

CHINA'S MILITARY MODERNIZATION PROGRAM: SOME LESSONS FOR THE ARMED FORCES OF THE PHILIPPINES

By

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The People's Republic of China (PROC) holds the distinction of having the largest armed forces in the world. The People's Liberation Army (PLA), its military, is composed of some three million troops, officers and personnel. China's military, however, is notable in another aspect. Since the 1970s, it has undertaken a modernization program which, in turn, has transformed the PLA into a highly professional, credible and well-trained army.

How did China proceed with the modernization of its armed forces? What considerations prompted such undertaking? More importantly, what lessons and insights can the Chinese experience provide, which may prove useful to countries like the Philippines, which also plans to embark on its own military modernization program? These are only some of the questions which the following article shall explore.

MILITARY MODERNIZATION 1949-1978

Shortly after the Communist victory and the founding of the People's Republic of China (PROC) in 1949, Communist Party Chair Mao Zedong announced that China needed a modern armed force. Other Chinese leaders also saw the need to modernize the army as well as convert it into a professional one. But China was still reeling from the debilitating effects of several decades of civil strife and foreign invasion. Furthermore, corruption in the previous government of Chiang Kai Shek had contributed to China's economic devastation. Thus, economic rehabilitation had

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first claim on the scarce resources of the country, and the modernization of the army could only proceed in a slow and limited manner.

Because the modernization of the military would entail tremendous costs, the Chinese sought assistance from the Soviet Union. But Stalin was reluctant to support the Chinese bid to develop independent capability to produce arms. Moreover, China and the Soviet Union got embroiled in the Korean War from 1950 to 1953. As a result of the huge losses it suffered in the war, China realized that the PLA could no longer rely solely on the size of its army and the willingness of its soldiers to fight. Structural reforms, an updated military strategy and upgrading of weaponry were also badly needed.

After Stalin's death in 1953, China and the Soviet Union forged a partnership that was characterized, among others, by the massive transfer of Soviet technology and sending of Soviet advisers and experts to the PROC.¹ China's limited military modernization finally began. The PLA's organization and concepts were revamped. A Soviet military mission that was set up in Beijing in 1950 was reactivated. Soviet manuals were translated into Chinese and incorporated into the modernization programs of the PLA, while weapons were upgraded. The most impressive advance took place in the Air Force which was non-existent before the Korean War. By the mid-50s, China's Air Force had some 4,000 small combat aircraft. By the end of the decade, China was already producing Soviet designed weapons, from small arms to tanks and submarines.

Moreover, changes were implemented in the training and education of Chinese military officers. Army commanders obtained formal training to prepare them for military life. Military academies were also strengthened. "Regulations on the Service of Officers were promulgated for the first time, which instituted a system of ranks, regular channels of entry into the officer corps, and professional criteria for advancement as well as insignia."² Also, new organs were created to manage the military establishment.

During this time, China's aspiration to develop nuclear capability also began to materialize. Again the Chinese sought Soviet assistance to develop a nuclear program, but the joint venture fizzled out because the Soviets wanted to exercise control over China's nuclear weapons. Further deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations in the second half of the 1950s and the cutting off of all Soviet aid to China in the 1960s adversely affected the modernization of the PLA. Undaunted, the Chinese leaders

stressed self-reliance. Despite the lack of logistical support, China managed to carry out an indigenous nuclear program, but this came at the expense of large-scale development of conventional forces.

MILITARY MODERNIZATION 1978-1994

China's current military modernization is viewed not solely as a response to security concerns, but as part of a much broader vision of bringing China to the ranks of the world's leading powers by the year 2000. To accomplish this, China's leaders believe that the military must be brought up to the standards of the most advanced countries. This, in turn, would require implementing comprehensive measures to address the many problems affecting the military establishment.

In 1975 and 1978, assessments conducted by the Military Commission of the Communist Party revealed the following problems besetting the PLA: (1) Lin Biao's leadership which bred factionalism, "mountain-stronghold" mentality, and the use of the army for partisan politics, while losing sight of the military's primary functions; (2) lack of discipline resulting in poor confidence in the army's combat effectiveness; (3) a bloated military organization; (4) deficient recruitment, promotion and retirement systems; (5) inadequate training to enable the army to cope with modern warfare; (6) insufficient and obsolete military equipment; and (7) an outdated military strategy. While Party officials were one in saying that the military badly needed reforms, there were many disagreements on how these will be carried out. Nevertheless, the assessments and subsequent discussions already pinpointed the problems that had to be addressed immediately.

With the avid support of top Chinese officials led by Deng Xiaoping, the PLA began a campaign to attain the so-called "three transformations": modernization (*xiandaihua*), revolutionization (*geminghua*) and regularization (*zhengguihua*). Modernization entails the procurement of modern weapons and formulation of a strategic doctrine attuned to the times. Revolutionization means adherence to the Party line which is to build socialism with Chinese characteristics under the guidance of Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong thought. Regularization includes professionalization and streamlining of the armed forces.

The objectives of China's military modernization can be classified into two. The short-term objective is to enhance combat

effectiveness. This involves the upgrading of weapons and equipment and improvement in the recruitment and training of officers and enlisted personnel. Military leaders recognize that most commanders lack experience in dealing with the intricacies of planning and employing combined arms operations. They also realize that contemporary warfare is radically different from the battles fought by Mao and the Red Army in the 1930s and 40s. Thus, some 1,000 commanders were sent back to military academies to learn new ideas and tactics.

The long-term objective is to build a self-sustaining industrial base. The withdrawal of support by the Soviet Union has made China realize the need to develop its own strategic weapons and space programs without relying on external assistance. So far, China has succeeded in producing quality weapons from old models, and has garnered a huge market from countries in search of more affordable weaponry. To remedy the technological lag, the newly created Commission in Charge of Science, Technology and Industry for National Defense (CCSTIND) was made responsible for the defense establishment's research and development program.

Still, China is aware that for the military modernization program to succeed, it will have to meet several challenges. First, China's armed forces is the world's largest. Streamlining thus introduces problems concerning the kind and availability of assistance to demobilized forces. On the other hand, upgrading the skills and improving the combat effectiveness of the remaining troops will have to be systematic and sustained if it is to be effective. Second, China's military doctrine needs to be "fine-tuned" because of the complex nature of modern warfare as seen in the recent Gulf War. Also, China's science and technology is not at par with those of the major powers. Its armed forces lack the kind of training that will enable them to adapt to modern warfare. Indeed, military planners, specially in the Pentagon, are now claiming that the "information domain is the future battlefield."³ The question therefore is, what steps have China taken to meet these major challenges to its military modernization program?

The Chinese Armed Forces

Born out of the partisan struggles of guerilla forces in the 1930s, the role of the PLA has changed in the course of time. Before the founding of the PROC, the PLA was, in Mao's words, "one of the three main weapons with which we have defeated the enemy." After the liberation, the PLA was expected to help the

Party and the Chinese people consolidate the gains of the revolution, establish a new socialist order and rehabilitate the economy. Today, it is being suited up to be a vanguard of the modernization programs of China and a partner in national development.

Army. In 1987, as part of the streamlining of the armed forces, some one million ground troops were demobilized, leaving the PLA with three million active forces. Regional commands were reduced from 11 to 7 and more than 4,000 divisional and regimental units were either dissolved or combined. The streamlining was aimed at producing a "lean and mean" army that is combat worthy. Problems concerning the bloated character of the military and its combat effectiveness had earlier hounded Party officials and military leaders, for despite the size of its army, China lost in separate clashes with Soviet and Vietnamese troops. The PLA was also restructured to adapt to its peacetime role. Its arsenal of weapons was also bolstered with a good number of self-propelled artillery, towed artillery, multiple rocket launchers and surface-to-air missiles. Several modern electronic equipment, including those used for meteorological and aeronautics purposes, were likewise acquired to improve the mobility of the ground forces.⁴

Air Force. Starting off as a miniscule group in the late 1940s, the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) has managed to build up its fighting capabilities without relying on external help. In the 1960s, after Soviet assistance was halted due to the Sino-Soviet rift, the PLAAF copied and modified various Soviet aircraft such as the MIG-19 and MIG-21 fighters, the Tu-16 bomber and the Mi-4 helicopter. The PLAAF also developed various indigenous aircraft such as the A-5 ground-attack aircraft and F-12 light interceptor at Nanchang, the F-8 interceptor at Shenyang and the F-9 interceptor at Chengdu. Quality control measures broke down during the Cultural Revolution, but the Air Force persevered. Flying schools were also improved. By the early 1970s, the PLAAF proceeded with the development of the F-8 and F-8 II interceptors, then China's most ambitious project. Following China's rapprochement with the US and increased contacts with other major powers, it was able to acquire modern aircraft. In 1989, however, the US suspended its arms sales to China on account of the Tienanmen Square incident, forcing China to turn to Russia and other European countries for modern aircraft and equipment. But the high cost, the lack of an imminent threat to its security, and the current emphasis on research and development may deter China from proceeding with such purchases. The PLAAF is also streamlining its forces. It has reduced its total active duty force

by one-fourth, to approximately 500,000. At present, the PLAAF has 8 command posts and 4 air corps.⁵

Navy. China's PLA Navy (PLAN) has traditionally been a coastal defense force. For several decades, its fleets, organized geographically into the North, South and Eastern Sea, have consisted mainly of aging patrol and coastal combatants. The Navy, however, has indicated that it will no longer be confined to coastal defense. Instead, it seeks to develop a regional power projection capability by augmenting its fleet and equipping its forces with modern armaments. Along this line, improvements in both the conventional and nuclear submarines will be undertaken to enhance submarine warfare. Not surprisingly, the modernization of China's Navy has been viewed with anxiety by its neighbors, particularly the ASEAN countries which also claim all or some of the Spratly Islands and Taiwan.

Recruitment and Education

The PLA enjoyed lot of prestige before and shortly after the 1949 Liberation; as a result many young men wanted to join the armed forces. But over time, the PLA's prestige waned. The salaries of PLA soldiers and officers are now lower compared to their civilian counterparts. In addition, the PLA's tradition dictates that soldiers adhere to simple life and hard struggle. On the other hand, the PLA cannot provide adequate training, weaponry and equipment. Not surprisingly, many young people in China would rather seek jobs that pay higher and provide quicker upward mobility in society.

To attract more young and talented recruits into the PLA, China decided to convert the military's basic-level schools into degree-granting colleges and offered early admission for high school graduates. Although recruits still undergo medical examination and background investigation for criminal records, family background is no longer deemed relevant. The new military service law states that all citizens "regardless of nationality, race, profession, family background, religious belief and level of education have a military obligation."⁶ This is a departure from the Conscription Law of 1955 which excluded family members of "counter-revolutionary elements, feudal lords, bureaucrat-capitalists and other perceived oppressors of the Chinese people."

It is estimated that some 10,000 candidates are recruited by PLA-run schools every year from among high school graduates. Those who pass a screening test are trained to become "command

cadres” or professional and technical staff. Those who become officers are expected to attend “command schools” before they are commissioned and allowed to graduate. Moreover, professional and technical skills are improved through required attendance at designated schools before officers get their promotion. Aging officers with little education are sent to schools to enhance their knowledge and improve their chances of getting promoted. Before, conduct and performance in battle was a major criterion for promotion. Today, academic qualifications and accomplishment of tasks - many in offices and seldom in battlefield or in troubled spots - matter much. The old or retiring officers lament over these developments in the recruitment, training and promotion of soldiers. But the PLA is adamant in selecting young people with academic preparation for its officer corps.

China has realized that an educated corps of officers is an important requisite if it is to ensure the success of structural reforms and improve combat effectiveness in the armed forces. Today, under the modernization program, China’s military emphasizes quality over quantity and technical proficiency over political and ideological purity, in a bid to match the prowess of the armies of other countries.

Military Doctrine and Strategy

Mao’s concept of a “people’s war” served as the main theoretical guide of China’s PLA from the war of resistance against Japanese invaders, up to the early years of China’s socialist construction. Developed during the 1930s, the “people’s war” strategy entails the formation of a united front led by workers and peasants, for a guerilla war against the landlords and their foreign and domestic allies, in what has been called the national democratic revolution.

Since the 1970s, however, the same concept has been modified into a “people’s war under modern conditions.” In principle, Chinese military tacticians still accept Mao’s concept of “active” or “positive” defense as the core of their strategy to defend China in a possible armed conflict. But new strategies have also been adopted, including that of nuclear deterrence, where China’s strategic nuclear forces define their role as one of counter-strike.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the forging of diplomatic ties between China and the US, China has also shifted from the idea of a general war with the Soviet Union, to small-scale and politically intense wars around its periphery. In 1985,

the Military Commission of the Chinese Communist Party concluded that “the potential for world war” has “diminished” and that future conflicts are “likely to be limited, regional, brief but intensive.”⁷ The Gulf War of 1991, with its precision, swiftness and use of some of the most lethal war technology and military operations, has likewise had an impact on China, as seen in its current shopping list of sophisticated military equipment and heavy investment in research and development. Indeed, in terms of doctrine, the Gulf War has only “accelerated the PLA’s attention to low-intensity conflict. This has meant increased attention to the development of combined arms, rapid deployment units, mobility, long-range force projection, and the development of blue water naval capability.”⁸ In addition, China is now giving importance to the upgrading of short- and medium-range missiles for use in conventional combat.

Defense Spending

In the early 1990s, China’s defence spending grew at about 5 percent per year. For 1990 alone, China allocated 29 billion yuan or \$6.1 billion to the military, signalling “the first real growth in formal defence spending in eight years and a reversal of a decade-long decline in the military’s share of the state budget.”⁹ In 1993, China’s defense spending was estimated at \$45 billion, an amount surpassed only by the United States at \$274.3 billion.¹⁰

Several reasons account for the increase in the military’s share of the national budget. These are: (1) the operational needs and morale problems of the PLA; (2) the cost of deploying troops during the Tienanmen crisis and maintaining paramilitary police and soldiers in Beijing, and sending troops in troubled spots such as Tibet, South China Sea islands and along disputed borders; (3) the need to improve the living conditions of ordinary soldiers; (4) compensation and other benefits for over a million Chinese soldiers who were demobilized in line with the troop reduction policy in the mid-1980s; (5) new facilities for troops; and (6) acquisition of modern weapons and equipment for the Navy and Army.¹¹ Moreover, it appears that China will continue to raise its defence budget as it undertakes a more comprehensive military modernization program.

Reports show that the state provides 70 percent of the funding requirements of the military. Nonetheless, the military is required to look for other funding sources to ease the burden of the civilian populace. So far, arms sales to other countries has been a particularly rich source of additional funds for China’s

military modernization. China has supplied arms to Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Cambodia's guerilla factions, Thailand and Myanmar. Profits from arms sales in turn, have been used to intensify research and development and to buy more sophisticated weapons from western countries.

Technology Transfer

China is fully aware of its military-technological gap vis-a-vis the United States and Russia, which can be considered on the cutting edge of modern science. To narrow down this gap, China has engaged in a broad-based program of scientific and technical cooperation with many countries, both in the developed and developing world. It has signed agreements with 57 countries and has cooperative relations with 108 countries and regions. It has also joined 187 international non-governmental science and technological organizations under the United Nations. In addition, China's S & T organizations have participated in more than 280 international academic organizations. The Chinese Academy of Sciences, for example, has signed cooperation agreements with counterparts in more than 50 countries and regions. Of China's 340 sister-city relationships, approximately one-third are oriented towards science and technology collaboration. Taken together, these relationships not only give a boost to science and education in China, but also have broad implications for the modernization of the country's industrial base."¹²

In order to gain access to foreign technology, China, during the period 1981-89, signed 18,000 agreements and over 30,000 contracts for the introduction of technology and equipment, for a total of 415,000 projects. The Chinese government in turn allotted some 463.2 billion yuan (US\$98.5 billion) in counterpart funds.¹³

One of China's sources for new and improved technology is the United States. As of 1986, China and the US have inked 25 formal agreements on cooperation in science and technology. China has also sent some 40,000 students and scholars to the US between 1979 and 1986.¹⁴ However, China's procurement of weapons from the US has been limited and selective because of economic considerations and concern over the increasing influence of western ideas and technology in Chinese society.

The benefits gained from technology transfer by the defence sector have been shared with the civilian sector. In the late 1970s, China began applying military technology to commercial purposes. Military industrial enterprises were used to produce goods for

civilian consumption under the principle of “integrating the army with the people.” The initiative was supported by high ranking military officials who claimed that it has generated additional resources for the military, facilitated better relations with the civilian sector, and increased China’s international investors and markets for non-military products.

MILITARY MODERNIZATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

Like the PLA in China, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) will also be undergoing its own modernization program. The AFP, which consists of three service commands, the Army, Air Force and Navy, has long been saddled with serious problems: a bloated military organization, outdated equipment, a patronage system that breeds corruption, lack of professionalism and discipline, inadequate training, and the absence of a cogent military doctrine. It also suffers from poor credibility because of the continuing involvement of a number of soldiers and officers in criminal and illegal activities. Moreover, the AFP’s combat effectiveness is suspect.

Proponents of military modernization in the Philippines hope that the program will be able to address the problems that beset the AFP. The program has five main components namely: 1) Force Restructuring and Organizational Development; 2) Capability, Material and Technology Development; 3) Bases and Support System Development; 4) Human Resources Development; and 5) Doctrines Development. The program goes beyond the usual procurement of modern weapons system and recognizes the need to develop a “defence force that is capable of performing a spectrum of roles in peace, crisis or war. In peacetime, the AFP has two roles: the traditional military role, and developmental and environmental role. In times of crisis, the role of the AFP is envisioned to include military counter-insurgency operations, support to police operations during civil disturbance and other contingencies, search and rescue operations, natural disaster relief operations and support to peacekeeping or enforcement efforts in pursuit of international commitments.”¹⁵

The program also includes provisions that broaden the concept of national security, to cover not only territorial and political, but also economic and environmental security. Hence, the AFP is tasked to defend the country from incursions, both military and non-military, like smuggling and poaching in territorial waters by other nationals. Likewise, it is expected to provide

support to the programs of government like environmental protection, socio-economic development, disaster preparedness and other peacetime functions.

Under the modernization program, the AFP shall adopt a self-reliant defense posture and shift to the external mode of defence. This in turn demands a credible force, both in terms of human resources and materiel. Because the development of its human component is deemed equally important as the acquisition of modern weapons and equipment, the modernization of the AFP will include programs to strengthen the patriotic spirit and raise the nationalist consciousness of the military, as well as instill respect for people's rights. Training will also be provided to help the AFP deal with the complexities of modern warfare and with the intricacies of diplomacy.

The modernization program of the AFP will be implemented over a period of 15 years. The budget for the program, which will come from various sources (e.g. taxes, proceeds from the sale, lease or joint development of military reservations) will be distinct and separate from the regular appropriations for the Department of National Defense and the AFP, and will be administered by the Secretary of National Defense. It will have a ceiling of 50 billion pesos (\$ 1.9 billion) for the first five years; succeeding amounts may be increased commensurate to the growth of the country's GNP. To ensure reasonable purchases of modern weapons and equipment and to prevent wastage, the program shall be regularly monitored by the Philippine Congress.

LESSONS FROM THE CHINESE EXPERIENCE

Though China and the Philippines are both striving to modernize their armed forces, their similarity ends here. China's PLA had a glorious beginning, as it was instrumental in defeating oppressive forces in its society and in transforming China to what it is today. On the other hand, the AFP started out as an adjunct of American colonial forces. Although it did not experience ideological wranglings over military doctrines and its current modernization program, the AFP is more fractious and enjoys less credibility specially among ordinary Filipinos.

Unlike the AFP, China's PLA continues to enjoy the support of the Chinese people. One reason is that, since its inception, the PLA has never been a burden to the civilian populace, as it has sought ways to meet its own needs. Another is that the PLA has

been a stabilizing force in Chinese society. On the other hand, the AFP's track record has been particularly bleak, specially during the martial law period when it helped prop up Marcos' authoritarian regime. Thus, in pursuing its current modernization program, the AFP can certainly draw lessons from the experiences of China, which has shown that political will, serious visioning and long-term planning can produce a credible and well-trained military.

The idea of being prepared for any eventuality has served the Chinese in good stead. During the Cold War period, China took on the herculean challenges of feeding its millions of people and keeping out hostile forces from its territory, without relying on external help. In the wake of stories about the bomb and a third world war, China marshalled its resources and figured out how to make its own nuclear weapons as part of its deterrence strategy. The Chinese also concentrated on research and development; as a result, they were able to produce indigenous weapons and equipment as well as modified versions of foreign ones. In the process, the PLA was able to strengthen its forces.

Chinese leaders have always emphasized that an important prerequisite of military modernization is the development of basic industries, for only then can a strong military emerge to help guarantee continued economic growth. As one China observer puts it, "a strong military could not be grafted into a weak economy."¹⁶ Today, although China can afford to invest in materiel development due to its improved economy, it has taken a prudent approach to the acquisition of modern weapons. Instead, it has focused on upgrading the education and training of the PLA. According to Xu Xiangqian, "We have seen many incidents in the history of war in which an army was defeated, not because its weapons were poor, but because its commanders had backward military thinking and directed military operations in the wrong way."

China has had its own share of political crises but has managed to surmount them. This is partly due to the PLA which, under the direction of the Party, has served as a stabilizing force. Officials who sowed intrigue and sought to take over the leadership of the Party usually failed. The PLA has therefore acted as a deterrent to intra-Party squabbles and has prevented them from going out of hand.

Chinese leaders have always emphasized that unity can be achieved and the tasks can be accomplished if the leadership of the Party is upheld by the military. Since its creation, it is the Party that has always guided the PLA and the latter has always assumed the role of a main supporter of Party decisions.

The Philippines can take a cue from China's experience. It must ensure that the military upholds civilian rule and not allow any action to undermine the latter's authority. The Chinese experience shows that a military that is integrated with the people becomes a formidable force. Whether in times of peace or war, the military must build good relations with the people by looking after their welfare, by helping them overcome their difficulties and by practicing discipline in the ranks. Moreover, is expected to be caring, diligent and frugal. Only then can the people embrace the military as their own.

NOTES

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