

CHINA'S ACTIVE DEFENCE STRATEGY: A MARITIME PERSPECTIVE

JOSHY M. PAUL

INTRODUCTION

China's security strategy has been, by and large, defence-oriented and 'active defence' is the guiding principle of this strategy. Defending the territory is the foremost objective of China's defence policy. China's Defence White Paper 2015 has devoted one full chapter (Chapter III) to explain the strategic guidelines of active defence, which is supposed to highlight the defensive nature of China's security strategy.¹ The White Paper explains,

From the long-term practice of revolutionary wars, the people's armed forces have developed a complete set of strategic concepts of active defense, which boils down to: adherence to the unity of strategic defense and operational and tactical offense; adherence to the principles of defense, self-defense and post-emptive strike; and adherence to the stance that "we will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked."²

Dr **Joshy M. Paul** is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

1. Ministry of National Defence, "Chapter III: Strategic Guideline of Active Defence", *China's Military Strategy 2015*, People's Republic of China, Beijing, May 2015, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2015-05/26/content_4586711.htm
2. Ibid.

Modern China's security strategy has largely been influenced by the Marxist-Leninist ideology and the thoughts of Mao tse-Tung as well as Deng Xiaoping. The elites of the Chinese Communist Party have modified the security strategy according to the changing nature of the security environment, its surroundings as well as global politics.

In fact, modern China's security strategy contends with a security threat from a superior enemy, so preventing an invasion by a superior power has been the cornerstone of its active defence strategy. Along with its defensive approach, of late, China has embarked on an expansionist strategy in the maritime domain, with great power ambition. In this regard, this article explains the importance of active defence in China's security strategy and its significance in the maritime domain.

States formulate their security strategies based on threat perceptions, both imminent and long-term, and how

to deal with such threats. In this counter-strategy, states rely on their past experiences and the nature of the threats. China has a rich history and has fought numerous wars—both internally and externally—in its evolution as a modern state. One can see the influence of the writings of ancient major strategic thinkers like Sun Tzu and others in China's modern behaviour—the so-called “strategic culture”.³ However, modern China's security strategy has largely been influenced by the Marxist-Leninist ideology and the thoughts of Mao tse-Tung as well as Deng Xiaoping. The elites of the Chinese Communist Party have modified the security strategy according to the changing nature of the security environment, its surroundings as well as global politics. For China, historically, had always confronted a superior power and, in most cases ended up losing its territory. This historical humiliation of defeat was somewhat reversed by the Communist Party when it decisively defeated the Nationalist government—the Kuomintang—and established Communist rule in China in 1949. In this pursuit, the Communist Party employed “active defence” as a major war-winning strategy to defeat the Nationalists who

3. Alistair Ian Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

were superior and more powerful, in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Since then, active defence became an important security strategy of China and has been incorporated in various official policy documents concerning China's defence in the modern times.⁴

ACTIVE DEFENCE IN A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Mao tse-Tung conceptualised the active defence strategy during the long period of the civil war in China between the Communists and the Nationalist government under Chiang kai-Shek. It was conceived as a fundamental and winning strategy against a superior force. Mao had applied the active defence strategy in the "encirclement campaigns" against the Nationalists during the 1930s.⁵ Though initially it was not fully successful, he persevered with the strategy, with modifications, based on the situation and the strength of the enemy. The underlying principle of active defence was breaking the enemy's "encirclement and suppression" campaign and taking an offensive position against the enemy in order to defeat him decisively.⁶ Mao used it also against the Japanese invasion and continued it till the end of World War II. It explains the manner in which a superior enemy can be defeated. Since it has been experienced in the battlefield against a superior enemy in the past, it has become the cardinal military strategy for war-fighting by the People's Liberation Army (PLA).⁷

Active defence is linked with China's ability to break the "encirclement" put out by the enemy; and a counter-offensive is launched that finally annihilates the enemy.

4. Since the 1980s, the People's Republic of China's various official strategic guidelines on active defence have been used with the approval of the Central Military Commission and the 1980 guideline is also titled as 'active defence'. For details, see, "The 1980 Strategy: 'Active Defence,'" in M. Taylor Fravel, *China's Military Strategy Since 1949: Active Defense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), Chapter 5. Also see Chapter III, "Strategic Guidelines of Active Defence" of China's 2015 Defence White Paper, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2015-05/26/content_4586805.htm

5. Ibid.

6. Mao tse-Tung, *Six Essays on Military Affairs* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1972), p. 52.

7. Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang, "The Chinese Navy's Offshore Active Defense Strategy", *Naval War College Review*, vol. 47, no. 3, 1994.

According to Mao, active defence is different from a purely defensive mechanism. Active defence is offensive defence against a superior enemy in a long-term battle.⁸ It is employed after an enemy has launched its offensive against China. Active defence is linked with China's ability to break the "encirclement" put out by the enemy; and a counter-offensive is launched that finally annihilates the enemy. Strategically, in a war against an invasion, China would place itself in the "inner line" defence, lure the enemy deep inland, wear down his strength by attrition, and, finally, change the strategic balance. Tactically, in campaigns or operations, the PLA would concentrate its force, seize local superiority, engage the enemy force in specific areas, take the "external line" offence, and, finally, destroy the enemy piecemeal.⁹

Active defence is different from preemptive strikes. In the former, the offensive action begins after the enemy launches the first strike, while, in the latter case, the enemy is attacked before he launches an attack. Preemptive strike is an advance attack to stop a country from taking the initiative. For China, preemptive strike or strategic offensive is a strategy of the imperial powers to counter a rival one, while active defence is a strategy of the weaker one against an invasion by a stronger force in order to protect its territory, and, finally, to defeat the stronger force.

Mao argued that active defence comprises the real defence: defence for the purpose of counter-attacking and taking the initiative.¹⁰ It is offensive defence because under it, China directly engages the enemy and, eventually, defeats him. The experience that the Chinese Army gained during the civil war was that its strength lay in the interior where it could mobilise the people's participation on the battlefield. At this level, it could use various tactics of active defence including guerrilla warfare, breaking the communication chain of the enemy and massive retaliation to defeat the enemy decisively. As a military strategy, active defence embraces two concepts: first, strategic defence and tactical offensive; and, second, strategic

8. Mao tse-Tung, n. 6.

9. Huang, n. 7.

10. Mao tse-Tung, n. 4.

protraction and a tactical, quick decision.¹¹ Strategic defence is to counter the enemy's strategic offensive through China's strategic defensive action. This means that in a protracted war, China initially allows the enemy to embark on strategic consolidation which will be utilised by China for the preparation of a counter-offensive. This is the first state of war; the Chinese, as a relatively weak force, would conduct a strategic retreat and give up territory in order to lure the enemy inland where the PLA enjoys geographical advantage, and combat and logistical support. After the enemy's strategic consolidation China would seize the initiative and launch a counter-offensive to ensure the enemy's strategic defeat. Mao applied this strategy against the Japanese during World War II as he perceived that the war with Japan would be a protracted one that would move through three stages: strategic defence—when Japan was on the attack; strategic stalemate—when Japan would seek to consolidate its gains; and, a counter-attack that would lead to a strategic offensive to defeat the Japanese.¹² Therefore, active defence is a strategy to be used in a war against an invasion. It is also active in essence, which means that the PLA will take the initiative and engage the enemy force in decisive battles. Indeed, the execution of the active defence strategy relies heavily on the Chinese advantage of a large landmass and a huge population.

Communist China's security strategy during the 1950s and 1960s was to "defend the motherland" from the imperial powers. The Korean War and US' stationing of its military forces in East Asia led to the adoption of this strategy. In the initial period, China perceived threats from all sides—both imperial powers and reactionary forces colluding with the imperial powers in its neighbourhood. The Korean War necessitated deploying forces at the forward level and China had to get involved in low-level military conflicts with its neighbours. (The forward defence strategy of deploying forces at the border continued for some time to prevent a US invasion of China because of the US troops stationed in South Korea. But later, Mao realised the strategic as well as economic cost of this forward defence strategy because

11. Huang, n. 7.

12. Fravel, n. 4, p. 52.

the army's first priority was to ensure the survival of the Communist Party and, economically, China could not afford to deploy forces at the border for a longer period to challenge a superior enemy.) After the India-China War of 1962, Mao realised that China's security environment had got stabilised so he discarded the forward defence strategy.¹³ Instead, Mao envisioned luring the enemy in deep, allowing an adversary to occupy territory, and then defeating it through a protracted war, leveraging China's large territory and population.¹⁴ The "luring the enemy in deep" strategy became the central theme of China's security strategy during Mao's time because China could take advantage of its large territory and population and it was difficult for an invading force to maintain its military for long inside China. A long and protracted war would help China get stronger, raising powerful armed forces, while constantly harassing the enemy. In this strategy, China could lose its territory to the enemy forces but Mao believed that initial losses could be converted into an advantage for China and territory could be retrieved once the enemy was defeated. Minor tactical victories, thus, could result in major damage to a superior opponent. Driving deep into hostile territory could enfeeble the opponent until it was superior no longer. The 'luring deep theory' explains that the Chinese Army would lift itself gradually to strategic parity, then ascendancy, and, ultimately, win through a conventional counter-offensive. For Mao, the actual fight had to take place in the interior part where China could effectively tackle the enemy through large scale people's mobilisation and guerrilla warfare that could tactically be employed to break the enemy's additional support and channel of communication. In Mao's total war concept, a large landmass and huge population were considered a strategic advantage. This strategy continued until Mao's death, including as a strategy against the Soviet Union.

When Deng Xiaoping consolidated his position within the Communist Party by defeating his rivals, he sought to change Mao's principles of the

13. Ibid., p. 127.

14. Ibid., p. 113.

“total war”¹⁵ concept and reestablished the “active defence” strategy as a winning strategy in which forward defence became an important tactic. The strategic guidelines adopted in 1980 by the Central Military Commission emphasised active defence as the major defence strategy of China against a Soviet invasion. The 1980 guidelines represented a clear rejection of the existing strategy of “luring the enemy in deep and strategic retreat” and introduced a strategy similar to the one adopted by China in 1956, which upheld that forward defence would be based on positional warfare.¹⁶ The 1980s’ strategy called for the PLA to develop the ability to conduct combined arms operations to coordinate tank, artillery, and infantry units, deployed in a layered defensive network of fixed positions. A significant development of the 1980s guidelines was the adoption of the forward defence strategy, deploying arms and other offensive systems at various layers aimed at preventing the invading enemy from approaching the ‘core’ area.

After the 1969 border dispute between China and the Soviet Union, a major Soviet invasion emerged as a security threat for China. Accordingly, protecting China’s northern border was important in China’s security strategy. The 1980s’ strategy described how China would respond once the Soviet Union had invaded.

The core of the strategy was a forward defence of China’s northern border, especially potential invasion routes through Zhangjiakou or Jiayuguan, to prevent any strategic breakthrough and buy time for a nationwide mobilisation. Afterwards, the strategy called for combining the defence of strategic interior lines with offensive campaigns and operations on exterior lines to create a stalemate. Finally, if the effective strength of the invading force was sufficiently weakened, the PLA would shift to a strategic counterattack.¹⁷

15. Mao’s total war concept is a combination of the people’s participation in the war and various stages of military strategy which include a strategic retreat by China, consolidation at the interior, guerrilla warfare and a counter-attack by a large scale mobilisation of people.

16. Fravel, n. 4, p. 141.

17. Ibid., p. 142.

By the end of the 1980s, the Soviet threat dissipated as a result of normalisation of the relationship between the two. Accordingly, China shifted its attention from the north where the security environment had stabilised and the Soviet threat had vanished, to the southern border – especially to the South China Sea.

Under the new concept, forward defence, rather than retreat, was viewed as the key to victory in such a conflict. In fact, in China's defence strategy, counter-attack, instead of preempting a Soviet attack, gained importance because China lacked any credible means to launch strikes beyond its borders. The principle of "gaining control by striking afterwards" or counter-attacking holds significant importance in the Chinese strategic concept, even in its rivalry with the United States in the Indo-Pacific.

Besides, Deng had also launched reforms within the PLA in the 1980s especially by downsizing the PLA and making it a more agile and flexible force.¹⁸ The lessons from the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict, where new technologies were used—especially to gain air superiority or deny the enemy air superiority—as well as new inventions in defence technology in the United States which included the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) or the "Star Wars" programme, and China's poor performance in the 1979 Vietnam fiasco, led to the need for a new look in China's war preparedness.¹⁹ Accordingly, in July 1985, the Central Military Commission, together with the State Council and Central Committee, issued a new plan, titled *Plan for Reforms, Streamlining, and Reorganisation of the Military System*. The goal of the reform was to develop a force with streamlined administration, more flexible command, and greater combat power by reducing the number of personnel, eliminating the level of bureaucracy, downgrading units, and closing some installations.²⁰ When the downsizing was completed in 1987, over a million

18. Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to US Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2010).

19. Fravel, n. 4, p. 163.

20. Ibid., p. 175.

soldiers—roughly 25 per cent of the force—had been cut.²¹ Moreover, China has given significant importance to qualitative change in its armed forces across the spectrum to meet the new and emerging challenges. By the end of the 1980s, the Soviet threat dissipated as a result of normalisation of the relationship between the two, and a new concept of warfare emerged which was that China's security environment had become stable but new conflicts would occur at the local level with a limited period, especially over disputed territory, in the southern part of China. Accordingly, China shifted its attention from the north where the security environment had stabilised and

the Soviet threat had vanished, to the southern border—especially to the South China Sea. For instance, in March 1988, Chinese and Vietnam forces clashed violently in the Spratly Islands when China moved to occupy six reefs also claimed by Vietnam.²² Similarly, the booming coastal region had now become the engine of Chinese economic growth, so protecting these regions also became one of the important aspects of China's defence strategy. Allowing the economically important coastal region to be taken over by the enemy during the initial stages of a future war (under Mao's "luring deep inside" strategy) could hamper China's ability to launch a counter-attack. As a result, China reintroduced the "forward defence" strategy, which then became the first line of defence in its security strategy in the 1980s. A war inside its territory would lead to destabilisation of the central government,

A war inside its territory would lead to destabilisation of the central government, hence, the Chinese decision-makers realised the importance of creating a forward defence line and the need to defend it. China realised that if any conflict were to take place, it must be outside the forward defence line and China has progressively been expanding this forward defence line along with its naval modernisation.

21. Ibid.

22. "Spratly Islands Dispute Defines China-Vietnam Relations 25 Years after Naval Clash", *The South China Morning Post*, March 17, 2013, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1192472/spratly-islands-dispute-defines-china-vietnam-relations-25-years-after>

hence, the Chinese decision-makers realised the importance of creating a forward defence line and the need to defend it. China realised that if any conflict were to take place, it must be outside the forward defence line and China has progressively been expanding this forward defence line along with its naval modernisation. The first and second island chains are the forward defence lines as far as the Chinese defence strategy is concerned.

Also commensurate with the change in China's worldview is its assessment about its own position, mission and goal in that particular environment. The paramount leader Deng Xiaoping expressed the direction of China's worldview that a full scale war was not foreseeable in the future and that the world had changed from bipolarity to multipolarity, and co-governance was going to be the international norm.²³ Deng had also viewed that any future conflict would be short and more localised, hence, it was imperative for China to promote national defence and self-preservation more vigorously than before. Importantly, it was believed that new security challenges were going to emerge in the maritime domain, especially over the territorial disputes, which required coordinated operations from all the Services. This was different from the earlier strategy in which the army was the major stakeholder. Thus, the new situation has forced China to focus on modernisation of its armed forces, especially the navy, to prepare to meet sudden challenges emanating in its surroundings in which protecting its interests had become an important task for its defence forces.

Similarly, with the stable northern border and a conducive security environment at the regional level, China saw an opportunity to improve its strategic situation in the south where territorial disputes continued. To fulfill its strategic interest, China embarked on a military expedition to settle its southern border disputes—which included the land border dispute with India and Vietnam—as well as disputes over the Spratly Islands and small reefs in the South China Sea area. Between 1984 and 1988, a series of intense battles occurred over various hilltops on the disputed Chinese-Vietnam border, and in March 1988, Chinese and Vietnamese forces clashed violently

23. Kai He, *Institutional Balancing in the Asia-Pacific: Economic Interdependence and China's Rise* (London: Routledge, 2009).

in the Spratly Islands which led to the Chinese occupation of six reefs claimed by Vietnam.²⁴ Similarly, during 1986 and 1987, a tense standoff over an observation post on the Chinese-Indian border occurred at Sumdorong Chu, where the Indian Army inflicted heavy casualties on the Chinese forces, which led to the sacking of its Tibet Military District commander and the Military Region chief in Chengdu.²⁵ M. Taylor Fravel argues that these incidents forced the Chinese military leadership to realise that defending Chinese interests in different territorial disputes on the Tibetan plateau, in the South China Sea and, more importantly, in the Taiwan Strait, required different capabilities and concepts of operation.²⁶ Precisely for this reason, by the latter part of the 1980s, the strategic concept of securing the Chinese mainland from superior invading forces was replaced by protecting disputed territories in the southern border as well as in the maritime domain of the East China and South China Seas. In this case also, China believed that a superior force may intervene to prevent fulfillment of the Chinese dream. As a matter of fact, the central theme of “active defence” remained the same because if the conflict escalated, then the superior American military would intervene in the crisis. As a result, the active defence strategy now focussed on deterring a US invasion in a crisis over the disputed territories rather than a full-scale US invasion on the Chinese mainland. From the 1990s onwards, the maritime domain became the new strategic theatre for China and its new strategic guidelines underlined the scope of “active defence” in the maritime domain to prevent the US’ advance to the Chinese shores.

In January 1993, China released another strategic document known as the *National Military Strategy Guidelines for the New Era* to provide an overall framework of principles and guidance to plan and manage the development of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). The new guidelines emphasized

24. For details of the China-Vietnam clashes, see M Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China’s Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

25. Manoj Joshi, “Operation Falcon: When General Sundarji took the Chinese by Surprise”, ORF Commentaries, July 3, 2017, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/operation-falcon-when-general-sundarji-took-the-chinese-by-surprise/>

26. Fravel, n. 4.

The new guidelines reflect the influence of war strategies of various international crises such as the 1982 Falklands War, the US air strikes against Libya in 1986 and, most importantly, the 1991 Gulf War which was short-lived and had successfully applied high technology in war-fighting.

“active defence” as the core strategy of the PLA and served as “the highest level of strategic guidance for all PLA military operations during war and preparation for war during peacetime”.²⁷ Given the nature of historical changes in conflicts, the guidelines introduced a new concept: “winning local wars under modern, especially high technology, conditions” which highlighted the need to wage wars with limited aims that would be characterised by new ways of fighting.²⁸ It was a major shift from the earlier strategy of how to counter an invasion of Chinese territory and the situation of a protracted

war. This situation has been aptly described in the official document *Science of Military Strategy* published by the Chinese National Defence University in 2001 that explains how China views local war under the new historical conditions:

Generally, the possibility of a large-scale ground invasion by an adversary is minimum. However, the danger of being the target of high-technological warfare, such as air-naval, air-space, and space-cyber wars, is intensifying. The threat from the east is more severe than that from the west, the threat from the sea is more severe than that from the ground; the threat from space and cyber network is gradually becoming true. The probability of conducting military operations to protect rights and limited oversea war operations is ever increasing. The most severe war threat is a large-scale strategic sudden attack launched by a strong adversary, which aims at destroying our war potential to force us to surrender. The most probable

27. “People’s Liberation Navy – Doctrine”, *Global Security*, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/plan-doctrine.htm>

28. Fravel, n. 4, p. 182.

war threat is a limited military conflict from the sea. The war we need to prepare for, particularly given the background of nuclear deterrence, is a large-scale, and highly intensive local war from the sea.²⁹

The new guidelines reflect the influence of war strategies of various international crises such as the 1982 Falklands War, the US air strikes against Libya in 1986 and, most importantly, the 1991 Gulf War which was short-lived and had successfully applied high technology in war-fighting. The guidelines also changed China's war preparedness that had been dominated by the ground forces until then, but the new strategy elevated other forces to play a more active role to defend the nation, and changed the modes of warfare used since the civil war era, i.e. from guerrilla and mobile warfare to joint operations among the Services. Although the new strategy did not initially identify the "primary strategic direction", in 1993, while introducing the new strategic guidelines, then Chinese President Jiang Zemin explained that "the focal point of military struggle is to prevent a major incident of 'Taiwan's independence' from occurring".³⁰ As a result, deterring Taiwan's independence as well as preparing "to deal with sudden incidents" over "outstanding" territorial disputes southeast of Taiwan became the main strategic direction of China's active defence strategy.

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ACTIVE DEFENCE IN THE MARITIME PERSPECTIVE

When the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) was created in 1949, it had been considered as a coastal defence force. In the continental security

29. Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, *The Science of Military Strategy* (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013 (English translation)), p.100.

30. Ibid., p. 184.

concept, especially during Mao's era, the PLAN played a secondary role to the PLA. Later, it became a *de facto* independent Service in 1977, when its submarines, for the first time, sailed into the Pacific and the South China Sea.³¹ During the 1980s, its budgetary allocation shot up and its role increased when Adm Liu Huaqing became the PLAN commander from 1982-87. Liu also generated a gradual future blue-water ambition for the PLAN and brought in a concept called "offshore operations" under the "active defence" strategy, and spearheaded an ambitious naval modernisation programme.³² He also coined the "first island chain" and "second island chain" concept initially to defend the coastal territory as well as to protect China's sovereignty over the "outstanding" maritime territorial disputes, and to convert the Chinese Navy into a truly global naval force by 2050.³³

During the period of Mao's continental security strategy, the navy's role was defined as being to counter amphibious-landing operations as well as how to survive the first wave of enemy strikes.³⁴ At the operational level, the navy had two phases: the first phase of its operations was to "hide," i.e. help "to preserve (Chinese) strength through concealing and dispersing ships, and transferring planes to the second-line bases". In the second phase, strikes would be carried out when the enemy landing force switched ships, removed obstacles and organised into columns to drive to the shore. These were the enemy's moments of vulnerability mainly because the formation would become more dense, the manoeuvre more restricted, and the communications and coordination more confused. Also "sinking one enemy ship at these moments is equivalent to wiping out one enemy company or battalion later."³⁵ When the Soviet Union emerged as the main enemy of

31. Kamlesh Kumar Agnihotri, "Strategic Direction of the PLA Navy: Capability and Intent Assessment", *Maritime Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2010, pp. 71-97.

32. Nan Li, "The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From 'Near Coast' and 'Near Seas' to 'Far Seas'", *Asian Security*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2009, pp. 144-169.

33. "The Father of the Modern Chinese Navy—Liu Huaqing", Centre for International Maritime Security (CIMC), October 8, 2014, [HTTP://CIMSEC.ORG/FATHER-MODERN-CHINESE-NAVY-LIU-HUAQING/13291](http://cimsec.org/father-modern-chinese-navy-liu-huaqing/13291)

34. Nan Li, n. 32.

35. Ibid.

China from the late 1960s, the role of the PLAN was prescribed at three levels: (1) preserving combat capability and preventing early engagement with the Soviet Pacific Fleet in decisive sea battles, in order to endure a protracted war; (2) dividing the PLA Navy into small groups, utilising fast attack craft and emphasising manoeuvrability of “fast attack, fast retreat” in order to destroy the Soviet naval force piecemeal; and (3) reliance on inshore and harbour mine-laying, land-based artillery, missiles, and naval air force in order to interdict the Soviet sea lines of communication and prevent a Soviet amphibious offensive.³⁶ In other words, the navy’s role was purely to support the army in the protracted war strategy. However, by the mid-1980s, a consensus was arrived at among the top echelons of the Communist Party as well as the Central Military Commission that there was a necessity to build an ocean going naval force that would play a major (leading) role for the navy in the era of local war under high technology conditions. Subsequently, the PLAN’s role and strategy were redefined as “active defence strategy under new historical (hi-technology) conditions”.³⁷

Offshore Active Defence

The role and strategy of the PLAN were redefined under the framework of “active defence strategy under new historical conditions”, which was further renamed as “offshore active defence” because of the area it needed to safeguard. The offshore active defence concept was elaborated by Adm Liu who asserted that “the Chinese Navy should exert *effective control* of the seas within the first island chain.”³⁸ Liu further stated that “offshore should not be interpreted as ‘coastal’ as we used to know it. Offshore is a concept relative to the ‘high seas’. It means the vast sea waters within the second island chain”³⁹ (see Fig 1). Although there is no clear-cut geographical

36. Huang, n. 7, p. 11.

37. Ibid.

38. Adm Liu’s remark is quoted in Ali Honggreen, *An Inside Look into the Chinese Communist Navy: Advancing Toward the Blue-Water Challenge* (Hong Kong: October 1988), cited in Huang, n. 7, p. 18.

39. Ibid.

mapping of the offshore active defence area, a consensus among the political and military leaders indicated that the “four large sea areas” (i.e. the Bohai, Yellow, East China, and South China Seas), plus the continental shelf out to the “first island chain” comprised the PLA Navy’s “offshore” area.⁴⁰ In general, the offshore active defence strategy aims to reunify Taiwan with the mainland, restore lost and disputed maritime territories, protect China’s maritime resources, secure the major Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in times of war, deter and defend against foreign aggression from the sea, and conduct strategic nuclear deterrence.⁴¹

Fig 1: First and Second Island Chains



Source: James Stavridis, “China Seeks New Islands to Conquer”, *The Japan Times*, February 22, 2019, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2019/02/22/commentary/world-commentary/china-seeks-new-islands-conquer/#.XgmxcbhGTRw>

40. Ibid.

41. Nan Li, n. 30.

Offshore active defence was considered a defensive strategy against a superior enemy who attempted to invade China. China launched a defence modernisation drive in the 1990s to make the offshore active defence a winning military strategy. Although the 1988 or 1993 strategic guidelines did not clearly indicate the main adversary, the modernisation effort was mainly to counter the US forces' advancement towards the Chinese shores in any contingency. Under this strategy, the objective of the PLAN was to prevent the enemy forces capturing or getting close to the prosperous coastal cities, which later included defending Taiwan as well as other disputed maritime territories also. Accordingly, the PLAN has formulated two important strategic concepts: extended strategic depth and offensive operations.⁴² Extended strategic depth means that to protect its core area (also known as the resolute defence area) from the enemy, the actual war operation must take place far away from it. As the core area extended from the coastal belt to the Taiwan Strait, the strategic depth was shifted from the first island chain to the second island chain. Similarly, once war broke out, China would launch offensive operations against the enemy to protect its core area. This would include attacking ships and logistical support deployed in the forward lines, targeting forward bases of the enemy in the Western Pacific and neutralising the command and control systems, including the cyber-based capabilities, of the enemy. In this regard, the active defence strategy emphasises resolute defence of key areas such as coastal cities, which was the defence frontline during the 1980s and shifted to the strategic rear in the 1990s, the Taiwan Strait and the disputed territories in the East China and South China Seas, and acquiring offensive capabilities to intercept and destroy enemy systems at sea, or deterring the enemy forces from getting close to the first island chain. This change in strategy converted the PLAN into a more offensive force than before.

In the naval modernisation drive, the PLAN focussed on technological advancement to face future challenges, which included advanced equipment and modern warships. Without these, the admirals realised that it would be

42. Huang, n. 7, p. 20.

An “assassin’s mace” system could generate a psychological advantage for China which would help prevent a formidable foe from intervening in a crisis against China. In fact, according to Chinese analysts, the Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capability is actually the “assassin’s mace” system.

impossible for the navy to compete in naval rivalry in the Western Pacific or carry out missions such as supporting Chinese claims in the Diaoyutai (Senkaku) and Nansha (Spratly) archipelagos.⁴³ Accordingly, the navy became a major beneficiary of China’s rising defence budget, which continued at a double digit growth during the 1990s and 2000s.⁴⁴ China started focussing more on research and development in the modernisation programme, including construction of aircraft carriers. To make the offshore active defence strategy effective,

especially the resolute defence, the navy has been given an important role in the Chinese national defence.

Another major change that occurred under the new historical condition was the change in the operational strategy of active defence. Under the earlier “luring the enemy in deep” strategy, active defence was considered to be a strategy of the weak against a superior power, hence, “gaining control by striking afterwards” was the fundamental principle of active defence. However, in the “new condition”, this strategy was likely to be vulnerable; so the new situation demanded “rapid reaction, flexibility, and effectively subduing the enemy”.⁴⁵ To address these challenges, the top military leaders gathered in mid-1992 and came out with a strategy that China must create “fists” and “assassin’s maces”.⁴⁶ The “fists” would be units with strong mobile operational capabilities of naval, air, and conventional missile forces, so that, “as soon as an incident

43. Ibid., p. 21.

44. Richard A. Bitzinger, “Recent Developments in Naval and Maritime Modernization in the Asia-Pacific: Implications for Regional Security”, in Phillip C. Saunders, Christopher D. Yung, Michael Swaine, and Andrew Nien-Dzu Yang, eds., *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles* (Washington, D.C.: National Defence University Press, 2011), pp. 23-40.

45. Fravel, n. 4, p. 201.

46. Ibid.

occurs, these forces can be sent rapidly to the theatre, control the situation, and resolve problems".⁴⁷ The "assassin's maces" referred to the development of advanced weapons that could be useful means for actually "subduing the enemy". Under this shift in operational strategy, China looked into developing systems to fulfill these two strategic concepts. Since then, the modernisation has focussed on acquisition of naval systems like submarines, large surface ships and aircraft carriers, and to gain air superiority, advanced aircraft, land-based as well as air-to-land cruise missiles that

are focussed on the adjacent waters. The assassin's maces to "subdue the enemy" hold significant importance in the Chinese strategy. From a historical perspective, particularly based on Sun Tzu's war strategy of "winning a war without a fight", the "assassin's mace" had significant influence in Chinese strategic thinking. An "assassin's mace" system could generate a psychological advantage for China which would help prevent a formidable foe from intervening in a crisis against China. In fact, according to Chinese analysts, the Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capability is actually the "assassin's mace" system.⁴⁸

Initially, the prosperous coastal belt was the main focus of the resolute defence of offshore active defence because of its importance in economic reforms and national development. However, the developments in the

China's military modernisation programme, launched in the 1990s, had two objectives: firstly to project its military prowess across the spectrum which included the air, naval, space and cyber domains; and, secondly to make active defence in the maritime domain a winning strategy.

47. Ibid.

48. A. Krepinevich, *The Quadrennial Defense Review: Rethinking the US Military Posture* (Washington DC: Centre for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2005), pp. 8- 91, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/the-quadrennial-defense-review-rethinking-the-us-military-posture>

Taiwan Strait, especially the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis,⁴⁹ revealed not only the gaping defence technological gap between the US and China but the physical military threat that the US could pose to China. Since then, preventing Taiwan's independence has become a part of the national security objective, and deterring US from reaching the Taiwan Strait a strategic priority for China. As a result, the resolute defence perimeter has been extended beyond the first island chain; so naturally, the strategic depth area has also been pushed further outwards to what is the second island chain and includes Guam.

Active Defence in Operation in the Maritime Domain

China's military modernisation programme, launched in the 1990s, had two objectives: firstly to project its military prowess across the spectrum which included the air, naval, space and cyber domains; and, secondly to make active defence in the maritime domain a winning strategy. The modernisation of the armed forces, especially of the navy, was primarily targeted to acquire capabilities that could reinforce its sea denial capability against a strong naval power.⁵⁰ The inventory that the PLAN acquired included: conventional and nuclear power attack submarines; surface combatants such as guided-missile destroyers equipped with long-range Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles (ASCMs) and Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs), such as the indigenously produced Luzhou and Luyang I/II DDGs; and maritime strike aircraft.⁵¹ China has particularly focussed on developing different varieties—in both speed and manoeuvrability—of advanced ASCMs so that they can easily destroy the approaching enemy systems. A

49. On the eve of the 1966 general election in Taiwan, China intimidated Taiwan with a major military exercise near the Taiwan Strait to stop the then Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui, who was set to be reelected, from declaring independence. In response to the Chinese action, the US sent the aircraft carrier *Independence* and another one, the *Nimitz*, was on its way, which proved China's inability to exercise its will in the "near sea" area, and US naval presence within the perimeter of the first island chain as a major security challenge for China.

50. Yves-Heng Lim, "The Driving Forces Behind China's Naval Modernization", *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2011, pp. 105-120.

51. For details, see, Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Chinese Ship-Based Air Defence System", in *China's Strategy for the Near Sea* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013).

number of these maritime strike aircraft, in particular the FB-7, FB-7 A, B-6G and Su-30MKK, can be armed with ASCMs to target surface combatants.⁵² China's conventional and nuclear powered attack submarines—the Kilo, Song, Yuan and Shang classes—are also capable of firing ASCMs.⁵³ The J-20 stealth fighter will increase China's ability to strike regional air bases, logistical facilities, and other ground-based infrastructure. The objective of the Chinese military modernisation drive is to make active defence a winning strategy by fielding capabilities designed to deter, deny and disrupt the deployment of US forces into the Chinese theatre.

In a conflict over Taiwan, a potential problem that China expects is to push the theatre farther from the Chinese waters, and for that, it has adopted both defensive and offensive approaches in the active defence strategy. The *Science of Military Strategy* explains that “after launching the war, we should try our best to fight against the enemy as far as possible, to lead the war about enemy's operational base, even to his source of war, and to actively strike all the effective strength forming the enemy's war system”.⁵⁴ China is sensitive about the US bases in Japan and Guam from where the US could launch its operations against China, and the US has always kept one aircraft carrier berthed at the Yokosuka naval base in Japan and long range bombers in Guam. The active defence strategy seeks to deny the US military the ability to manoeuvre physically or if the US was to engage the Chinese military directly, then it should be prohibitively costly for the US.⁵⁵ At the same time, if a physical engagement was ever to happen, then it should not be near the first island chain. Chinese integrated air defence, anti-ship cruise and ballistic missiles, maritime bombers, missiles and torpedo carrying submarines, and fast patrol boats are all designed to serve this purpose. The objective is to create a psychological advantage over the enemy about the cost of an

52. Oriana Skylar Mastro, “China's Anti-Access-Area Denial (A2/AD) Capabilities: Is American Rebalancing Enough?” on William H. Natter III, ed., *American Strategy and Purpose: Reflections on Foreign Policy and National Security in an Era of Change* (Jason Brooks), pp. 118-140.

53. Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China (Washington DC: Department of Defence, 2011), p. 19.

54. Guangqian and Youzhi, n. 29, p. 461.

55. Mastro, n. 52.

operation within the first island chain near the mainland. Since the US is far superior to China in terms of technology and physical naval strength in the Western Pacific, complete sea denial is not possible for China, so it aims to disrupt the US' manoeuvrability in the Western Pacific which includes preventing the US from operating from certain bases in the theatre, forcing US forces to operate at greater distance from the theatre of operations than preferred, or delaying US deployment from outside the theatre.⁵⁶

Active defence operates a variety of military characteristics that have been arranged in a multi-layered configuration for disrupting US forces; access to, and freedom of, manoeuvre within the significant portions of maritime Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. At a larger level, active defence capabilities include advanced and extended-range air defence, air-to-air and precision strike capabilities, Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR), and force projection enablers such as aerial refuelling, airlift and logistic capabilities. China has made considerable achievements in all these aspects, most importantly in the space and cyber domains, including anti-satellite weapon technology. These could be employed to increase the time and distance required for the US forces to arrive in the theatre, and can even cripple the US' ability to launch offensive operations.

Active defence has both defensive and offensive characteristics and the configuration of capabilities that China has employed in the maritime domain is within this objective. However, it is difficult to distinguish which system counts for defence and which for offence, as some systems may be applied for both purposes. But it can be argued that those systems which have been deployed to intimidate or to attack Taiwan if it declares independence, as well as the systems to prevent the US from crossing the first island chain, can be considered as defensive operations. The operations employed to disrupt US naval deployment in the Western Pacific, including preventing its assets stationed in its bases in Yokosuka, Japan or Guam, or even reinforcement from other sources, to be effectively

56. Ibid.

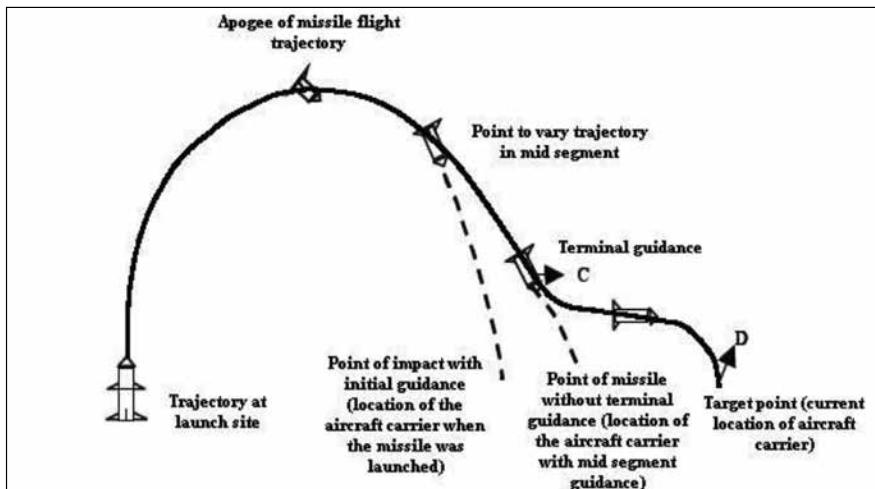
used against China, can be considered as offensive operations. These include a preemptive attack on US bases in Japan and Guam as well as attacks on US carrier groups far away from Chinese shores. China could even disable the US' space-based assets with its Anti-Satellite (ASAT) weapons. In recent times, China has invested hugely to develop strike capabilities in support of active defence which include High Powered Microwave (HPM) and Electro-Magnetic Pulse (EMP) weapons to blind US C4ISR assets such as satellites, and also to disable surface ships, and the use of Precision-Guided Munitions (PGMs) by rendering the Global Positioning System (GPS) constellations inoperable.⁵⁷ The active defence strategy has also been strengthened by advanced submarines—both conventional and nuclear—integrated air defence systems and development of the DF 21D and DF 26D land-based anti-ship missiles. The DF 26D is also known as the “Guam killer” because the US base in Guam comes within its range and US carriers can now be targetted around the second island chain also.⁵⁸ To prevent US intervention in a crisis over Taiwan, China is likely to launch a preemptive strike against US bases in the Western Pacific. This signifies the offensive nature of the active defence strategy.

China has also developed a sophisticated BMD system largely to protect the coast and the Taiwan Strait. The MRBM DF-21 D can target US carrier groups around the first island chain and the DF 26D can target the second island chain.

57. Sam Gondsmith, “China’s Anti-Access and Area-Denial Operational Concept and the Dilemmas for Japan”, 2012, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/156621555.pdf>. For more details, see, Ronald O’Rourke, *China Naval Modernisation: Implications for US Navy Capabilities* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2012).

58. “Meet the DF-26 Missile: China’s Prized Anti-Carrier Weapon”, *The National Interest*, October 3, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/meet-df-26-missile-chinas-prized-anti-carrier-weapon-85261>

Fig 2: Flight Trajectory of DF 21/26 D



Source: Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China (Washington DC: Department of Defence, 2011), p. 28, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2011_CMPR_Final.pdf

China has deployed a multi-layered configuration of systems in the East China and South China Seas to ensure active defence as a winning strategy. According to a Pentagon report, China has made evolutionary improvements in its existing capabilities, which include nuclear submarines, both attack (SSNs), and ballistic missile (SSBN) for attacking US infrastructure in the western Pacific.⁵⁹ China has already acquired second strike nuclear capability, with land-based as well as submarine-launched ballistic missiles reaching US cities to counter a US nuclear assault. China has purchased the Su-27 and Su-30 fighter aircraft from Russia and has indigenously developed the 5th Generation (Gen) fighter jet J-20 in order to ensure air superiority over the Western Pacific. Other multi-layered systems which have been arranged in the Western Pacific are: for operation out to 3,300 km from the Chinese mainland, the PLA will use the CSS-2 Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) and Land Attack Cruise Missiles (LACMs), launched from Chinese

59. Annual Report to Congress: Military Power of the People's Republic of China (Washington DC: Department of Defence, 2008), p. 21.

H-6 bombers to attack US forward operating bases and support infrastructure in the Western Pacific.⁶⁰ For operations out to 2,000 km, the PLA will use the road-mobile CSS-5 Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles (ASBMs) and CSS-5 Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs) in addition to the DH-10 LACMs and ASCMs launched by the FB-7 and H-6 aircraft. For operations out to 600 km, the PLA will use the CSS-6 and CSS-7 Short Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs), Chinese HG-9 Surface-to-Air Missiles (SAMs) and Russian PMU-2 SAMs for air and Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD).⁶¹ Besides, China

possesses the most active ballistic missile programme in the world and has devoted considerable effort to fielding SRBMs with precision guidance.⁶² As preventing Taiwan's independence is the most important strategic priority, China has deployed more than 1,000 CSS-6 and CSS-7 SRBMs to garrisons opposite Taiwan and is increasing the size of this force at a rate of more than 100 missiles per year.⁶³ China has also developed a sophisticated BMD system largely to protect the coast and the Taiwan Strait. The MRBM DF-21 D can target US carrier groups around the first island chain and the DF 26D can target the second island chain.

As Liu Huaqing propounded the three island chain concept and set the target period for achieving capabilities to secure the first island chain by 2010, the second island chain by 2020, and the third island chain by 2040, China is expanding its strategic depth towards the third island chain which includes the South Pacific and Indian Ocean Region (IOR). As stated above, active defence has both a core inner periphery known as the resolute defence

Active defence is the guiding principle of China's overall security strategy. Mao had successfully used it during the civil war prior to the formation of Communist China, and it has been incorporated into the security strategy of China in the 21st century.

60. n. 53.

61. O'Rourke, n. 57, p. 4.

62. Thomas G Mahnken, "China's Anti-Access Strategy in Historical and Theoretical Perspective", *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 299-323.

63. Ibid.

area and an outer strategic depth perimeter. China has gradually expanded its strategic depth, along with the capabilities, from the coastal waters in the 1980s to the Taiwan Strait during the 1990s. With the acquisition of the carrier killer missile, the DF 26D, this has further expanded from the middle of the first and second island chains to the outer periphery of the second island chain. Now, China has acquired aircraft carriers, and is planning to build six nuclear powered carriers by 2035, which are considered as the mainstay of expanding its powers and strategic influence from its backyard to far off regions. With the six nuclear powered aircraft carriers and the nuclear submarines, China can expand its strategic depth concept into the Indian Ocean without much difficulty. Thus, the active defence strategy ensures the protection of China's core interest in the East China and South China Seas, and allows it to expand its influence towards the South Pacific as well as the IOR.

CONCLUSION

Active defence is the guiding principle of China's overall security strategy. Mao had successfully used it during the civil war prior to the formation of Communist China, and it has been incorporated into the security strategy of China in the 21st century. It aims to deter Taiwan's independence, protect China's interest in the territorial disputes in the maritime domain and expand China's naval presence in the far sea regions such as the Southern Pacific and Indian Ocean. The primary objective of China's active defence strategy is to prevent US involvement in a crisis over Taiwan, and if the US were to be involved in such a crisis either by directly engaging with China or by supporting Taiwan, then it should be prohibitively costly for the US. So China hopes to get a psychological advantage against the enemy by conveying that the cost to the US will be greater to it than the benefit, in order to deter it from a military engagement with China. Through the military modernisation programme launched in the 1990s, China has acquired the capabilities to achieve this objective which include C4ISR, a large number of missile arrays, different types of surface ships, submarines

and dominance in cyber warfare. Various Western-based reports on China's military capabilities prove that China has indeed achieved air superiority over the Taiwan Strait with its large number of short range missiles and stealth fighter jets which are likely to pose insurmountable challenges to Taiwanese and American efforts to command the air over the strait and the island.⁶⁴ With its acquisition of modern weapon systems to protect its core area, China has widened the scope of its strategic depth further afar from the shoreline. China wants to avoid any naval engagement with the US closer to its shore. It can also target US bases in the Western Pacific with preemptive strike capability to prevent the US from using its assets during a crisis. In a way, under the active defence strategy framework, China could pose a serious challenge to the US Navy in the Western Pacific.

China is emerging as a major maritime power, capable of enhancing its influence and prestige across the ocean. Of late, the Western powers have started to acknowledge China's naval prowess with the capability to overcome US challenges in the Western Pacific. China has had a focussed military modernisation to acquire capabilities for defensive as well as offensive purposes under the active defence strategy. The expansion of the resolute defence area that was initially the coastal belt, then including the area up to the first island chain, is also based on the capability that China has acquired over a period of time. When it developed the IRBM DF-26D, China expanded its strategic depth from the first island chain to the second island chain. Now the first island chain is part of the resolute defence strategy. Similarly, when China completes its six nuclear powered aircraft carriers, the Indian Ocean Region is likely to come within the strategic depth strategy. This will truly enhance China's ambition of being a maritime power with a blue-water navy capability.

64. David A. Shlapak et al., *A Question of Balance: Political Context and Military Aspects of the China-Taiwan Dispute* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2009). Also see Ashley Townshend and Brendan Thomas-Noone, "Averting Crisis: US Defence Spending, Deterrence and the Indo-Pacific", United States Studies Centre, University of Sydney, New South Wales, July 2019, <https://www.ussc.edu.au/analysis/averting-crisis-american-strategy-military-spending-and-collective-defence-in-the-indo-pacific>