

TRADITIONAL MILITARY THINKING AND THE  
DEFENSIVE STRATEGY OF CHINA

An Address at the United States War College

by

Lieutenant General Li Jijun  
Vice President of the Academy of Military Science  
The Chinese People's Liberation Army

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## FOREWORD

On July 15, 1997, the U.S. Army War College hosted a delegation from the Chinese Academy of Military Science. During the delegation's visit, Academy representatives and members of the U.S. Army War College faculty engaged in discussions ranging from professional military education to national security and military strategy. The highlight of the visit, however, was a speech delivered to the U.S. Army War College Corresponding Studies Class of 1997 by the Chinese delegation's leader, Lieutenant General Li Jijun.

As relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China continue to improve, elements of the People's Liberation Army have demonstrated their sincere willingness to work toward better professional relationships with their U.S. military counterparts. In his address, General Li set the cornerstone for a future relationship between the Academy of Military Science and the U.S. Army War College that will further those goals.

General Li graciously agreed to the publication of his address. The Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to offer it as the first in its "Letort Papers" series with the hope that it will be a vehicle by which strategists and defense professionals in the United States and elsewhere may develop a better understanding of how the Chinese view their own national security and how the People's Liberation Army sees its role in contemporary Chinese military strategy.

RICHARD H. WITHERSPOON  
Colonel, U.S. Army  
Director, Strategic Studies Institute

## INTRODUCTION

Lieutenant General Li Jijun is the Vice President of the Chinese People's Liberation Army's Academy of Military Science. The Academy is the principal military institution for developing military doctrine and strategic theory in the People's Republic of China. Established in 1958 on the northwestern side of Beijing, the Academy has a mostly military staff of about 500 full-time researchers, engineers, and specialists, some of whom are scholars of national repute and tutors of doctoral candidates.

The Academy is more than a national defense university. It conducts research on national defense issues, armed forces development, and military operations. It organizes, plans, and coordinates academic endeavors throughout the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and maintains a broad range of contacts with all PLA units. In addition to performing theoretical analyses and academic study, the Academy deploys senior faculty teams to augment operational headquarters during times of conflict. Moreover, the Academy performs consultant functions for China's Central Military Commission and the General Departments of the PLA.

The Academy's leaders have always come from the senior ranks of the PLA and have included some of China's most experienced and influential generals. General Li is no exception. He began his military career as a junior officer during the Korean War. As he matured in service to his nation, General Li earned a reputation for being one of China's most respected and influential strategists. His position of leadership in the Academy of Military Science, coupled with the Academy's ubiquitous influence over Chinese national security matters, confirms the significance of the following address.

Another factor adding relevance to General Li's remarks is how they fit in the contemporary international strategic context. In support of China's policies of "reform and opening up," the PLA is actively seeking military-to-military relations with other nations, particularly with the United States. Aware of this historic juncture, General Li delivered his address in the spirit of increased Sino-American dialogue and cooperation. The speech is interesting for what it tells us not only about Chinese strategy, but how the Chinese government views threats to its national security.

However challenging, it is important for American strategists to view the international security environment from a Chinese perspective. Only then can our dialogue be meaningful, our engagement productive, and further cooperation possible. General Li's address is a grand first step toward explaining how

China views the military dimensions of its national security strategy.

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**TRADITIONAL MILITARY THINKING AND THE  
DEFENSIVE STRATEGY OF CHINA**

Speech to the U.S. Army War College

by

Lieutenant General Li Jijun  
Vice President of the Academy of Military Science  
The Chinese People's Liberation Army

Honorable General,  
Honorable Ladies and gentlemen:

Today I am greatly honored to have this opportunity to address you on the topic of Chinese traditional military thinking and how it fits into the defensive strategy of the People's Republic of China.

From the many discussions I have had with foreign officials and scholars who have visited China, I developed the impression that they were both interested in--and puzzled by--the current Chinese defensive strategy. I advised them that, to have a better understanding of the current strategy, it is necessary to gain some knowledge of traditional Chinese military thinking, which might be taken as the roots of our current strategy. Thus, traditional thinking is a good place for me to start today.

**Traditional Chinese Military Thinking.**

Each civilization has its own notion of war which cannot help but be influenced by its cultural background. China's civilization, which dates back more than 5000 years, is one of the oldest and most admired in the world. The ancient and marvelous Chinese soil produced not only a large body of humanities, but also rendered a rich legacy in military theory. Through the cultivation and refinement of many long centuries, Chinese military thought has been crystallized into a unique system of traditional wisdom composed of the following three elements: the pursuit of peace, the high priority accorded national unity, and the emphasis on defense rather than offense.

The Chinese people are a peace-loving people. Creating the earliest written script, our ancestors used two pictographs to form the character "force" (wu). One pictograph was "stop" (zhi), the other was "spear" (ge). The underlying logic was that wars should be abandoned as an instrument, and the use of force could only be justified to stop violence. An important ancient military doctrine was to strive for the perfect victory; one

accomplished "without actual fighting, thus even massive military operations can be conducted with no casualties and damages." (*quangshen bu dou, dabin wu chuang.*) Likewise, Sun Tzu defined "subduing the enemy without fighting" as the "highest excellence" in the conduct of war. At the beginning of the 15th century, even earlier than the period of "geographic discovery" in the West, a great Chinese sailor named Zhen He led the largest fleet the world had known on seven voyages westward. These voyages, reaching as far as the eastern African coast and the entrance to the Red Sea, took Zhen He to more than 30 countries and regions. Unlike later Western explorers who conquered the land they discovered, this fleet did not subdue the newly-discovered lands by force. This was not a voyage to plunder the local populace for treasure nor was it one to establish overseas colonies. Zhen He's task, as decreed by the Emperor, simply was to convey friendship and goodwill and to promote economic and cultural exchanges between China and other Asian as well as African nations. During what is known in the West as "the Age of Discovery" there are few, if any, voyages that had intentions as benign as that of this Chinese voyage.

Over the last 150 years, however, China has been the victim of repeated aggression and pillages. Being a people who have suffered a great deal as a result of war and turmoil, the Chinese treasure peace more than most. An ancient Chinese motto admonishes people, "never do to others what you do not like others to do to you" (*ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren*). China's history and the way the Chinese people understand their own civilization militate against any desire for aggression. Over thousands of years the pursuit of peace has been thoroughly absorbed into the Chinese national psyche.

The Chinese people treasure unity. China is an entity within which many nationalities have coexisted for a very long time. People who live and breed on Chinese soil, wherever they live, to whatever nationality they belong or religion they believe in, and wherever they move, have come to identify themselves with a unified Chinese culture and nation. Embracing numerous subcultures, the Chinese culture is one so compatible and tolerant that different beliefs and customs can be readily accommodated and cultivated within it. That China has never experienced religious wars as bloody as those that took place in Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries bears witness to the greatness of Chinese culture.

China is a nation that has withstood the vicissitudes of over 5000 years of history. During those 5 millennia, more than 6000 wars, both large and small, have been fought. A majority of the wars have been fought for the unification of the nation and the harmonic coexistence of the various nationalities. There have also been a number of wars against foreign invaders and to stop

the aggression of others against us. At any particular time, no matter how divided the nation might be and how antagonistic different peoples might feel toward each other, the final result would invariably be the emergence of a more comprehensively reunified China, with reconciliation among different nationalities. Those who devoted themselves to the reunification of the nation in time of war and turbulence have left their names in history as great statesmen and soldiers whose thoughts and deeds had profound impact on later generations.

The Chinese people are a people who emphasize defense rather than offense. Statements stressing defensive military actions are numerous throughout classic Chinese military literature. An ancient Chinese thinker, Mo Zi, who lived 5 centuries before Jesus Christ, came up with the concept of "non-offense" (*fei gong*) advocating responsive rather than provocative actions. The defensive tradition has materialized itself into the Great Wall of China, one of the seven wonders of the world. It was built in the heartland of China to protect the agrarian communities from harassment from the northern nomadic tribes. The Great Wall, however, was not a marker of national boundary. For the majority of time, such a defensive tradition brought prosperity to the Chinese people and fostered good relations with our neighbors. However, the feudal rulers of China turned more and more corrupt, especially after the 19th century. Instead of inheriting and updating the old traditions, they allowed them to ossify and then applied them rigidly. When faced with aggression by the Western powers, the Chinese government of the Qing Dynasty failed to mount a strong resistance and then gave up without any attempt at fighting. Before 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established, more than 1000 treaties and agreements, most of which were unequal in their terms, were forced on China by the Western powers. As many as 1.8 million square kilometers were also taken away from Chinese territory. This was a period of humiliation that the Chinese people can never forget. This is why the people of China show such strong emotions in matters concerning our national independence, unity, integrity of territory, and sovereignty. This is also why the Chinese are so determined to safeguard them under any circumstances and at all costs.

### **Contemporary Chinese Defensive Strategy.**

The essence of traditional Chinese military thinking has been both inherited and updated by contemporary Chinese statesmen and strategists as they continue China's revolution and construction. Most outstanding among the modern Chinese statesmen and strategists are Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin. Their efforts and contributions have been instrumental in contributing to the liberation, independence, and



development of modern China. What follows are three examples to illustrate how these Chinese leaders put traditional military concepts into modern practice.

First, at the end of 1948 and the beginning of 1949, when the Chinese Civil War was in its final phase and the Chinese People's Liberation Army held overwhelming superiority over its opponent, Mao Zedong devised the taking of the three cities of Tianjing, Beijing, and Huhehaote by different means. The People's Liberation Army attacked and captured Tianjing more or less conventionally. At Beijing, however, the People's Liberation Army laid siege to the city. The enemy commanders were compelled to accept its terms; the peaceful reorganization of the garrison into the People's Liberation Army. This proved to be a face-saving solution for the enemy's commanders. Huhehaote, another important city in northern China, was handed over to the People's Liberation Army by the defending forces when they revolted against their commanders. These three ways of winning are what Sun Tzu described as "to defeat the enemy by stratagem" (*fa mo*), "to undermine the enemies' alliance by diplomatic means (*fa jiao*), and "to assault the walled city" (*gong cheng*).

The second example is the defensive border war with India which the People's Republic of China was forced to fight in 1962 in response to Indian provocations. Chinese troops recovered part of the territory seized by the Indians, but to demonstrate China's peaceful intentions toward India, People's Liberation Army forces withdrew from the recovered territory, released all Indian prisoners of war, and returned large stocks of weapons and equipment. This is a case nearly unprecedented in military history.

The last example concerns Hong Kong. By entirely peaceful means, China recently resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong, a part of Chinese territory the British seized militarily more than one and a half centuries ago. The adoption of the "one country, two systems" policy, an innovation receiving both international appreciation and admiration, is a perfect example of the combination of China's strategic tradition and contemporary political wisdom.

Now, I will discuss the current military strategy of the Chinese People's Liberation Army. The fundamental guideline of that strategy is active defense. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, no matter how the world situation changed, China's military strategy always remained defensive in nature. China has not occupied a single square inch of foreign soil, nor has it possessed any overseas military bases. Furthermore, China has not retained any military presence beyond its own territory. Instead, even though parts of Chinese

territory are still occupied by its neighbors, China has shown great restraint and patience as it calls for peaceful solutions to the territorial disputes left by history.

What I particularly want to mention is that the adoption of a defensive military strategy not only conforms to ancient Chinese traditions as well as the socialist political system of modern China, it also fits national strategic interests. What China desires most is a peaceful and stable international environment in which it can focus on economic development and the improvement of its people's life. China is a developing socialist country. It will never seek hegemony, and it opposes any form of power politics and does not seek external expansion.

The sole purpose of the Chinese armed forces is to defend the people and the nation, which also establishes the criterion for defense building. This is a fundamental and unchangeable guideline, decided by the Chinese government and people and written into China's Constitution. There are some who have deliberately created and spread the "China threat" theory. But this proposition ignores the facts and confuses what is right with what is wrong. Now, I will specify some of the characteristics of China's current defensive strategy.

First, the armed forces of the People's Republic of China always assume a self-defensive posture and never make any provocation. But if war is ever imposed on China, its armed forces will certainly retaliate. Taiwan has been an inseparable part of China. The Taiwan issue is an internal Chinese affair to which the People's Republic of China favors a peaceful solution through reunification. But China cannot commit itself to the renouncement of the use of force as a final resort to halt foreign intervention or the independence of Taiwan. Therefore, force is also the guarantee that the Taiwan issue might be resolved peacefully. For the Chinese government and people issues concerning our national sovereignty are not subject to reconciliation or negotiation.

Second, China's nuclear strategy is purely defensive in nature. The decision to develop nuclear weapons was a choice China had to make in the face of real nuclear threats. A small arsenal is retained only for the purpose of self-defense. China has unilaterally committed itself to responsibilities not yet taken by other nuclear nations, including the declaration of a no-first-use policy, the commitment not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states and in nuclear-free zones. Nor does China advocate, encourage, or engage in the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The People's Republic of China has not helped any nation to develop nuclear weapons. In short, China's nuclear strategy is completely defensive, focused only on deterring the possibility of nuclear blackmail being used against China by other nuclear powers.

Third, China's defense spending has been kept at a very low level for more than a decade. Since 1979, reform, opening up, and economic development have been our cardinal national policies. Defense spending has remained low. Whether in absolute terms, in *per capita* terms, or in terms of the share of China's gross national product, our defense budget is much smaller in comparison to those of the developed countries or, for that matter, most of the developing countries around us. Defense spending has been limited to satisfy basic defensive needs in accordance with China's peaceful foreign policy and our commitment to economic development.

Fourth, China plans to build its military into a streamlined and effective one, a force defensive in nature and modernized to a certain degree. To obtain such a force, the government has undertaken a series of measures including downsizing and restructuring of the services, the improvement of political and military quality of men and officers, and the phased modernization of equipment. The Chinese armed forces will subject modernization to the overall needs of national modernization, doing so gradually within the context of a limited defense budget. China does not seek capabilities beyond its basic defense requirements.

Finally, the promotion of military-to-military relations with other nations is a way to enhance world peace. The People's Liberation Army has developed friendly ties with militaries in many countries. It has taken part in various United Nations peacekeeping missions. Even China's defense industries have conducted extensive international cooperation in the field of defense conversion by shifting to the production of civilian goods. Sino-American military-to-military exchanges have made headway recently. I am sure this is to the mutual benefit of both of our countries.

In the early 1950s, as a junior officer, I began my military career on the battlefields of Korea. Today, as a guest of the U.S. Army War College, I am speaking to American officers on China's defensive strategic thinking. Comparing the world today with that of a half a century ago, I believe that many of you, like myself, marvel at the tremendous power of history. The Cold War is over, and the trend toward multipolarity is irreversible.

At the turn of the millennium, the world finds itself at a crossroads where the maintenance of peace and the promotion of development are responsibilities to be shared by all nations.

The People's Republic of China is the world's largest developing country. The United States is the world's largest developed country. Both are permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. A healthy relationship between our two

countries will contribute greatly to world peace and to the stability and prosperity of the Asian-Pacific region. To be objective, we have our differences. But the common interests that we share are greater than our differences. This fact provides us with a foundation for a robust and stable Sino-American relationship in the 21st century.

Some rather perceptive people have pointed out that a policy of "containing" China is reminiscent of Cold War thinking. If ideology continues to divide our two countries, the consequences will be really undesirable. If you treat China as an enemy, you will have 1.2 billion enemies with which to contend. The price for that will be very high. In my opinion, it is time to abandon Cold War thinking once and for all. Cooperation is better than confrontation, and consultation is better than conflict. Economic policies that are mutually beneficial are preferable to economic sanctions. Mutual respect is better than discrimination, just as trust is better than suspicion.

To us soldiers, it is far better to toast each other at banquets than it is to aim at each other on the battlefield. It is both my hope and my belief that if realistic, rational, and wise attitudes guide Sino-Soviet relations, right decisions will be reached. It is also my hope and belief that the relationship between our two militaries would have a bright future as relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China improve.

U.S. ARMY WAR COLLEGE

Major General Robert H. Scales, Jr.  
Commandant

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