

## **The Concept of Active Defence in China's Military**

**Strategy**, by Amrita Jash, New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2021,

pp. xxix + 290, Rs 995

*Gurpreet S. Khurana\**

The strategy articulated by Deng Xiaoping in 1990 as a guiding tenet of China's foreign policy was: "*Observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs calmly, hide our capacities and bide our time, be good at maintaining a low profile, and never claim leadership*".<sup>1</sup> Today, Beijing has clearly deviated from this tenet and under the garb of 'striving for achievement' (*fen fa you wei*), it has been increasing its politico-military assertiveness in the conduct of its international relations, particularly against its maritime and continental neighbours. One wonders why, since in its quest to reorder the established international system, China may be doing much harm to its own image as a responsible world power. The book under review aptly answers this conundrum. It says that a 'low-profile' approach may portray China as 'too soft', thereby seriously impairing its 'core interests', and particularly its national security against enemies, both within and without, thus jeopardising 'regime survival'. Such approach would also be untenable as China's power grows, along with the nationalistic feelings amongst its citizens.

To understand the nuances of China's military strategy, and more specifically its concept of 'active defence', the book adopts a net assessment approach. It begins with a detailed examination of China's perception of

---

\* The reviewer is Captain in the Indian Navy. He is currently Head, Centre of Excellence, Indo-Pacific and China Maritime Studies, Visakhapatnam, India, and is also a Visiting Professor at Naval War College, Goa.



its security environment, along with its overarching national strategic objectives, notably the fulfilment of the 'Chinese Dream' of building a well-off society and great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, leading to its strategic approaches for national development and national security. It is refreshing to note that the author goes much beyond the more widely known aspects of Sun Tzu's teachings and connects the provisions of China's defence white papers on military strategy with its actions on ground, notably during the India–China military standoff in eastern Ladakh in mid-2020.

While this assessment seems to be beset with no grave omissions, some questions remain unanswered. For instance, it remains unclear whether in its actions on ground across the India–China border, China has lately tended to avoid war altogether or has merely adopted Sun Tzu's dictum of 'winning wars without fighting'. This may be seen in context of China's 'new security concept' (*xin anquan guandian*) articulated in the late 1990s, which says that 'force cannot fundamentally resolve disputes and conflicts...(and) the use of force and the threat to use force can hardly bring about lasting peace'.<sup>2</sup> This policy shift essentially dictates that China should resolve disputes with other countries through soft power—including diplomacy and charm offensive (*meili gongshi*)—to find accommodation in their respective positions, thereby arriving at 'win-win' solutions. Therefore, is China's 'salami slicing' tactic meant to avoid war or does it represent a more malicious form of war combined with psychological operations and lawfare? One may even question if China's actions against India across the India–China border were in consonance with its 'new security concept', but then it always takes two to tango!

The Chinese conceptualisation of 'active defence' is subject to diversely disputed interpretations and views worldwide. The concept may have been valid in the 1980s when the strategic direction of Mao Zedong called for '...luring the enemy deep and the use of mobile warfare (against it)...' (p. 78), but its applicability in the present times remains ambiguous. The Chinese leaders' endeavour to rename the concept to 'active defence strategy under new historic conditions'(p. 78) does little to dissipate the fog.

The book aptly cites the 2020 United States (US) Department of Defense (DoD) report reflecting the predominant view among military professionals. It says that 'active defence' draws from China's military doctrine of offensive action at operational and tactical levels, while

retaining a defensive posture at the strategic level. However, strategic defence is not specific to China, which is why the military forces of most countries across the globe are called ‘defence forces’. Even the United Nations (UN) Charter permits a nation the right of individual and collective self-defence (Article 51) at the strategic level, whereby international law of armed conflicts confers upon it belligerent rights under the principle of *jus ad bellum*. So, how is the concept of ‘active defence’ unique to China? Furthermore, some military powers across the globe, notably the US, even interpret Article 51 of the UN Charter as a right to undertake ‘pre-emptive’ self-defence. In this context, where does China’s ‘active defence’ stand? Will Beijing adhere to the policy articulated in its 2008 Defence White Paper<sup>3</sup>, which talks about China ‘...striking the enemy only after the enemy has started an attack’? Both the aforementioned US DoD report and the author of this book do not believe so.

Not claiming to hold all answers, the book only attempts to advance the debate, which may continue for a while. The applicability of China’s ‘active defence’ doctrine is yet unclear in terms of the quantum of force and the time of its application, but it possibly applies more clearly in spatial terms. It mandates the neutralisation of a military threat well outside China’s national periphery; and thereby translates into the need for ‘strategic depth’ beyond—rather than within—Chinese sovereign territory. Beijing has never precisely defined the measure of such ‘depth’, possibly since such distance would be enhanced progressively in tandem with China’s military power projection capabilities. The growing Chinese naval footprint in the Indian Ocean is germane in this context. It brings to the fore the essence of the distant maritime warfare for China. The book thus aptly examines China’s naval doctrines and capabilities, along with those relating to space and cyberspace, all of which are now increasingly feeding into China’s military strategy.

The analysis in the book is based on a very sound understanding of basic concepts of statecraft, notably national interest and objectives, the constituents of national strategy and the various elements of national power that contribute to the formulation of such strategy. The Chinese perception of strategy (*zhanlue*) differs much *vis-à-vis* Western thinking, and the author does well by basing the study on the understanding of this core fact. Since Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*—the oldest treatise on military operational art—Chinese military strategy has developed in insular environs. This has led to a wide difference between the Chinese military

forces and the military forces of other major powers, not only in terms of fundamental doctrinal nomenclature and concepts but also in terms of strategy formulation. The doctrinal variance is best exemplified by the differences in two strategy board games—the Chinese ‘Weichi’ and the Western ‘Chess’—which explains how the Chinese think *vis-à-vis* their counterparts in the West. In ‘Chess’, the player aims to checkmate the opponent’s king through a single decisive encounter. ‘Weichi’, on the contrary, is essentially an ‘encirclement game’ involving multiple battles over a wide front, where the objective is to fully surround a larger total area of the board than the opponent. Clearly, the Chinese ‘Weichi’ is oriented towards fighting a land campaign, thereby—unlike the Western ‘Chess’—entailing capture of territory. ‘Chess’, on the other hand, is more akin to a naval campaign, which usually does not entail holding of territory.

Another difference between Chinese and Western operational thought lies in the subtle nuances of ‘operational manoeuvre’. Although ‘manoeuvre’ is the cornerstone of Sun Tzu’s treatise, and also essential in the Chinese game of ‘Weichi’, its relevance is confined only to the initial part of the campaign to avoid the strength of the adversary. In the Chinese operational thought, decisive victory is achieved at a later stage only through ‘attrition’. In contrast, in Western doctrine, as exemplified by the ‘Chess’ game, ‘manoeuvre’ is critical for the entire length of the campaign, particularly since the operational objective would not usually involve capture of territory. This variance possibly emanates from the historical-cultural divergence between China and the West. Whereas the Western military forces, having learnt lessons from their ‘bloody’ histories, seek to avoid ‘attrition’ of own forces at all costs, China perceives its strength to lie in numbers—in terms of both platforms and human resource—and thus its ability to absorb ‘attrition’ of own forces.

The book also examines other aspects closely linked to China’s military strategy, notably its defence industrial complex, defence management and defence budget. The analysis in the book is based on diverse and credible sources—much of these references being Mandarin Chinese—which make it an authentic and credible assessment. In addition to the evolving Chinese military strategic thinking, the book also attempts to answer some key questions of immense relevance today with regard to China as a neighbour, as well as China as a major global power. How will China behave with its maritime and land neighbours? How will it contribute to international peace and stability as a great

power? Or more generally, as the author says, ‘What entails China’s rise?’ The findings of the book are, therefore, valuable for statesmen, professionals and analysts alike, not only in the countries neighbouring China but of the entire Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

#### NOTES

1. See <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/661734.shtml>
2. ‘China’s Position Paper on the New Security Concept’, People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 31 July 2002. Available at <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/xw/t27742.htm>, accessed on 15 April 2021.
3. ‘China’s National Defense in 2008’, Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, January 2009, Beijing. Available at [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2017-04/11/content\\_4778231\\_4.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/2017-04/11/content_4778231_4.htm), accessed on 15 April 2021.

