Alastair Iain Johnston contends that China possesses a stark realist strategic tradition that views war as a central feature of interstate relations.[24] Others contend that under communism China developed into a revolutionary state

more prone than other countries to resort to war to resolve conflicts.[25] These recent studies radically differ from many earlier case studies of China's use of force, which tend to highlight the moderate, defensive nature of a PRC reluctant to use military force and viewing war only as a last resort.[26] Such disparate conclusions beg the question of which interpretation best fits reality.

This study contends that two strands of strategic culture, both shaped by an ancient and enduring civilization, exist: a distinctly Chinese pacifist and defensive-minded strand, and a Realpolitik strand favoring military solutions and offensive action.[27] Both interact, and their combined impact is mitigated by a civil-military culture shared by China's soldiers and statesmen.

Civil-Military Culture

Civil-military culture transcends the boundary between comparative politics and international relations. Usually the word *relations* is used, but in this book, the term *culture* is substituted because this term suggests the inclusion of not only linkages between civil and military spheres, but also patterns of behavior, shared values, norms, and beliefs. What is civil and what is military is not so much separate and segregated but rather intertwined and enmeshed. And civil-military culture is embedded in a country's broader political culture.[28] More-over, while the old term implied that there might be one "correct" configuration of civil-military relations, the new term suggests there may be considerable crossnational variation between civil-military cultures.

As Thomas Berger shows, "political-military cultures" are very important in determining the defense policies of states.[29] And Elizabeth Kier, despite her primary focus on organizational culture, recognizes the importance of broader cultures within society in influencing outcomes in the domestic political arena. Indeed, Kier contends, "... the interaction between the constraints [set by culture(s)] in the domestic political arena, and the military's organizational cul-ture shapes the choice between offensive and defensive military doctrines."[30] In effect, Kier draws attention to civil-military culture.

Civil-military culture has been employed, particularly since World War II, initially to explain political outcomes notably in the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Attention increasingly focused on interpreting the political dynamics of communist states, and a thriving subfield emerged in comparative communism.[31] While in the post–Cold War era the subject of military politics may seem less central to an understanding of the domestic and foreign affairs of many countries, it remains critical for contemporary China.[32] Some schol-ars see a unique Chinese construct of civil-military culture,[33] others see a dis-cernible variant of a communist system,[34] and still others see a Chinese military

arrangement that has similar commonalities with other large countries with sizeable armed forces.[35]

The Long March symbolizes to many scholars a distinct civil-military elite configuration that either (1) firmly established the mechanism of party control over the army, or (2) forged a close-knit coalition of like-minded civil and military leaders.[36] Under the former conception, China's PLA is viewed as under the total control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), consistent with Mao's oft-quoted dictum, "the Party commands the gun but the gun must never command the Party." Under the latter conception, more popular with scholars of Chinese military politics, military and political leaders in the People's Republic form a single monolithic elite forged in a protracted armed struggle for power – and hold nearly identical views on most matters. Some scholars contend that the PLA does not even constitute a separate coherent interest group,[37] and Chinese soldiers do not have a perspective of organizational culture distinct from that of Chinese statesmen. When differences of opinion are evident, they are perceived as occurring along factional lines that transcend the civil-military dichotomy.[38]

The Long March does highlight the intertwining of civil and military in communist China – the overlapping of party and army leaders. Long Marchers, such as Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, were often seen as both civil and military figures. Indeed, it can be difficult to label a particular individual as either soldier or civilian. Under Mao and Deng (1949–97), China's strategic doctrine and decision-making are seen as the work of one man – especially under Mao – and one elite group largely undifferentiated by bureaucratic interests or professional perspectives.

In fact, this depiction of a completely homogeneous Chinese leadership and the characterization of the party firmly controlling the gun are oversimplified and ignore the broader evolution of Chinese civil-military culture. Thus, as the Long March has been glorified and has passed into the realm of myth, so the depiction of a cohesive civil-military leadership has become increasingly irrelevant to contemporary Chinese foreign and domestic politics.

As this book will show, analyses of the attitudes of civil and military elites in the Mao, Deng, and Jiang Zemin eras reveal notable differentiation along civil-military lines and considerable numbers of leaders with career paths exclusively within military affairs after 1949. These distinctions have only become more pronounced over time. The two prime examples that blur the distinction, Mao and Deng, are both deceased now, and China's most prominent leaders in the wake of the Sixteenth Party Congress in November 2002, President Jiang Zemin and General Secretary Hu Jintao have no claim at all on military experience or identity – nor did Jiang or Hu participate in the Long March.

Organizational Culture

Military doctrines, policies, decisions, and employments are affected by cultures other than strategic and civil-military. Kier demonstrates that the organizational cultures of armed forces exert a significant impact on military doctrine.[39] Furthermore, if political culture entails the study of the "mindsets" of political actors,[40] one might expect distinctive types of belief systems based on differences in an actor's past experience, training, and organizational environment. Thus, military leaders likely hold perspectives distinct from those of political leaders. In other words, soldiers possess their own particular organizational culture or cultures.[41] There is significant variation among the military establishments of different countries as well as notable commonalities.[42]

The military is now an essential ingredient in understanding the dynamics of China's internal politics and in assessing Beijing's foreign relations after Deng. The PLA is now widely assumed to have a major impact on political outcomes, but analysts are often at a loss to demonstrate this in specific cases, particularly in foreign policy.[43] Nonetheless, in the 1990s, both individual Chinese soldiers and the military as an institution were identified as aggressively advocating harsh and bellicose policies.[44]

Some scholars argue that militaries tend to advocate offensive doctrines because doing so is in their corporate interests; a military will receive more government funding and gain greater prestige. It is the civilian political leadership that provides crucial restraints on these bellicose impulses.[45] Other studies challenge these findings and suggest that while soldiers in the United States and other countries do hold belief systems and attitudes that are distinct from those of nonmilitary officials, the former are actually far more conservative and cautious than the latter.[46] Further research indicates that soldiers do tend to respond more cautiously than their civilian counterparts to decisions to commit troops to combat.[47]

There is widespread agreement that the PLA is becoming a more significant and influential institution in China's security policy.[48] Of course, the PLA has always had substantial political clout in the PRC by virtue of its intimate relationship with the CCP (see Chapter 3). And the death, in February 1997, of Deng, Beijing's paramount leader for almost two decades, has essentially assured the military of continued influence, since his successor, Jiang, has none of the considerable military credentials of Deng and needs to cultivate a closer relationship with the PLA.

Surprisingly, given the widespread recognition of the PLA as a central institution in the PRC, studies of both China's security policy and Beijing's use of force have tended to ignore or downplay these areas as civil-military issues.[49]

In fact, broader studies of Chinese foreign policy also give little attention to the military.[50] There is a dearth of studies on the PLA's involvement in foreign policy crises where the use of force is weighed.[51] This inattention to the PLA is also evident when one examines domestic politics. There are a few important exceptions, most obviously the PLA's crushing of the popular protests in Beijing in 1989.[52] On the broader subject of the PLA's intervention in domestic politics, there is also limited coverage.[53] Most of this scholarship is focused on the Cultural Revolution, and even these studies do not address the actual use of the PLA.[54]

Research Strategies

The scholarship on China's propensity to use force seems to be shaped to a considerable extent by one's research strategy and the data one taps. To date, scholars have concentrated on one of three approaches:[55]

(1) Analyzing the influence of enduring cultural or psychocultural traditions
(2) Studying the content of Chinese military doctrines and statements
(3) Examining the actual record of military employments

The first approach studies the question from a cultural or psychocultural perspective, invariably contending that China's strategic outlook is colored by a unique cultural milieu. Typically these studies conclude that China traditionally has been pacifist and averse to conflict, resorting to war only after all else fails.[56] This research, however, tends to ignore how precisely culture impacts strategic choice and action.

The second approach examines doctrines and/or the writings and pronouncements of senior Chinese civil and military leaders.[57] These scholars reach mixed conclusions about whether China is bellicose or pacifist. Their enterprise is complicated; for those who study doctrine, it is sometimes a subjective judgment as to whether a doctrine is best labeled offensive or defensive. Moreover, the pitfall in focusing on formal doctrines is that these may be irrelevant discourses that impose apparent coherence and consistency on actions that are in reality neither coherent or consistent. The danger in relying heavily on official statements is that these may express empty, high-minded rhetoric to mask unprincipled motives and justify erratic behaviors.

The third approach examines actual cases of the employment of force. The overwhelming majority of studies are qualitative – examining the particular circumstances of one or more cases and looking for patterns. Few have used quantitative methods – but two such studies conclude that China is far more willing than many other countries to use force to resolve a foreign policy crisis.[58]

Early case studies, based on limited evidence, stress cautiousness, the aim to deter a prospective foe and avoid combat.[59] More recent scholarship, using an array of newly available Chinese sources, stresses Beijing's predisposition or willingness to use force.[60]

This book presents the first study to combine all three approaches. The goal is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of China's propensity to use force through an examination of the linkages between culture, doctrinal writings and statements, and actual military employments. First, Chinese strategic culture and civil-military culture are examined. Then, in the core of this study, a comparative analysis of five cases of the use of force by China at home and abroad is presented. Not only is the external use of military force examined, but also China's deployment of military force internally is analyzed – something other studies ignore. To consider strategic culture as a variable affecting only inter-state relations is to erect a rather arbitrary divide. The increasing incidence of intrastate warfare in the post–Cold War world dramatically underscores the need for more attention to the domestic use of force by governments (or "intrastate security").[61]

<p style="text-align:center">OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS</p>

Chapter 2 argues that neither the Confucian-Mencian nor the parabellum strands of Chinese strategic culture, identified by Alastair Iain Johnston, alone is sufficient to encompass the richness and variety of China's strategic tradition. These two strands of strategic culture interact to produce what I dub a "Chinese Cult of Defense." The interplay between the two strands of strategic culture produces the paradoxical outcome of idealist, principled, high-minded logic (the Confucian school) combined with hard Realpolitik security policies and regular decisions to call out the troops (the Realpolitik school).

Chapter 3 briefly examines the status of the military in Chinese political culture and then focuses on civil-military culture as an intermediate layer of culture sandwiched between strategic and organizational cultures. An analysis of doctrine, civil-military format, military identity, and organizational function reveals dramatic changes in each dimension from the Mao era to the Jiang era.

If a Chinese military culture is present, it should be most clearly observable in times of crises. This should be particularly so in instances when a state uses force as an instrument of policy, because the concept of coercive diplomacy is at the heart of the different core beliefs of soldiers and statesmen.[62] Thus I examine as cases studies the largest troop employments in three different eras. Each instance involved the same "policy output": the use of force.[63] The use of force is defined as the employment of overt military power, including explicit,

credible threats of military action backed by troop movements, exercises, missile or artillery tests, or the construction or expansion of military installations in a border area. Thus, Chinese saber rattling in the Taiwan Strait in 1995–6 and construction in 1995 of a naval station on Mischief Reef in the South China Sea – territory also claimed by the Philippines – are both examples of the use of force.[64] This is the realm of coercive diplomacy; neither actual combat nor a formal declaration of war is necessary.[65]

Five cases are selected from the fifty-year course of PRC history spanning the rule of three different leaders. Two cases are from the era of Mao (1949 to the mid-1970s), two cases are from the era of Deng (1978 to the mid-1990s), and one case from the Jiang era (since the mid-1990s). In each of the first two periods, the most significant foreign instance and domestic instance of the use of force are analyzed. The final case is the 1995–6 Taiwan Strait Crisis that occurred when Deng was still alive. Deng, however, was seriously ill and not involved in the policy-making or decision-making at all. In effect, this was the first significant use of force in the post-Deng era.

Chapter 4 examines China's decision to intervene in Korea. The challenge is to reconcile the image of an aggressive and adventurist Beijing depicted in recent accounts of the Korean War with earlier studies that stress the caution and restraint shown by Beijing in late 1950.

The PLA's role in the Cultural Revolution is examined in Chapter 5. The dual role format of China's civil-military elite meant that any intense intra-party conflict would inevitably infect the military. Yet, the slow and tortuous process by which the PLA was gradually brought in to restore order during the tumultuous Cultural Revolution is poorly understood. The PLA's strong desire to remain aloof from the turmoil eroded as the military gradually came to view the escalating societal violence as propelling China into anarchy. When Mao ultimately ordered the PLA to restore order, the military was largely united on the necessity of intervention.

Chapter 6 examines China's month-long war with Vietnam in early 1979. Many analysts regard Beijing's use of the term "self-defense counterattack" as merely a rhetorical fig leaf to cover a case of blatant aggression. Yet many Chinese leaders sincerely believed the action was defensive – that they were only driven to it by repeated Vietnamese border incursions and other hostile acts by Hanoi against Beijing.

Chapter 7 analyzes the tragic and violent end to the student-led prodemocracy demonstrations in Beijing in June 1989. Initially CCP and PLA leaders were divided on how to deal with the student protests. Then they adopted an approach of gradual escalating measures to deal with the protests to compel the demonstrators to withdraw. Ultimately, when the protests continued and the

specter of chaos loomed, most military leaders concluded that decisive action had to be taken.

Chapter 8 analyzes the most recent crisis in the Taiwan Strait. The confrontation remains little understood, and the potential for misunderstanding and misperception between China and the United States is alarming. The hawkishness displayed by military figures during the crisis reflects fundamental differences between military and civilian approaches to the practice of coercive diplomacy. It also reflects intense PLA feelings on the subject of Taiwan, and the clear civil-military consensus that the missile tests and military exercises were a strictly controlled "show of force."

This study concludes with an assessment of the influence of cultures and a reexamination of China's use of force. Different layers of culture explain different things. Strategic culture accounts for the continuity – a fundamental propensity to use force; civil-military culture accounts for how and where force is used; and organizational culture accounts for the existence of a military perspective distinct from a civilian one.