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Adding wings to tigers: people's war in the South China Sea

Abstract

Extract:

For many centuries, China has held herself to be the Middle Kingdom, and was a dominant regional power until the arrival of the European traders and colonialists around five hundred years ago. From a Chinese perspective, these colonial powers robbed her of her prestige among her tributary states, waged war upon her, subjected her to unfair treaties, addicted her people to opium, and annexed her land. Their presence precipitated an internal fracturing, and gave cause for the emergence of the Chinese Communist Party. This, in turn, gave rise to the civil war which resulted in the break away of Taiwan. In the process, China lost much. It is little wonder then, that with her re-emergent economic power, China is contemplating reclaiming her rightful place under Heaven.

Keywords

China, international relations, trade, military scenarios

ALTERNATIVE SCENARIO

'ADDING WINGS TO TIGERS': PEOPLE'S WAR IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

by Robert Muller *

When asked, in September 1991, what implications could be drawn from the Gulf War, Major General Wang Pufeng, deputy director of the Department of Research on Strategy at the Academy of Military Science of China, replied:

We will continue to adhere to the strategy of 'people's war', but high-tech weapons will only reinforce our 'people's war' strategy, like adding wings to tigers.

Under the current circumstances, we must ponder over two questions: How to fight a people's war in light of high-tech weapons, and how to develop high-tech weapons to facilitate our people's war. These questions concern the security and survival of our nation, as well as China's position and role in the world's future strategic pattern.¹

For many centuries, China has held herself to be the Middle Kingdom, and was a dominant regional power until the arrival of the European traders and colonialists around five hundred years ago. From a Chinese perspective, these colonial powers robbed her of her prestige among her tributary states, waged war upon her, subjected her to unfair treaties, addicted her people to opium, and annexed her land. Their presence precipitated an internal fracturing, and gave cause for the emergence of the Chinese Communist Party. This, in turn, gave rise to the civil war which resulted in the break away of Taiwan. In the process, China lost much. It is little wonder then, that with her re-emergent economic power, China is contemplating reclaiming her rightful place under Heaven.

If China is to reclaim her position as the Middle Kingdom, it is necessary that she reclaim it from the powers to whom she lost it. Of recent times, most of these powers - Britain, France, Portugal and so on - have largely withdrawn from the region. Hong Kong is to be returned in July, and Macao shortly thereafter (1999). The last of the colonial powers, the United States, still exerts some influence over the region, and it is against the United States that China may well direct her attentions in an effort to prove herself again powerful. An inhibitor to any action, military or otherwise, that China might mount against the United States is that nation's economic and military associations with South Korea, Japan and Taiwan.

There is currently some speculation regarding the reunification of North and South Korea. Such a reunification would be very much in China's interests for a number of reasons. First, should these two nations unify, the need for an American presence on the peninsula would be obviated. Second, any such reunification would provide China with an opportunity to embrace an emerging nation, and present herself as a benevolent elder. Third, China would have the opportunity to trade and invest in the restructuring, and so be in a position to exert some economic influence. In such a scenario, China would effectively be able to ensure, at the least, the non-interference of Korea, should she choose to test American resolve in the South

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¹ Quoted in Li Deshun, 'Post-Gulf War World Strategic Pattern', *Beijing Review*, 25 November-1 December 1991, pp. 7-9.

China Sea. This would deny the United States access to land bases in the area, and inhibit her effectiveness in any potential military action.

Failing a reunification, it would be in China's interests to ensure cordial relations between the two Koreas, also reducing the need for an American presence in the region. Perhaps with this outcome in mind, it is possible to consider the Chinese diplomatic intervention in the North Korean nuclear issue as a long-term strategic move.

As with Korea, China's objective would be to ensure a non-alignment of Japan. From a Japanese perspective, there would be distinct advantages in associating herself more closely with an emerging China, even if at the expense of relations with an increasingly weak and introspective America. Should the balance of trade between Japan and China reach the levels that exist between Japan and the United States, China would be in a strong position to request, of her neighbour, a non-interventionist stance should a showdown between China and America occur. It is conceivable, therefore, with the potential for increasing Chinese influence in Korea and Japan the United States may have no foothold in Asia other than Taiwan.

Before considering Taiwan, mention needs to be made of other neighbouring Asian nations. When looking at these nations, it is important to note that in previous incarnations, before the borders of today were drawn, many had experienced the benefits of belonging to the Chinese tribute-trading system. Again today, trade is uppermost in the formation of relations. To encourage participation and trade, China is setting up regional trade zones, and is actively encouraging cross investment with these Asian neighbours. As the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) expands to include all of Southeast Asia, it is likely that China will encourage this grouping to trade with her. Given the profit potential that such trade would carry, and the Asian proclivity for minding one's own business, it is likely that the nations of ASEAN would avoid becoming involved in any Chinese action in the South China Sea. These nations would almost certainly refuse to be used as a staging base for any country or organisation wishing to interfere in China's business in the area. After all, their previous experience with China was more agreeable than that with the colonising powers.

China shares land borders with many nations, India, Pakistan, Russia, Mongolia and a whole range of others in the west and north-west. Recently, China has been active in pursuing a normalisation of relations with these countries. While China has made it clear that she does not entirely agree with the positions of some of the borders, claiming that they were imposed by colonial powers, she is content, nonetheless to forego some claims in the interests of neighbourliness. This action allows the other states to retain some face, and to be, to some extent, in China's debt.

Relations with Russia are warming, and the recently negotiated 100 kilometre demilitarised zone along the border is giving China some comfort in these dealings. Similarly with the Indian subcontinent, China has advanced region-to-region relations between herself and South Asia as a whole, during Jiang Zemin's December 1996 visit. Vietnam and Taiwan, by comparison, have had difficulties with China. The first has experienced, until the 1980s, punitive cross-border raids; and the second, until March this year, 'missile diplomacy'.

Having embarked on a process to secure through trade, treaty or threat, the tacit if not explicit cooperation of her neighbours and regional friends, China could soon be in a position to act on her long held claim of territorial sovereignty over the South China Sea.

A major impediment to reclaiming this area is Taiwan. Not only is Taiwan strategically positioned, and in possession of an impressive arsenal with which to thwart any Chinese militaristic intentions, but she can be also used as the catalyst to precipitate American, and possibly United Nations, involvement in any conflict in the area. Just as the United States justified their presence in the Gulf by assisting a victimised friend, so too that excuse could be used to legitimise and sanitise what would be largely issues of economics, trade, pride and self-interest. China, it appears from her actions, has learned from the Gulf War not to allow a

potential enemy a staging point anywhere near the theatre of operations. In this consideration, Taiwan, as she exists today, poses some threat.

In the case of armed conflict, a U. S. aligned Taiwan could act as a land-based staging point for American aircraft, which, with their in-flight refuelling capabilities, could patrol the skies over the South China Sea, and penetrate Chinese airspace to attack land-based military facilities. Given the relative lack of sophistication in Chinese defensive radar and airborne weapons systems (aircraft and missiles), and the undoubted penetrative abilities of American stealth aircraft, it is imperative that China keeps any perceived aggressor force from establishing a permanent and defensible land base.

For these reasons China would need to assure, at least, the denial of Taiwan as a base of operations. At best China could use the islands of Taiwan to help form part of a blockade of the area denying access to the South China Sea, to stage her own troops, aircraft, and naval assets, and as a forward deployment area for her mobile, land-based missiles. Should China experience favourable outcomes with her other preparations, Taiwan will be subjected to enormous pressure to reunite with the mainland.

With China being successful in denying land-based facilities to any interventionist force, it is still possible that some form of military action would be embarked upon by the Americans, probably alone in view of China's membership of the UN Security Council. Should this be the case, any forces would need to be mobile, probably using aircraft carriers as staging points from which to launch air borne attacks, and carrier escorts for the launch of missiles.

However, the geography of land masses of the South China Sea is such that it becomes a perfect place to fight a 'people's war', wherein, any aggressor who opted to invade could be cut off from retreat and harassed at will.

People's War, and 'Adding Wings to Tigers'

The Maoist theory of 'people's war' posits three stages. In the first stage, strategic retreat, the defending army allows the aggressor to breach its defences, and advance into home territory. Rather than fighting fixed piece battles, the defending army employs guerrilla tactics and harasses the enemy, cutting off their supply lines. The second stage involves stalemate, wherein the defending army employs captured weapons to attack the aggressor. In this stage, the lack of resupply and retreat, along with the constant harassment by the fluid guerrilla force serves to sap the aggressor of the morale and the will to fight. In the final stage, the defending army transforms from a guerrilla force into a regular force, and mounts a 'strategic counter-offensive' to repulse the aggressor from the home territories.

This theory forms the basis of 'people's war', and it is to the guerrilla army that General Wang would see wings attached, in order to transform the once-peasant army into one of the late twentieth century. China is currently undergoing a modernisation programme for her armed forces, both in weapons systems and techniques such as the concept of rapid deployment forces. This modernisation is important should she ever be put in a position of having to conduct a 'people's war' in the South China Sea.

Should an aggressor, say the United States, decide to interfere with Chinese moves to reclaim the South China Sea it would need to deploy a mobile force, most probably in the form of carrier task forces. Rather than preventing such a force from entering the region, and therefore having to fight an external battle and project her power, China would allow such a force to breach her defences. Assuming by this time China had two aircraft carriers, and assuming Taiwan has reunified with China or remains neutral, the judicious placement of one carrier task force between Taiwan and the Philippines, and one in the straits to the east of Singapore would deny an escape route and cut off supply lines. These positions could be supplemented with some guerrilla-type activity from a number of submarines placed at the Indian Ocean

entrance to the Straits of Malacca; between Fuzhou and Taiwan; off the northern tip of Borneo; and to the west of the Philippines. Further submarines, if available, could close all the gaps by patrolling to the north of the Celebes; in the Indian Ocean to the south of Indonesia; and in support of the carrier off Singapore.

Once the invading force is trapped, and supply lines cut off, it would be an easy matter to harass the enemy from ship, shore or air. Missiles could be launched from land-based mobile launchers and in the true spirit of 'people's war', having inflicted damage on the enemy, withdrawn into bunkers, tunnels, or under coverage of foliage. With the ability to fuel in-flight, aircraft could mount coordinated attacks from the two carriers and numerous land bases, and while the attrition rate would be high, the aircraft at the disposal of the enemy would be limited in number, and so, as with the land warfare of previous generations, it would only be a matter of sending in the human wave of pilots. These newly developed missiles and aircraft are the wings that General Wang sees as being fitted to his fighting tigers.

Likewise, from the sea. Small, fast patrol boats could sneak inside the defensive perimeter of the intruder, launch an attack and escape to safety in the form of either a larger, well defended, armada, or shored-based facilities. Again, using the human wave concept, and the relative lack of expense of the craft, the losses would not be too severe.

It is very possible that in such a scenario as outlined, no nuclear strategic measures would be undertaken for fear of provoking a retaliatory strike. No carrier battle group would be worth the potential loss of Washington, New York or Honolulu. A pre-emptive tactical nuclear strike by a trapped and desperate theatre commander is possible. However, where would he or she attack when surrounded by Chinese assets? Such a commander could be assured of but a single strike before an indignant Chinese government ordered, reluctantly (in view of the escalatory potential of such a move), the use of nuclear weapons in reply.

In a scenario where tactical nuclear weapons were not employed, the 'tigers with wings' would continue to harass the invading force until that force was sufficiently demoralised and depleted as to be forced to withdraw. In the interests of maintaining friendly relations, and to appear to be a magnanimous victor, the Chinese forces would escort the remaining force to the limits of her territory, and bid them farewell. Having thus displayed her willingness to employ force of arms to protect her domain, China would deter any other outsider from trespassing on her territory.

Following such a conflict, China would need to turn her attentions to calming any disquiet among her neighbours and friends. Given the importance of relationships in Asian cultures, with blame squarely leveled at aggressive colonialist westerners, and in light of the economic benefits of being included in China's sphere of influence, it would probably not be too long before relations were again normalised. Japan, in particular, would have more to gain than lose from a stable and strong Chinese world which is protective of Japanese access to, and investment in, Sino-Siberian energy resources.

Conclusion

With the modernisation of the Chinese military well underway, and the overtures that she is making towards her neighbours, it is possible that China is preparing to again assume her position as the most influential of the nations of Asia. Acting as inhibitors to this development is the influence exerted by the United States over Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. In the case of Japan, how long it will endure as a quasi-sovereign nation under American military patronage remains to be seen. As regards South Korea, a normalisation between North and South would go a long way to furthering the expulsion of foreign forces. The economic and trade balance is changing, and with increasing Chinese influence comes the possibility of Japan and Korea abstaining from any conflict between China and an outsider. In the case of Taiwan,

should Taiwan refuse to accede to Chinese wishes for non-involvement, she runs the real risk of a tactical military strike, and Chinese invasion.

Should China attempt to reassert herself, it would be probable that the United States would try to interfere to protect her pride and regional interests. If such an intervention is military, it is likely that China would employ the theory of 'people's war' to engage and entrap any expeditionary force. By 'adding wings' to the guerrilla tactics of old, Chinese forces would be able to harass and deplete any aggressor force. Having reasserted her authority, China would expel the foreigner, and return her attentions to her region and to her historical role of Middle Kingdom and guarantor of stability in the Chinese trading world.

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