

China's military philosophy and strategy

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Robert Green served in the Royal Navy from 1962 to 1982. As a Commander, his final appointment was as Staff Officer (Intelligence) to the Commander-in-Chief Fleet running his intelligence team in the Northwood bunker 1980-82, including during the Falklands War. He is a frequent contributor to The Spokesman, usually on nuclear matters (see nos.127, 129, 131, 135).

As the United States again flexes its military prowess in the Middle East and East Asia, it seems determined to challenge China in its backyard while also provoking Russia and North Korea into a military confrontation. In light of these disturbing developments, I offer an alternative assessment to the US-led western mainstream media propaganda view of the military threat posed by China.

China has learned not to wage war

China is one of the world's oldest civilisations. In a vast, influential country once ruled by warlords and often threatened by external enemies, the Chinese famously pioneered new military technology, for example inventing gunpowder in the 9th century. Their accomplished seafaring explorers and traders ranged beyond East Asian waters aided by Chinese maritime inventions, including the stern-mounted rudder, mariner's compass, and bulkhead compartments improving ship integrity. Chinese merchants traded far into the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and down the East African coast; and China developed a capable naval fleet to protect these enterprises. However, it saw no need to build an overseas empire. The last time it attacked another country was its neighbour, North Vietnam, in 1979, in response to a border dispute and Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia and seizing of the Paracel and Spratly Islands, also claimed by China.

Modern Chinese strategists know their history; and they still follow the teachings of Sun Tzu, a philosophical military strategist who wrote *The Art of War* around



500BC. Three of Sun's maxims were:

- *Military force should only be used to protect people from turmoil and encourage peace*
- *The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting*
- *Choose a strategy which focuses on an enemy's weaknesses*

The greatest US weakness is the Pentagon

The Chinese correctly see that the greatest US weakness is the Pentagon's stranglehold on US foreign and domestic policy. With military-industrial complex interests in almost every political constituency, over-powerful lobbyists rebuff any Pentagon budget cut. Instead, President Trump's first budget includes a \$54 billion boost for defence – despite the fact that the US already spends more on defence than the next seven countries combined, and nearly three times more than China.

Trump's recent over-hasty decisions – taken just before hosting a dinner for Chinese President Xi Jinping – to authorise a cruise missile strike on a Syrian airforce base in retaliation for what the US alleges was a Syrian government chemical attack, and to despatch a carrier task group towards North Korea, signal an ominous predilection for the military option. China's measured response, once President Xi was safely home, was to condemn such military adventurism as destabilising and unhelpful. After the reckless US attack on Syria – a Russian protectorate – pressure may grow to deploy US ground forces in another intractable civil war, but one which risks direct military conflict with Russia. While boosting Trump's approval ratings, the principal beneficiary was the manufacturer of the 59 cruise missiles used. Coming on top of fresh demands to prolong deployment of US military forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, this is inexorably undermining the US economy, and continuing to erode the morale and health of young Americans.

Is China fooling the Pentagon?

Sun Tzu taught China not to confront the US militarily. Instead, there is circumstantial evidence that China's strategy is to fool the Pentagon by slowly introducing new weapon systems, without any intention of mirroring US capabilities. Three examples follow:

- *Nuclear weapons.* Unlike the US and Russia, China has only about 250 nuclear weapons. Almost all of these are land-based, and none are on high alert.
- *J-20 stealth fighter.* In 2011, despite China's famed secrecy, a prototype appeared for the first time while the US Defense Secretary visited Beijing.



The Pentagon used this to justify no cuts to the US F-22 and F-35 stealth fighter programmes. US stealth aircraft technology is some 20 years ahead of China's. Meanwhile, the F-35 programme is the most costly in US military aviation history. On 9 March 2017, China announced that the J-20 had entered service; however, it is no match for the F-22, the closest US equivalent, which became operational in 2005.

Aircraft-carriers. China has one experimental, relatively small ex-Soviet aircraft-carrier, deploying J-15 fighter aircraft of inferior performance to the US F-18 Hornet, which has been operational for over 30 years. Although China recently launched its first home-built, slightly larger variant of the Soviet design, it has developed land-based, conventionally armed ballistic missile systems with precision guidance which, with its increasingly capable submarine force, could neutralise US strike carriers if they attack Chinese vital interests; and the longer-range DF-26 missile could be a serious threat to regional US bases, especially if fitted with nuclear warheads.

China's preferred reliance on its economic and soft power

The global balance of economic power is shifting to China, now the world's biggest trader and manufacturer. Trying to avoid the 'Thucydides Trap', it is focused on minimising hostile ideological and military competition. While modernising its military capabilities to protect its vital interests, it is building co-operative security and trust in order to tackle the most pressing challenges of climate change, environmental degradation and poverty.

China has taken full advantage of US military entanglements in the Middle East and Central Asia by deploying its regional economic and financial muscle. For example, the largest copper mine in Afghanistan – with the second greatest reserves in the world – is being quietly developed by the Chinese; no military personnel are involved. The consensus among Chinese commentators is that the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq 'bought China a decade' to develop its regional security response to NATO expansion: creation of its Shanghai Co-operation Organisation. Meanwhile, it has been assiduously promoting its grand 'One Belt, One Road' project, combining the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt and sea-based Maritime Silk Road – the former helping compensate for the latter's vulnerability to disruption by US naval forces. Recalling the ancient so-called Silk Road trade routes, these integrate the region into a cohesive economic area through building infrastructure, increasing cultural exchanges, and broadening trade. Supporting these is the China-



led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which is challenging both the US-dominated World Bank as most US allies, including even the UK and Australia, have joined it, and the Japan-dominated Asian Development Bank. Trump's rejection of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement – designed to draw China's neighbours away from dependence on it for trade and investment – has boosted these Chinese initiatives.

Regarding other US military incursions, deployment in March this year of an initial Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) battery of anti-ballistic missiles in South Korea, ostensibly to protect this key US ally from North Korean missile attack, has caused deep unease in both China and South Korea. The missiles would be largely ineffective in protecting South Korea, being sited too close to North Korea; however, the system's long-range radar covers ballistic missile launch sites in both China and Russia. Thereby, the US is directly confronting China (and Russia) militarily. This satisfies an increasingly urgent need for the Pentagon to justify the astronomical cost of ballistic missile defence and to counter China's tactical ballistic missile threat to US strike carriers and regional bases. China, already encircled to the west, south and east by US military bases, has condemned the deployment as an unnecessary, provocative military escalation. In restrained retaliation so far it has closed down some South Korean commercial and artistic activities in China. The new President of South Korea, Moon Jae-in, gained political support partly because of his opposition to the system.

In conclusion, my assessment is that the US politico-military elite are dangerously out of touch with China's military philosophy and strategy, based on their mistaken, arrogant assumption that it will try to match US capabilities and doomed drive for global hegemony. The risk is rapidly growing that the US will provoke a serious military confrontation in East Asia through its belligerent posture towards China, and provocation of North Korea.