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THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION IN THE DIRECTION OF MILITARY DOCTRINE SINCE THE FOUNDING OF  
NEW CHINA, AND THE LESSONS FROM IT

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*[This document traces how China's military doctrine—its concept of what kinds of wars the country may have to fight and how to fight them—has changed since the founding of the state. The general theme is the inveterately defensive nature of Chinese military planning. All countries, of course, would claim that their military posture is one of self-defense; but according to the authors, China's ambitions are explicitly limited to a defense of China's territory. Taiwan, of course, is included in that territory, and there is considerable evidence for inferences made by foreigners that China's also plans for the contingency of an attack on and conquest of that island. This document, however, does not discuss this aspect and, indeed, focuses on the threat of attack from Taiwan (especially, of course, during the time Chiang Kai-shek was alive). The authors may be implicitly critical of Mao's strategy. In case of American or Soviet attack, Mao allegedly wished to "lure the enemy in deep," allowing the enemy to become bogged down and caught up in a "people's war." But also Mao is quoted to the effect that any strategy that allows prolonged occupation of the country by the enemy is a bad strategy, something that seems in contradiction with the proposal to lure the enemy in deep. The authors also indicate that this particular strategy did not outlive the Chairman. China's general posture developed from people's war (stress on infantry and on guerilla tactics against superior forces) to mechanized warfare to today's informationalized. The main conflict China needs to prepare for, according to this analysis, is a localized war under conditions of high technology. In practice this means that China would like to be able to foil any American defense of Taiwan resulting from a Chinese attack on Taiwan. The authors point out that military doctrine is always subordinate to the overall political aims of the state—perhaps a commonplace, although the people's war tradition is very explicit about the primacy of the political. Another residue of people's war thinking is perhaps the notion that China needs to prepare to defend against and defeat a materially and technologically superior enemy.]*

Ever since the founding of New China almost 60 years ago, there has been a constant process of evolution of military doctrine in response to different military objectives, forms of warfare, and differences of enemy strength. It is important to sum up that process of historical evolution, to seek out its basic rules, and to derive appropriate lessons in order to develop a military doctrine for the new era and speed up military reform with Chinese characteristics.

### **1. The Historical Evolution of Chinese Military Doctrine Since the Founding of New China**

Students of military affairs have different ways of dividing the history of military doctrine since the founding of New

China. There is, however, a general agreement on a movement from active defense to active defense while drawing the enemy in, back to active defense, to winning a localized war under conditions of high technology: four phases.

1. The establishment of the doctrine of active defense.

For 20 years before the founding of New China the People's Army had consistently upheld the direction of active defense. In the period immediately after the founding, however, there was no clear decision on the direction of military policy. With the victory in the War to Resist America and Aid Korea, New China won a period of relative stability and peace; but America persisted in its attitude of enmity and tried to hold China under siege. Given the need to preserve the security of the state, the stipulation of a military doctrine became a matter of urgency, as proposed by Mao Zedong. In April 1955 then Minister of Defense Peng Dehuai reported to Mao Zedong, proposing the occasion of a meeting of the Warsaw Pact as an opportunity to discuss Chinese military strategy and policy with the Soviets. Mao Zedong pointed out: China's military doctrine is active defense; it absolutely is not preemption. That is the earliest expression of New China's military doctrine and it set the basis for the general direction to be followed. On 6 March 1957 Peng Dehuai made a report to the Central Military Commission: "On the Direction of the Fatherland's Military Doctrine and National Defense Construction." This was the first complete and systematic exposition of the doctrine of active defense. The major elements of this doctrine include: 1) Coordinated use of political, diplomatic, and military means to defend against and block potential aggressive war, with a strong national defense serving to maintain a peaceful environment for development; 2) In the face of a threat of war, China would not take pre-emptive action or initiate an attack under any pretext whatsoever—it would not fire the first shot; 3) If imperialism should, without regard to consequences, initiate an aggressive war against China, the PLA would be prepared to respond with a counterattack. After the battle line had been stabilized it would fight a protracted war, wearing down the enemy and depriving the enemy of the initiative in attack. The initiative would gradually shift to the PLA and the defensive posture would change to an attack mode.

New China's direction of active defense clearly stipulated that the enemy was American imperialism. The mode of fighting was full-scale war. The main direction of attack would be from the southeast coast. The war would be protracted in style, with its mode being a transformation from defense to attack. After this doctrine had been set out, a concrete direction was drawn up to implement it. Thus, in the 1950s Peng Dehuai set up coastal defenses, planning for the main campaign to be fought along the coast and the outlying islands. In the first half of the 1960s Lin Biao directed the work of the CMC. He rejected the above direction by Peng Dehuai, setting out the direction of "standing firm in the north and yielding in the south." He divided the coast into a region to be defended to the death and a region to be defended strongly. Generally speaking the Yangtze river was the boundary, with the north to be defended to the death

whereas in the south the enemy might be permitted to penetrate some. Mao Zedong, however, did not agree with this direction of Lin Biao's. He said: "This stand firm in the north and yield in the south—I'm not sure it's a good idea. We can't pay attention to the east and neglect the north." He also said, "I've studied military deployments for a long time. This business of standing firm in the north and yielding in the south—it may not work. The enemy will not necessarily follow Japan's old road. The main battlefield will not necessarily be in Korea or the northeast. The enemy's line of attack can come through Tianjin, Qingdao, Lianyungang, and Shanghai. They can come through the middle and cut the country in two, north and south. We don't need to be afraid of the two wings. If they occupy the northeast, there is still the area within the pass, so we don't have to be afraid of that wing. When the Japanese came in by that route, forcing the Chinese to the south, that did not solve their problem. We don't need to fear the wing that will occupy Guangdong. The danger is that they will come in the middle and split the country into north and south, two halves. That is a relatively greater threat." If we go by this, Mao Zedong still advocated tempting the enemy to penetrate deeply.

## 2. The Adjustment of Active Defense to Active Defense, Tempting the Enemy to Penetrate Deeply

After the 1960s the idea of tempting the enemy to penetrate deeply was further developed and received attention. In the 1970s it became the basic substance of China's military doctrine.

During the Chinese Revolutionary War era active defense was often achieved through tempting the enemy to penetrate deeply. Following the founding of New China Mao Zedong never forgot this successful experience. In the early 1950s there was the threat of aggression by a joint attack of the United States and the Chiang Kai-shek troops along the southeastern coast. Mao Zedong proposed that in addition to defending firmly several main places, we should not defend to the death the entire coastline. He proposed the notion of "tempting the enemy to penetrate deeply, then concentrating our forces to exterminate him." In the 1960s there was the danger that the United States could attack both from the north and from the south. Mao Zedong went so far as to say that if the United States attacked Guangxi from the sea or from Vietnam, we should not be afraid of losing even such a large city as Nanning. By the mid-1960s the United States was expanding the war in Vietnam and China's relations with the Soviet Union were becoming increasingly bad. China was in danger of being attacked by both the United States and the Soviet Union, the two superpowers. Mao Zedong proposed using the method of tempting the enemy to penetrate deep as a means for defeating aggression. At the Hangzhou Conference in June 1965, Mao Zedong pointed out: "The enemy will be easier to fight if we tempt him to penetrate deeply. I have never thought that resisting the enemy at the country's gates was a good method." After the Hangzhou Conference tempting the enemy to penetrate deeply became the guiding doctrine for the PLA in future wars. Several times during the following year Mao Zedong said, "We still want to let the enemy in. Offer him some bait and let him penetrate deeply. He will then be easily annihilated." His general conclusion was: "We have practiced tempting

the enemy to penetrate deeply for several decades. We met disaster in the five ‘Bandit Encirclement’ campaigns <sup>[1]</sup> because we did not tempt the enemy to penetrate deeply. Now everyone believes in it; there is no other way.” In March 1969, after the Zhenbaodao incident, <sup>[2]</sup> it seemed as if there might be a major war between China and the Soviet Union, Mao Zedong and the Party Center added active defense to tempting the enemy to penetrate deeply. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of that month, after listening to a report on the situation in the Zhenbaodao area, Mao Zedong pointed out: “It’s not important to fight closer than seven kilometers [indicating the range of Soviet artillery)]. It’s better to fight at a distance of 70 kilometer, 700 kilometers, 7000 kilometers.” On 28 April Mao Zedong said at a plenary session of the CMC, “It seems you can fight on a small scale or on a large scale. Fighting on a small scale means fighting along the border. In order to fight on a large scale, I recommend first yielding ground.” Following this directive by Mao Zedong, in the 1970s tempting the enemy to penetrate deeply and active defense were linked together, becoming the general direction of military doctrine. In December 1977 the CMC formally defined this direction as “active defense, tempting the enemy to penetrate deeply.”

In the various adjustments to military doctrine, the main focus was on tempting the enemy to penetrate deeply. Its basic spirit was: “In the first phase of the war, the main objective is to smash the enemy’s plan of attack while preserving our own vital forces. We must prevent a lengthy occupation by the enemy and preserve the country’s system during the course of the war. Afterwards we must in a planned manner tempt the enemy to penetrate to a prepared battleground, conducting a mobile war on a scale appropriate for the circumstances. We must concentrate superior military forces and annihilate the enemy bit by bit.” That is, we do not passively protect certain points or lines. We need to be flexible, prepared both to attack and defend, and not permit a prolonged occupation by the enemy. Mao Zedong once pointed out: “The Great Wall formerly did not play a defensive role. Possibly more than half of the construction is useless. The Maginot Line was penetrated, right? It was useless. It tied up a lot of forces at the expense of active forces. Our manner of fighting has never been to stand firm, taking whatever comes and fighting on whatever ground is available. We held ground during the five Bandit Exterminations; we tried to protect the entire central soviet area.” But Mao Zedong was also against our welcoming the enemy in with open arms. Once, in speaking of national defense, he criticized Stalin’s errors during the first part of the Patriotic War: “The war plan was to engage the enemy outside the country’s gates, so there had been no preparation inside the borders. There was only attack, no defense. Thus, once Hitler had fought his way in, there was no way to resist him. There remained only Zhuge Liang’s <sup>[3]</sup> 36<sup>th</sup> stratagem: the best is to run away. The only thing to do was to withdraw.” In April 1965 he pointed out again: “We don’t want to learn from Chiang Kai-shek and his like. He allowed the Japanese to conduct a prolonged occupation. They quickly fought

their way to Nanjing, Wuhan, Changsha. We don't want to learn from Stalin, who allowed Hitler to conduct a prolonged occupation, and before long was right in front of Moscow and Leningrad. We want to prevent the enemy from getting in deep and conducting a prolonged occupation." It is apparent that active defense, tempting the enemy in deep involved the coordination of both attack and defense.

During this period, the posture of active defense, tempting the enemy in deep, was linked with the plan to "fight an early war, fight a large-scale war, fight a nuclear war," and with "fight from all directions." In October 1964 Mao Zedong pointed out: "We must be reconciled to war. We need to prepare for war on the basis of an early war and a large-scale war. We must be reconciled to fighting an early war, a large-scale war, a nuclear war." In the 1960s and early 1970s China was besieged on all sides. In the northeast and southeast there was the United States, Japan, and Chiang Kai-shek. In the south there was SEATO. In the east there was India. And in the north to northwest there was the Soviet Union and Mongolia. Mao Zedong even made a most pessimistic estimation: "We must prepare to be occupied by the Soviet Union north of the Yellow River. They will divide us with the Americans, the Americans occupying all south of the Yangtze. The Huai River valley will be a zone of contention between the Soviets and the Americans. North of the Yellow River Wang Ming <sup>[4]</sup> will set up a government while Chiang Kai-shek will return south of the Yangtze." It was these conditions that led Mao Zedong to propose to "fight from all directions." This direction was consistent with the one to fight an early war, a large-scale war, a nuclear war. . . . The whole plan was directed toward the possibility that the American and Soviet superpowers would initiate a full-scale war against China.

### 3. The Evolution from Active Defense, Tempting the Enemy in Deep, Back to Active Defense.

After the third plenum of the 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee China entered the era of reform and opening. There was adjustment in the policy toward preparation toward war as the core of work turned toward economic development. This required a shift in military and defense planning in order to accommodate the general shift in national policy.

In the new era there was the question of whether the policy of active defense, tempting the enemy in deep should be changed, and if so, how? High ranking Party and military leaders paid a great deal of attention to these questions in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1980 Song Shilun, President of the Academy of Military Science, pointed out in a letter to the CMC that the policy of tempting the enemy in deep was an inexpedient military plan and recommended that China revert to the earlier version of active defense. Zhang Zhen, the PLA Chief of Staff at that time, also said, "I'm inclined no longer to use the term *tempt the enemy in deep* in military planning. This will not mean any real change in our military posture, but it will make our plans even more active and lively than before." He exchanged ideas with Yang Dezhi and Yang Yong, and after getting their agreement made reports to Nie Rongzhen, Ye Jianying, and Xu Xiangqian. On 30 September 1980 Zhang Zhen and the others made a summary report to Deng Xiaoping and received

his approval. At a study meeting on 15 October Deng Xiaoping fully affirmed the policy of active defense. He said, “In a future anti-aggression war, what direction should we choose? The one I approve of is active defense.” After 1985 the CMC based itself on the scientific decision that “the danger of war still exists, but a world war can be avoided this century.” It went a step further in providing the policy of active defense with concrete substance. This involved strengthening deterrence, upholding peace, and providing guidance for the possible outbreak of localized small-scale wars. The direction of active defense was formally reaffirmed at an enlarged meeting of the CMC in December 1988.

This did not mean a simple reversion to the policy adopted during the early years following the founding of New China. Rather, it was a new development in its content. First, the national interest was taken as the highest standard for military preparations. Active defense implied deterring war and struggling for an advantageous international and domestic environment. Secondly, it held to the policy of rejecting pre-emption and not firing the first shot. While China had nuclear submarines, guided missiles, artificial satellites, and other means of threat, the policy continued to be one of deterrence, absolutely not one of firing the first shot. Thirdly, the policy was no longer to tempt the enemy in deep, but rather to defend strongpoints in the first phases of the war. In the period after the founding of New China there were shades of tempting the enemy in deep in the general policy of defense, but after this readjustment that was no longer the case. This was a major change. Fourthly, while we would not stretch our hands to the outside, the strategy of defense contained an element of attack. As Deng Xiaoping pointed out, “Our policy is one of active defense, but active defense is not defense pure and simple. Defense contains an element of attack.” Fifthly, we should prepare to meet an enemy with weaponry superior to ours. We would not engage in an arms race. During the 1980s there were obvious deficiencies in the weaponry of the PLA as compared with that of the armies of other great powers and this gap would take a relatively long time to close. Sixth, we would continue to uphold the strategy of protracted war. Deng Xiaoping clearly pointed out: “The strategy of active defense necessarily contains within itself the strategy of protracted war.

#### 4. Fighting and Winning a Localized War Under Conditions of High Technology: The Direction of Military Planning for a New Era

In the 1980s and the early 1990s there were dramatic changes in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union fell apart. There was a major transformation of the world political situation. Added to this was the radical development in world military affairs symbolized by the development of the military use of information technology. This was especially clear in the Gulf War in 1990. All of this showed that warfare in the future would be conducted under conditions of high technology. In 1993 Jiang Zemin made a speech to the CMC in response to these developments, combining them with China’s actual conditions. He pointed out the new direction in military planning: The basic direction in military planning should be to prepare to fight a localized war under conditions of high technology. This required raising the

quality of the PLA and its war preparedness. In military construction there should emphasis on quality over quantity; and in manpower there should be an emphasis on scientific training rather than mass.

In contrast to earlier periods, the new emphasis was on preparing for a localized war rather than full-scale war, especially for a localized war under conditions of high technology. Therefore, the goal of military planning stressed obedience and service to the general purposes of national development, protecting territorial sovereignty and advantages at sea, guarding the unity of the fatherland and social stability, protecting the ability to engage in reform and opening. Training would be directed toward preparing for possible localized conflicts under conditions of high technology. War planning would be directed toward raising deterrence capacity and combat capacity, with the aim both to deter war and win war. The new military posture developed and improved in response to the changing situation. It can be seen from this that the new military posture grew out of the policy of active defense, but provided it with a new content.

## **2. Lessons of the Evolution of Chinese Military Planning Policy Since the Founding of New China**

### **1. The adjustments in Military Planning Policy Were Responses to Objective Conditions**

We are able to see the following from the evolution of Chinese military doctrine since the founding of the state: these adjustments and reforms were not simply the result of subjective human perceptions but were mainly determined by objective conditions. The key to adjusting and reforming military doctrine is correctly to see the changes in objective conditions and to take the initiative in adapting to them. With the founding of New China and the basic resolution of the large-scale domestic military struggles, the country moved from a warlike to a peaceful environment. While during the earlier period the basic military mission had been to secure political power, it now became that of building and maintaining national defense in a period of peace. This new objective condition required that the military mission be changed to one of defense against aggression, consolidating the new political regime, and protecting the people in their peaceful labor. The policy of active defense was adopted to meet these goals. During the 1960s and 1970s the international situation became increasingly complex. In order to meet the omnidirectional threat posed by the American and Soviet superpowers and their allies, the military doctrine changed from active defense to active defense, luring the enemy in deep. The focal point of preparation was on “fighting early, fighting on a large scale, fighting a nuclear war.” In the 1980s there was a new transformation of the international situation. The American and Soviet superpowers had achieved a nuclear balance, the third world was rising, the forces for world peace were growing, and international tensions were becoming less. China’s domestic reform and opening were proceeding smoothly and the overall situation had changed greatly for the better. At that time there was still the danger of war but it became possible to deter war or to postpone its outbreak. Military policy became once again that of active defense. The 1990s saw a worldwide revolution in military affairs. The mode of warfare began to change from mechanized war to informational

war. Local war became the main mode of combat. Under these conditions the CMC proposed a new direction for military policy. It is not hard to see that the direction of military policy responds to the security situation, general national capacities, technological developments, and the general developments in the modes of warfare. It is the necessary consequence of objective conditions. However, these changes are absolutely not the spontaneous products of objective conditions. They can only be realized after undergoing the influence of the subjective perspectives of commanders. Thus, these transformations are not something that come about passively but are the consequences of initiative. The adjustments and direction can come about only through the correct understanding of objective changes and taking the initiative in responding to these changes.

## 2. Obedience and Service to Overall National Strategy Are the Premise for the Adjustments and Changes in Military Doctrine

The adjustment and change in the direction of military doctrine are the active subjective response to objective conditions. This kind of response is not isolated, but is systematic. It impinges on the politics, economy, military, diplomacy, and cultural factors of the country. This is because the military is merely a subsystem of the country's macroscopic system. This means that military doctrine is a component of the country's overall strategy. This means that obedience and service to the overall national strategy are the premise for adjustments and changes in military doctrine. Each of the adjustments since the founding of the state have not merely been the result of military considerations but of the overall national strategy. If changes in military doctrine are made in isolation from overall national strategy, they would take a wrong direction. In the relatively long period since the founding of New China the country has faced powerful enemies and the threat of armed aggression. Therefore the core of overall national strategy has been to protect the countries continued existence and to protect the consolidation of the new-born people's democratic regime, to guarantee the ability of the whole people to enjoy peace in their labors. For the past 40 years and more of effort by the Chinese people, the basis of state authority has become ever more solid and the possibility of an attack by foreign enemies increasingly small. It has become possible to struggle for a relatively long-lasting peaceful environment. The country has entered into a new era in which the core task is economic construction. The core of the national strategy has moved from the preservation of existence to development. The new military doctrine is precisely a response to this change in national strategy.

## 3. The Direction of Military Policy Requires to Be Supplemented and Supported by a Relatively Strong Concrete Measures

Military doctrine is a general guiding direction. Its implementation requires concrete direction, measures, and steps. Therefore, at the same time that we adjust military doctrine we must set up a concrete program for bringing it to reality.



Otherwise, the doctrine will become a dead end. There have been concrete measures for implementing all the differences in military doctrine since the founding of New China. Thus, the implementation of the doctrine requires the coordination among different units, regions, and departments.

#### 4. There Must Be a Unity of Stability and Vitality in the Implementation of Military Doctrine

Military doctrine is stable in its overall character but it must also be able to change in response to objective conditions and so requires vitality. Therefore, we must achieve unity between stability and vitality in military doctrine. The changes in military doctrine since the founding of New China have followed this principle. The nuclear idea in all the adjustments of military doctrine has been unchanging stability, namely the idea of active defense and not making the first move. This is because China is a peace-loving socialist country, a developing country seeking development. It has maintained this direction in different military and international environments. But the content of active defense has changed in accord with changes in the domestic and international environment. Only if we accurately bring about this unity of stability and vitality will our military doctrine be able to have a scientific basis.

#### 5. The Adjustment in the Direction of Military Doctrine Is the Lever for Overall Military Change

From the perspective of epistemology, there is an intimate relationship between the objective and the subjective. The objective determines the subjective, while the subjective takes its function from the objective. Military doctrine is a necessary demand by the objective on the subjective and is also a self-conscious subjective activity. It has an enormous directing and leadership role. That is to say, self-consciously applying the guiding and leading role of military doctrine can provide the initiative of promoting full-scale change in the military sphere. This is the necessary internally operating factor in the evolution of Chinese military doctrine. In the years following the founding of New China, the doctrine of active defense led to the strengthening of the southeastern seaboard front and also to steps leading to military regularization and modernization. In the 1990s there was a new military direction leading the PLA toward mechanization and informationalization. This led to changes in deployment and in methods of fighting. Therefore, in the new era of active leaps in military developments we must fully recognize the key role of the adjustment and reform of military doctrine and self-consciously take initiative in applying that key role, active promoting military reform with Chinese characteristics.

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[1] A series of campaigns by Chiang Kai-shek's army against communist forces in the southeast in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

[2] A battle between Chinese and Soviet forces on a disputed island along China's northeastern border with Russia.

[3] Zhuge Liang is a legendarily astute strategist from China's Three Kingdoms era (AD 184-260).

[\[4\]](#) Wang Ming (original name, Chen Shaoyu), 1904-1974, a Soviet-trained Party leader, was Mao's main rival in the late 1930s and early 1940s. During the Cultural Revolution he sought refuge in the Soviet Union.