

CHINESE LESSONS FROM OTHER PEOPLES' WARS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY DIGEST

CASE STUDIES

[THE KOSOVO CAMPAIGN](#)

China pays heavy attention to this case because the Kosovo Campaign was both a controversial foreign military intervention and an awesome display of air power.

[THE FALKLAND-MALVINAS WAR](#)

This is a case all major powers study. But China is clearly more interested than any other nation, presumably for this case's remarkable resemblance to the Taiwan issue.

[THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR](#)

The relevance of this case for China is clearly about its need to use missiles as a main deterrence force against Taiwan's push for independence and possible U.S. intervention.

[THE GULF WARS](#)

The 1991 Gulf War is widely viewed as a major influence on China's ongoing modernization, but the PLA is more ambivalent about taking lessons from the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

[U.S. PACIFIC COMMAND](#)

PACOM is the face of the U.S. military to the PLA, and so it is not surprising that China pays close attention to PACOM's strategic design and operations in the Western Pacific.

[U.S. COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN](#)

PLA analysts note that U.S. COIN operations took place on extremely difficult battlefields and employed network-centric methods and equipment in a wide range of operations.

[THE WARS IN CHECHNYA](#)

Russia's Chechen problem has much relevance to China's problems in Xinjiang and Tibet.

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Chinese Lessons from
Other Peoples' Wars



CHINESE LESSONS FROM OTHER PEOPLES' WARS

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*Andrew Scobell
David Lai
Roy Kamphausen, eds.*

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THE PLA CONFERENCE BOOK SERIES



CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

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The annual conference on the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) took place at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, from October 22-24, 2010. The topic for the conference was the "PLA's lessons from Other People's Wars." Participants at the conference sought to discern what lessons the PLA has been learning from the strategic and operational experiences of the armed forces of other countries during the past three decades.

Two main factors drove the conference's focus on what Chinese military analysts have learned from non-Chinese wars. First, the PLA has not fought an actual war in the past three decades. Yet, recently, fundamental changes have taken place on the battlefield and in the conduct of war. Since the PLA has not fought in recent decades, it has no experience in the changing face of war, and thus could not follow Mao Zedong's admonition to "learn by doing"; instead, it must look abroad for ways to discern the new patterns of warfare in the evolving information age. Studying Chinese military analysts' observations of non-Chinese wars therefore provides a glimpse of what the PLA takes from others' experience to improve its capability and to prepare itself for dealing with China's national security issues, such as Taiwan, the South and East China Sea disputes, and internal unrest in Tibet and Xinjiang, to name the most obvious ones.

Second, Chinese military analysts have noticeably more freedom in assessing and commenting on the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the successes and failures, of other countries' wars. On the other hand, when discussing their own wars, for political reasons Chinese military analysts must emphasize the heroics and triumphs of the PLA and downplay setbacks and failures. While there is certainly recognition of the daunting challenges the PLA has faced—regarding the Korean War, for example, Chinese accounts readily acknowledge that the Chinese People's Volunteers (CPV) were totally unprepared logistically and devastated by airpower—there are limits to the levels of candor. As proof of this, to date, there is no critical analysis of the PLA's claimed success or dismissed failure in the Sino-Vietnamese border war of 1979 by Chinese military analysts.

Studying Chinese military analysts' observations of other people's wars therefore highlights key insights as to what Chinese military analysts consider important determinants of current and future military operational success and failure.

The following is a collection of executive summaries from each chapter found in the 2011 conference volume, *Chinese Lessons From Other Peoples' Wars*.

For more information about the PLA Conference series, please visit [NBR's website](#).

CHAPTER 2 – PEOPLE’S LIBERATION ARMY LESSONS FROM FOREIGN CONFLICTS: THE AIR WAR IN KOSOVO

June Teufel Dreyer
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Different groups within the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) learned different lessons from their analyses of the Kosovo conflict; a decade after the confrontation, the three distinct voices that emerged at the time continue to be heard in only slightly modified form.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Advocates of the first school, that the PLA must match the United States weapon for weapon, have seen large increases in the defense budget each year. The second school, which argued that the PLA should rely on using existing weaponry better and employ inexpensive asymmetric techniques lest China be lured into an arms race that would bankrupt it, still castigates those who claim that battlefield victory is impossible unless and until they are provided with state of the art weapons. With regard to the third voice, which argued for the continuing validity of people’s war, the primacy of men over weapons is regularly affirmed, as is the need for political work to bolster morale and belief in the Party’s policies as the proper guide for action.

There has been no resolution of the debate among the three schools, which can be seen as complementary rather than mutually contradictory. Only the first is expensive, and with the country’s economy continuing to grow, it does not place an undue burden on the national budget.

This analysis finds certain pitfalls in the PLA’s analysis: lessons learned that are suspiciously advantageous to the particular part of the military that makes a case for them, a tendency not to challenge certain factors that might challenge cherished PLA traditions, and an apparent unwillingness to consider the implications of certain issues at all.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Assuming that PLA journals accurately reflect what military planners are saying to each other and to policy makers, American policy planners should be aware that the PLA scrutinizes the combat performance of the U.S. military in minute detail, and that it will seek to adapt its weapons and strategy to counter, match, or exceed those of the United States.
- The PLA’s publications do not evince awareness of the shortages of munitions, in the types of munitions available, and in personnel whose skills levels were adequate for the jobs they were asked to do. This indicates that the PLA may overestimate the capabilities of the U.S. military.
- U.S. authorities should be aware of the Chinese penchant for sanctifying misinformation from its own military history to justify its use in the present day. This apparent unwillingness to challenge shibboleths constitutes a potential vulnerability that U.S. planners should take into consideration.
- The U.S. should be aware that a desire to overestimate the role of the population in helping to defeat an invader could lead the Chinese into another dangerous blind alley.
- Chinese commentaries do not acknowledge that the same dependence on high technology that they believe to be the Achilles heel of the American military may become a comparable vulnerability that the United States can use against the PLA as its own weaponry becomes increasingly sophisticated.
- U.S. planners should be aware of the PLA’s tendency to interpret actions that the United States sees as reactions to particular events, such as the decision to intervene in Kosovo to halt ethnic cleansing, through the prism of a conviction that it is part of an American grand strategy to maintain and extend U.S. global hegemony.

CHAPTER 3 – SINICA RULES THE WAVES? THE PEOPLE’S LIBERATION ARMY NAVY’S POWER PROJECTION AND ANTI-ACCESS/ AREA DENIAL LESSONS FROM THE FALKLANDS/MALVINAS CONFLICT

Christopher D. Yung
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines the lessons the Chinese military has drawn from the Falklands/Malvinas conflict of 1982 and applied (doctrinally, operationally, and in terms of procurement) to the expected contingencies of Taiwan and an “Out of Area” maritime campaign.

MAIN ARGUMENT

Chinese analysts highlight the following conclusions, which serve as guidance for the operations practiced and executed, doctrine being developed, and weapon systems and platforms procured. These conclusions are: “Know your enemy, know yourself”; the importance of tactical estimates and correct deployment/employment of forces; the importance of tactical and war-fighting guidelines (doctrine); the importance of effective systems of command and control; the importance of national mobilization and defense economy; “Take your protection with you”; the importance of bases and access to facilities; the paramount importance of air power; the important role of merchant shipping; the role of amphibious forces; and logistics as force multiplier or “Achilles Heel.”

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Owing to their applicability to China’s defense of the “Near Seas,” the Chinese military are likely to continue procuring or developing into a mature capability diesel-electric submarines, modern surface combatants, land-based and sea-based maritime strike aircraft, anti-ship cruise missiles, anti-ship ballistic missiles, and maritime surveillance capabilities to track and target ships at sea.
- Owing to their applicability to China’s “Out of Area” maritime campaigns, the Chinese military are likely to continue procuring or developing L-class amphibious ships, aircraft carrier capabilities, nuclear attack submarines, aerial refueling capabilities, and replenishment ships.
- Operationally, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) will continue participating in exercises that stress combined arms ground-sea-air operations; amphibious operations; coordination among surface combatants, air forces, and subsurface forces; command and control of forces afloat, in the air, and ashore; and a combination of general purpose forces with ballistic missiles and other Second Artillery forces.
- The PLA will seek to gain access (temporarily or periodically) to a naval support facility far from China’s shores, will continue to practice its operations far from Mainland China in conjunction with foreign partners, and will continue to operate “Out of Area” in the Gulf of Aden, the Indian Ocean, and in other foreign locations.

CHAPTER 4 – THE PEOPLE’S LIBERATION ARMY’S SELECTIVE LEARNING: LESSONS OF THE IRAN-IRAQ “WAR OF THE CITIES” MISSILE DUELS AND USES OF MISSILES IN OTHER CONFLICTS

Christopher Twomey
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter finds that China has “learned” few lessons from ballistic missile usage per se in other historic cases. Instead, it has engaged in a degree of doctrinal innovation that moves well beyond the traditional “terror” attack usages of ballistic missiles.

MAIN ARGUMENT

China has not imported lessons directly from Iranian and Iraqi use of ballistic missiles in the 1980s, or Iraqi use in either 1991 or 2003. It has certainly examined those cases, and portrays a relatively accurate assessment of the military role they played. That said, it does dress up those attacks in typical inflated language about their political utility for sowing terror and thereby attacking the adversary’s morale. Nevertheless, these lessons are not then analytically extrapolated to China’s strategic situation. Instead, the substantial innovation that China has undertaken with regard to its ballistic missile force, and apparently its missile doctrine, moves orthogonally away from such brute terror attacks. Thus, precision attacks on key nodes of military utility are the core of Chinese missile strike strategy. This suggests a degree of innovative doctrinal development. The Chinese appear to be extrapolating from American standoff precision strike campaigns in the 1990s and 2000s, to be sure, but nevertheless adapting these lessons to areas of their own relative technology competency.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This analysis raises some operational implications and calls for further research as well.

- The flexibility with which the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) developed distinct technical answers to doctrinal demands is likely to be disconcerting for the U.S. military that uses a different approach, rendering problematic the anticipation of likely future such innovative developments by the PLA.
- China is likely to continue to emphasize and diversify the roles for its missile forces beyond traditional strategic roles.
- Further examination of the interaction of demand-pull of operational needs and the supply-push of existing bureaucratic and technical expertise is warranted. This would help anticipate future likely directions for emphasis in deployment of capabilities and development of doctrine for the PLA.

CHAPTER 5 – CHINESE LESSONS FROM THE GULF WARS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter analyzes Chinese military writings about U.S. wars with Iraq to determine what possible lessons the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) may have learned from them.

MAIN ARGUMENT

PLA writings suggest that these two wars have been very influential, affecting Chinese tactical, operational, and strategic thinking. Not only have these wars affected Chinese military doctrine, promoting greater jointness, but they have also underscored the impact of information technology. This is reflected not only in an emphasis on increasing access to information within all aspects of Chinese military operations (the “informationalization” of the PLA), but also has led to renewed emphasis on political warfare, as embodied in the concepts of psychological warfare, public opinion warfare, and legal warfare.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The PLA, given its lack of combat experience, seems to be trying to compensate through the close study and analysis of other nations’ wars—especially those of the United States. Especially influential have been the two Gulf Wars between the United States and Iraq.

PLA analysis of American military experience includes examination of the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war. The resulting lessons learned affect the full range of Chinese military activities, including not only weapons acquisition, but doctrinal development and training. As important, it is leading Chinese military leaders to rethink their strategic approach to conflict.

PLA writings suggest that they consider political support from both elites and the public to be a key strategic center of gravity. These writings also suggest that the Chinese are likely undertaking measures in peacetime to influence domestic, American, and third-party elite and broader perceptions. This includes trying to create a legal environment that will be supportive of Chinese positions in the event of conflict, as well as influencing public opinion through media and public diplomacy.

CHAPTER 6 – THE PEOPLE’S LIBERATION ARMY LESSONS LEARNED FROM RECENT PACIFIC COMMAND OPERATIONS AND CONTINGENCIES

Frank Miller
Defense Intelligence Agency

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter highlights lessons learned by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) from its studies of and interactions with the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), including their evolving motivations and areas of interests.

MAIN ARGUMENT

China’s main purpose for interacting with the U.S. military was to assist in the modernization of the PLA. As the combatant command responsible for the Asia-Pacific Region, PACOM is the face of the U.S. Military to the PLA. The PLA readily engaged with PACOM when its interests could be met, or when PACOM offered entrée to more strategic, national-level lessons resident elsewhere in the United States. As the PLA’s shi, or strategic positioning increased, other factors detracted from their desire to engage, but not their need to study, PACOM and its subordinate forces. These factors include a shared sense of competition for military primacy in Asia and the need in Beijing to protect the viability of their strategic message, even within the PLA’s own ranks. Thus, the bilateral military relationship entered a phase of downward spiraling to the point now where the primary lessons the PLA wants to learn from PACOM is how to defeat it.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This analysis raises some operational implications and calls for further research as well.

- Pacific Command and its forces, are increasingly seen by the PLA as a tool for surrounding and containing China’s peaceful development. The PLA will engage with PACOM only when Beijing feels its strategic position in a particular issue is weak, when their studies assess PACOM can offer them lessons of value, and when engaging does not undermine another, seemingly unrelated but no less important, issue.
- The reduction of PACOM’s voice in the bilateral relationship is a loss to Washington of a key component of the Department of Defense (DoD) global engagement strategy in dealing with China.
 - Whereas PACOM used to be a source for cooperation, it is now seen more as a potential enemy.
 - Whereas proponents of PLA modernization and transformation used to seek best practices and lessons from the U.S. military through PACOM, they are increasingly turning to other sources for the same information, not willing to pay the political price for dealing directly with the United States.
 - Whereas Washington used to have the ability to dial up or down the rhetoric in bilateral communications, the loss of PACOM as an accepted component in the relationship has forced an unhealthy formality in what should be normal messaging between two militaries.
- Washington can no longer depend on PACOM to send objective messages to the PLA, because Beijing is too busy studying how to counter their operations to listen.

CHAPTER 7 – THE INFLUENCE OF U.S. COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN ON THE PEOPLE’S LIBERATION ARMY

Martin Andrew
GI Zhou Newsletter

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter looks at the influence of U.S. counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in Afghanistan on the People’s Liberation Army (PLA).

MAIN ARGUMENT

The PLA has learned many lessons from U.S. COIN operations in Afghanistan, but the primary areas involve battlefield fire support, interdiction, the importance of low collateral damage, helicopters, unmanned air vehicles (UAVs), and fixed-wing close air support in the conduct of conventional operations. These lessons have been applied to the overall development and modernization programs of the PLA, and not exclusively to the development of a Chinese-style COIN capability and doctrine.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

China has transferred the COIN mission from the PLA to the People’s Armed Police Force (PAP). It implies that the China sees this mission in an exclusively domestic context. The PLA itself is not preparing to conduct external COIN operations on the scale of U.S. operations in Afghanistan. It is unclear how the PLA would respond if it were called upon to perform COIN-like roles in an overseas context.

The PLA has nonetheless used the lessons learned by the U.S. military to inform the developing “jointness” of its own operations. Combined arms operations, with realistic training, have been emphasized to increase the capability of the PLA.

The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) does not have close air support and low collateral damage weapons comparable to those of the United States but fully appreciates U.S. advances in these areas and is trying to replicate them where it can. The PLA also has grasped the importance of helicopter assault, attack, and lift roles as well as the importance of battlefield fire support, especially from fixed-wing close air support assets. Moreover, the PLA sees unmanned systems as having ever-greater importance on the modern battlefield.

CHAPTER 8 – LEARNING FROM THE NEIGHBORS: THE PEOPLE’S LIBERATION ARMY EXAMINES THE SMALL WARS AND COUNTERINSURGENCIES WAGED BY RUSSIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter examines the People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) assessment of the Russian counterinsurgency (COIN) operations from the 1990s and beyond.

MAIN ARGUMENT

In the absence of large-scale insurgencies in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) over the past 40 years, and the distant experience of China’s own COIN operations in the 1950s-60s, the PLA pays close attention to the COIN operations of the Russian military, particularly the two Chechen wars (1994-96 and 1999-2009). The PLA analysts seem to have reached a consensus regarding the socio-politico-economic origins of the post-Soviet insurgency and terror issues in Russia. That is, terrorism and insurgencies are forms of “political violence” caused by deeper social ills. They have debated, however, about the effectiveness of the tactics, use of firepower, intelligence gathering, and processing of the Russian COIN operations. While the PLA academia display more favorable views of the Russian operations in the second Chechen War, the PLA intelligence, including their counterparts in the People’s Armed Police (PAP), are more critical about Russia’s approaches, particularly about the weakness of the Russian intelligence in COIN operations, as well as in dealing with terror groups in the broader socio-political milieu.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- PLA analysts clearly favor broader and more comprehensive treatment of the terror and insurgency issues.
- They attach great importance to intelligence gathering, sharing, processing, and disseminating in anti-terror and COIN operations.
- The PLA discourse over the Russian experience, particularly the structural deficiency of the Russian intelligence community, is perhaps a detour for some analysts, such as in the PAP, to argue for more effective and independent intelligence gathering and processing ability and infrastructure.
- Some, particularly the Intelligence Department of the PLA General Staff, favor the American approach of high-tech reconnaissance and information analysis, something that the Russians seem incapable of doing. It is unclear how this is operationalized.
- The focus on the tactical aspects of the Russian COIN operations by some analysts remains relevant for the PLA in the event that such militarized COIN operations become necessary.
- Recent discussion of anti-terror and COIN shows that PLA is getting interested in cross-border operations.

