Conclusion

There he is, with the dragon's powers, and occupying exactly the central place.

I Ching

This study recognises that since 1977 the Chinese military leadership has been deliberating on the best methods for implementing – not simply advocating – a doctrine of people's war under modern conditions. Herein lies a conscious effort, a situation representing directed strategic attention. As far as this indicates control rather than confusion, such an exploratory condition may be surmised to be a positive one. But a potentially negative outcome from such 'controlled' exploration could be one of delay linked to the dilemma of choice: a choice the Chinese believe they may not have to make if Maoism is successfully wedded to modernity; people's war to professionalism. In this respect it can be observed that modern warfare has become a combined arms and a combined services phenomena; it is a systemic approach to armed combat. The term People's Liberation Army, it has been noted, refers to the Chinese armed forces in their entirety: Army, Air Force and Navy; the conventional as well as the nuclear components. These are the Chinese forces of defence and deterrence, and the PLA is the deterrent force as a totality. For just as the US Administration recognises that 'neither nuclear forces nor the cleverest theory for their employment can eliminate the need . . . to provide a capable conventional deterrent', the Chinese understand that their massive conventional forces may well represent their final deterrent against invasion and one for which nuclear weapons can never wholly substitute.

This tendency to combine rather than distinguish is both a characteristic of the PLA's heritage and a characteristic of contemporary warfare, as in the Soviet system where all arms are integrated to the goal of security. Furthermore, the human and psychological factors that are so important to a revolutionary army are also a vital element of warfare in any age. The will to fight, and to continue fighting even if the war is a protracted one, cannot be regarded as a matter of mere military fashion: morale has ever been universally recognised as a central element in capability.

Other traditional strengths in Chinese defence will remain relevant for the future. In respect of matériel, Chinese traditions of the 1950s and 1960s have not been abandoned: equipment continues to be based on and inter-operable with Soviet designs; a system which holds advantage in the capture and use of Soviet equipment in possible wars with China's major adversaries, the USSR and its ally Vietnam. Further, by combining attrition warfare through the 'swarm effect' of plentiful manpower and older technology weapons, with the 'sting effect' of mobile moderate-technology guerrilla warfare, the PLA will not only enhance the strengths of its defence but may well emerge as the prototype of a futurist Third World army. This, latter, observation is justified first by the conditions of modern warfare. These are not peculiar to China but of universal application. Second, it may be proposed, that just as the Chinese 'revolutionary paradigm' spread to other Third World regions earlier this century, so too may the technological refinement of its armed forces offer a military model for the twenty-first century. In this, the guerrilla method is likely to remain the poorer nation's alternative to the prohibitively expensive arms race, but armed with light anti-armour and anti-air weapons, for example, well-organised guerilla units can expect to find success when opposing conventional armies if these can be forced to engage in protracted war. In turn, conventional armies may themselves adjust to the strategy of guerilla warfare – as did the British in Malaya during the 1950s – resulting in a far more widespread change in the structure of armed forces as we know them. Moreover, the mutation of professional armed forces from the conventional to the guerilla mode, can be proposed as the obvious and universal adaptation to the post-nuclear battlefield. Armed forces which are already structured in this mode will enjoy an obvious advantage in such circumstances.

Nevertheless, the concept of guerilla nuclear warfare is particularly applicable to conditions which are peculiarly Chinese and must be viewed as deterrent in intent. Like other strategies for use of nuclear weapons – launch on warning, pre-emption, retaliation – GNW is meant to deter an aggressor from provoking its enactment. GNW is credible in that it is practical for the Chinese and appears to hold a significant probability of actual military success, a situation which offers marked contrast to the (widely argued) 'incredible' nuclear strategies of NATO, the USA and the USSR. Moreover, for the Chinese the escalatory transition of guerilla warfare to a tactical nuclear level offers a credible strategy in that the cost and technology are entirely within China's capabilities. This mode of guerilla warfare
must be seen as a logical development of China's traditional victory denial strategy, and a key element in the philosophical 'flanks and rear' of a modern people's war theory.

However, Chinese defence policy is unique and defies exact classification. Behind the weapons improvement and organisational restructuring of the PLA is the assumption, underlying comparative strength analysis, that it wishes to be more competitive with - and therefore similar to - modern military forces. At the same time, it is recognised that such improvements still fall far short of any meaningful parity - let alone marked improvement in the face of continued Soviet improvements. Obviously, if the Chinese have no real chance of 'catching up', then the attempt to be similar would be futile. The maintenance of people's war in modified form as the governing doctrine of modern Chinese warfare, coupled with the types of weapons selected for improvement and the organisational changes that are being implemented, suggest the PLA is not being recreated as a poor replica of a Western or Soviet military force, and that people's war under modern conditions is more than a temporary expedient or a substitute for the unattainable goal of high-tech Western style forces. Mao's original solution to the problem of a weak army pitted against a strong one centred not on adversarial strength (a description of the strategic problem), but on those adversarial weaknesses which were open to exploitation (an attempt to produce a favourable outcome, that is, the implementation of a problem-solving strategy). The Vietnamese demonstrated such a proposition to be valid when, despite the obvious disparity in the 'balance of forces', they successfully waged a war of resistance against the French colonial authorities.

This exploitation of enemy weaknesses remains highly pertinent to threat assessments of China's security in the 1990s and early twenty-first century. The most serious threats for China must be those which are both more probable than others and potentially more devastating to national survival. Although in absolute terms no threat in the current era is so serious that it would lead to a major war involving China - all the potential conflicts examined in this book are well below an even chance of occurring - the threat from the USSR and Vietnam is firmly established. And that threat is always one which involves dealing with a technologically superior foe, directly or indirectly (as in the case of Soviet intervention in a Sino-Vietnamese war).

Whilst regional threats to China are within the defence capabilities of a modern people's war doctrine, the People's Republic can be expected to suffer tremendous losses in the event of nuclear attack on China as a consequence of US-USSR strategic war. Nuclear attack on China would be a matter of either contender wanting to neutralise a third party in the war. Within the strategic climate following the Washington summit of December 1987, such a war may be designated a low probability of occurrence but its importance to China's survival is extremely high. Because such an event would be the outcome of conflict between the two superpowers, China could not ensure against this threat. Only continued strategic deterrence is workable as a solution.

A full-scale Soviet attack on China, employing weapons of mass destruction with long-lasting environmental effects, might carry a higher probability of eventuating and also a higher risk to China's survival, because in this attack China is not a third party to be neutralised as in the above case. It is the prime and sole focus of Soviet hostility. Such a scenario must be accorded the highest priority factor in Chinese defence policy. True, it has been argued that a mass attack would be counter-productive for the Soviets and, therefore, would constitute an irrational act if it were enacted. But even supposing the Soviet leadership did behave irrationally, it would be extremely difficult to achieve the long-term irradiation of all China's cultivable land. If a viable socio-cultural-political entity survived in China, then even this most threatening of conflicts could not destroy the nation. Indeed, China's ability to survive in a post-nuclear environment must be judged to be a powerful deterrent.

Whereas in the past PRC deterrence policy has relied on the combined threats of strategic nuclear weapons and the enormous manpower available for conventional resistance, in the 1990s and beyond the deterrent strength of the PLA (nuclear and conventional) would have to be such as to perform convincingly within battle. In other words, if war has not been deterred, then China must be able to both defend itself and dissuade the enemy from continued and/or escalatory aggression. To do so, the nuclear basis of a future defence policy would need to shift emphasis away from reliance on strategic systems, and concentrate on tactical weapons for use in unconventional warfare. China's resolve to resist nuclear aggression, at both pre- and post-nuclear levels, is unequivocal.

If Chinese defence policy is to insure against the most serious threats by means additional to continued strategic deterrence, then a multi-layered deterrent offers a workable solution. In the event that
the PRC's territorial integrity is violated through failure of the first layer, the overall Chinese deterrent, GNW would provide an effective instrument of retaliation. It is an indirect strategy of tactical nuclear use which seeks to undermine the enemy's confidence of tenure in China by rendering the cost of final 'victory' excessive. Operations would be conducted against the invaders' physical and psychological resources (from security of supply to the morale of troops), at a level low enough to render useless their strategic superiority in nuclear and conventional weapons.

While appreciating the possibilities open to a nation which must operate from a position of military weakness, one cannot ignore the prevailing strategic ethos in international affairs. This holds that the capability of one's own forces must be maintained at a sufficiently convincing level to deter attack. The most common argument legitimising the military establishments of modern nations is that: 'In peacetime the purpose of military forces... is to reduce to a minimum the enemy leadership's incentive to seek military solutions to political problems.' What this book has sought to convey is that capability can be convincing even in the absence of stronger or equal level of military force or technological ingenuity than that of one's adversary, provided that the potential costs of attack can still be made to exceed potential gains. GNW, again, is a hedge against the possible erosion of Chinese nuclear strategic retaliation capabilities in the last years of this century as a consequence of Soviet deployment of BMD systems. To paraphrase Mao, in the 1960s and 1970s, a few ICBMs might have been enough, but in the first decades of the twenty-first century, even the 'many' ICBMs will probably not suffice. In this respect the nuclear-armed guerilla – with the possible assistance of ATBMs – will be of more relevance to the PLA than strategic ballistic missiles which are likely to become redundant if the superpowers do deploy BMD systems.

For the Chinese neither qualitative nor quantitative parity in weapons are goals. One of the more enduring conclusions that may be drawn from this study is that while the current modernisation of the PLA seeks to enhance its deterrent credibility, it will not seek to do so by employing established methods. For the Chinese there is little point in acquiring retaliatory parity, then BMD counters, even if such achievements were possible, when GNW offers an obvious and cheap alternative. The same end will be reached by different means – means which are different to those of the superpowers because change in defence is based on the concept that whatever the modernisation it must be compatible with China's resources and military experience. Almost by chance, such means are also compatible with the demands of future warfare: that is, speedy social recovery after nuclear attack and a credible post-nuclear strategy, rather than further technological contest which would, in the circumstances, be impossible. Supposing resilience (social and economic as well as military) to be the key to twenty-first-century warfare, powers of survival and denial may well hold value over the power of punishment, especially in foreseeable circumstances where maintaining the power of punishment against BMD may demand ever-larger allocations of GNP and offer bankruptcy rather than security. If China's position in the late twentieth century was that of hidden power – the dragon lying deep – then in the first half of the twenty-first century the dragon will emerge to assume a central place in the global order. The dragon will be the more important because its billion claws will be sharper whilst its scaly armour will be no less penetrable.