



M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.

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Last fall, the *New York Times* published a story on China's red lines regarding Taiwan, highlighting the apparent determination of the Chinese government to recover the island.¹ As military analysts ponder the significance of China's actions in the

¹ Steven Lee Myers, "China Ramps Up a War of Words, Warning the U.S. of its Red Lines," *New York Times*, 5 October 2020.

Taiwan Strait and the determination of the mainland to follow through with its plan, they will need analytical tools and historical reference points to guide them in that assessment. The book under review is a timely study of China's evolving military strategy in meeting such challenges from abroad. It can act as a manual to decrypt future Chinese behavior in the Western Pacific region and allow countries like Canada to take an informed stand on current and future Chinese challenges.

M. Taylor Fravel finds the theoretical literature on the sources of change in military strategy lacking. This literature has tended to focus on a small number of cases. Furthermore, the sample is largely limited to (Western) democratic societies such as the United States and the United Kingdom. It is further hampered by a focus on two historical periods: the years between the First World War and the Second as well as the post-Cold War period. A study of the former Soviet Union and China is also lacking. In the context of this state of affairs, the China case presents a virtual gold mine of evidence and experience to consider and contribute to the literature as well as shed some light on patterns in China itself and help military analysts interpret with greater accuracy Chinese behavior and intentions as a looming confrontation appears on the horizon.

Professor Fravel argues that a better understanding of Chinese military strategy comes from a historical perspective, focusing on its evolution over time. While scholars have done substantial and valuable work in this field, referring to Paul Godwin, Li Na, and David Finkelstein, Fravel believes that the focus on strategy during specific periods of time hampered efforts to appreciate what was new about Chinese military strategy and identify more clearly what factors played a role in influencing decision-making on military strategy.

Fravel focuses on the Chinese communist period, pre and post-1949. He found that this period offers a rich inventory of data and experiences on the evolution of strategy and will allow Western scholarship to test their own current theories using Chinese data. In that regard, Fravel benefited from a rich inventory of Chinese sources, including memoirs, biographies, reports, speeches, and other historical records more recently available. The existence of and access to these sources greatly enhance Western observers' ability to understand Chinese military behavior as well as the evolution of Chinese military strategy over time.

Fravel's argument is made up of two parts. The first part "focuses on the motivations for pursuing a change in strategy," while the second part looks at the "mechanism by which a change in strategy occurs, which is shaped by the structure of civil-military relations."⁽⁴⁾ This dual focus is supported by looking at military strategies between 1927 and 1949 (Chinese civil war) and then the four instances when such changes occurred after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) assumed power in 1949 (1956, 1964, 1980, and 1993). Fravel concludes that major changes occur when the conduct of warfare witnesses a major shift (usually in a foreign context). In these instances, the change in military strategy occurs only when the CCP is united. If the Party is divided, no change in military strategy is observed or is at least delayed. For foreign observers, analysis of Chinese military strategy involves keeping an eye on internal party debates as well as domestic politics.

The book opens with a chapter outlining what constitutes military strategy, also known in China as strategic guidelines (*zhanlue fangzhen* – 战略方针), and what its effect is on operational doctrine, force structure, and training. We learn what factors shape military strategy such as external threats, new approaches to conducting wars (i.e. Gulf War in 1991), or new missions assigned to the military. This chapter is also a form of a lexicon of terms, such as what constitutes major or minor changes in strategy using historical examples to illustrate such changes.

As Fravel reviews the literature on civil-military relations, he highlights the distinct type of relations that exists in socialist states. He concludes that we should instead refer to "party-military" relations.⁽¹⁹⁾ Communist parties have always exercised tight control of the military and this is true in China as well. If at all, the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) involvement in politics has always been in support of the party.²

The pre-1949 period was particularly interesting for this reviewer. As Fravel notes, Chinese communists were at war from the early days of the formation of the party. Thus for over twenty years (1927-1949) before assuming political power, they

² There is an entirely separate apparatus for domestic security in China, including a force called the People's Armed Police (PAP). As the PLA conducted extensive downsizing in the 1980s and 1990s, many units were transferred to the PAP. The best overview on these various "armed forces" is found in Dennis J. Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2006).

forged their combat experience fighting the Nationalists as well as the Japanese. For a large portion of this period, the Red Army (as the PLA was originally called) had to make up in ingenuity what it lacked in technological and numerical parity with its adversaries. It chose tactics and strategies that allowed it to avoid suicidal confrontations or other bloody battles while inflicting on its enemies losses that over time cancelled their superiority in numbers and weapons. It may be wise to remember the lessons of this period as military analysts ponder the current situation.

As we read through the various chapters on the evolution of military strategy in China, one is introduced to such concepts as *active defense*, *luring the enemy in deep*, and *people's war*. The most potent term is *active defense*.(61-63) Developed during the civil war by Mao Zedong, the concept pervades all subsequent military strategies. While it does much to explain at least in part the success of the PLA during the civil war, it is not clear to Fravel how this term would apply today. Active defense makes particular sense when Chinese forces were at a disadvantage technologically and numerically against an enemy. How would it play now that the Chinese military is working its way toward greater parity with the US military? Fravel is hampered in that effort due to a lack of documents covering the more recent period.

While the 1956, 1980, and 1993 military strategies clearly appear to have been influenced by outside factors, the 1964 strategy stands as an exception. In 1956, China anticipated that the United States and Nationalist troops based in Taiwan might attempt to recover the mainland. In 1980, the Soviet Union represented the bigger threat. Its invasion of Afghanistan and its massive presence along China's northern border forced Chinese leaders to adapt further their strategy. In 1993, while there was no direct threat to China, the 1991 "high-technology" Gulf War reverberated and was a wake-up call for Chinese leaders. In 1964, however, Mao made use of border threats on the southwest border (India) and the US presence in Vietnam to push for a change in strategy. In fact, the internal situation was evolving in a direction inimical to Mao's hold on power. Fravel makes a convincing argument that there was no foundation for a change in military strategy at the time. Mao challenged his opponents by suggesting they were holding on to a strategy that did not reflect the current threat assessment. This exception to the rule suggests that the domestic situation may play an outsize role in Chinese military thinking or at least in the politics surrounding it. The Tiananmen

events of 1989 were to be another such reminder as divisions within the political leadership delayed a reaction to the 1991 Gulf War's impact on military thinking.

Given that China was very much a developing country for most of the period covered by this book, a distinctive feature of Chinese military practices concerns its receptivity towards foreign ideas. As Fravel narrates China's military relations with the Soviet Union, it clearly appears that while there were useful lessons to be drawn from the Soviet experience as well as its development of an indigenous weapons industry, the Chinese military leadership was also fairly critical of their usefulness in the Chinese context. Chinese military leaders (Peng Dehuai comes to mind) were critical enough to appreciate the pertinence or inapplicability of foreign ideas and practices in China, including the American experience. In that regard, they did not discriminate based on ideology.³

Professor Fravel has rendered a valuable service to the community of scholars involved in Chinese military affairs. His extensive use of Chinese sources has made available to Western scholars a huge amount of information that is inaccessible to most observers who cannot read Chinese. This raises an important point about our ability to explore and assess Chinese military thinking. In an era where social media plays an oversized role in shaping public opinion, the barrier posed by language constrains our ability to further mutual understanding. Scholars such as Professor Fravel thus contribute to shedding light on a military power about which we still know too little.⁴

While this book enhances considerably our understanding of Chinese military thinking, for anyone familiar with current events involving China, it is still only part of the story. Much has been written about Chinese surreptitious activities abroad, including here in Canada. The activities are also part of a larger *war* that is not reflected

³ China has made substantial progress in building an indigenous capacity in terms of a military industry. Two of the best accounts on this issue are Tai Ming Cheung, *Fortifying China: The Struggle to Build a Modern Defense Economy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009) and Tai Ming Cheung, ed., *Forging China's Military Might: A New Framework for Assessing Innovation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

⁴ A useful companion to this book which appeared in 2019 covering the Xi Jinping period and is referred to in Professor Fravel's book is Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N. D. Yang and Joel Wuthnow, eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2019). It can be accessed here: <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Publications/Books/Chairman-Xi-Remakes-the-PLA/>.

in the theoretical treatment of military strategy. Yet, such activities do play a role, however difficult to assess, in furthering the political objectives of the respective powers.⁵

As recent events in the United States reveal, manipulation of public opinion can have dire consequences. Governments need to consider how to better immunize their respective public opinion to such manipulation. In that regard, the Chinese government spends considerable effort to educate (if that is the word) its citizens on international issues and build public opinion in support of China's position. China's public television CCTV has two programs broadcast daily (seven days a week) with two experts on each program commenting on the issue of the day.⁶ Western countries would do well to ponder how to raise the level of understanding of international issues among their respective public.

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⁵ There is an emerging literature on this subject. An extensive coverage of this type of activities in Australia can be found in Clive Hamilton, *Silent Invasion: China's Influence in Australia* (London, GB: Hardie Grant Books, 2018). A multi-country study of the phenomenon can be found in Hsu Szu-Chien and J. Michael Cole, eds., *Insidious Power: How China Undermines Global Democracy* (Manchester, GB: Eastbridge Book, 2020). For Canada, one of the better accounts can be found in Jonathan Manthorpe, *Claws of the Panda: Beijing's Campaign of Influence and Intimidation in Canada* (Toronto, ON: Cormorant Books, 2019).

⁶ One television program titled "*Both Sides of the Strait*" (my translation of Haixia Liangan – 海峡两岸) covers issues involving Taiwan. The other program, titled "*Focus Today*" (Jinri Guanzhu – 今日关注), comments frequently on military affairs involving the South China Sea and the Middle East (particularly Iran). In one episode broadcast on April 3, 2021 covering the presence of Western navy ships in the South China Sea (United States, France, India, Japan), the program host asked a commentator about the presence of the Canadian ship HMCS *Calgary* in the South China sea and its significance. The commentator dismissed the 29-year-old ship's presence as laughable (taikexiao – 太可笑). The episode in question can be viewed here: <https://tv.cctv.com/2021/04/04/VIDEZRgRRhWQzTXnxAVdQvZf210404.shtml?spm=C45305.PsWBolxpNeGm.EchLZ9n63c88.65>