



## **Some Pitfalls In Making Assumptions About Chinese PLA's Military-Political Behaviour**

**Speaker:** Rear Admiral Sudarshan Y. Shrikhande

**Chair:** Dr. Atul Bhardwaj

**Venue:** ICS Seminar Room

The event began with the chair's introductory remarks. . Welcoming the speaker R Adm. Sudarshan Y. Shrikhande, the chair informed the audience about the rich naval experience and the current research interests of the speaker. Meanwhile, the chair also recommended the audience to go through the article written by the speaker to have a broader understanding of the subject. The speaker extended his gratitude to the chair and the ICS for the opportunity to present his paper and interact with scholars.

The speaker began his presentation by putting forward his central argument that the pitfalls in making assumptions about Chinese People's Liberation Army's (PLA) military behavior would lead to a negative impact on decision making. He outlined five commonly held belief about the PLA, which were discussed in the presentation. To begin with, the speaker contended that the assumption that China's military has no combat experience since 1979 is problematic. Giving an overview of the situation of China-Vietnam war, the speaker questioned the utility of combat experience for the military, highlighting that the importance of combat preparedness and readiness should catch the attentions of decision makers. The speaker argued that the lack of combat experience does not necessarily lead to defeat in the future. Similarly, combat experience of previous wars may not necessarily be relevant in the next war. It is important to distinguish combat experience and drawing lessons from combat which could go into the development of tactical prowess for the larger competence of the military forces. Moreover, the domestic counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism operations should not be conflated with inter-state conflicts. For the last decades, given the warfighting experience cannot be acquired outside the combat, the PLA has tried to ensure its combat preparedness for future wars across the spectrum of war itself and the three levels of warfare.

The second assumption that the speaker problematized is that PLA is less geared for the exercise of 'mission command'. First of all, he elaborated on the relation between

Communist Party of China (CPC) and PLA, emphasizing the PLA is a party's army and loyal to the CPC, not to the motherland. The fact that the party's army has to be subordinate to the party makes it necessary to have political officers. He further explained that the political officers and commanders are playing a different role in the PLA. The political officers' duty is to assist in party-work, indoctrination, counseling and maintaining focus and morale that the CPC expects of its troops. The commanders focus on narrower warfighting readiness and reality. Therefore, it is ill-advised to believe this diarchy will be an advantage for the adversarial side in a conflict. The politicization did not hamper its level of mission command.

The third pitfall of assumption of PLA that the speaker introduced is that the PLA may not have the will to fight given a one-child policy. Although the speaker admitted the one-child policy has generated negative or even serious consequences, he argued that it is inaccurate to believe the PLA soldiers may not be good fighters or that Chinese mothers and grandmother may be so anti-war that leaders may hesitate to consider these options. This assumption that are based on self-comforting cultural outcomes can be dangerous. The speaker pointed out that one-child policy may result in a shrinking base of conscripts, which leads the PLA to ramp up its combat effectiveness via technological modernization, harnessing outer space, cyber, missile and information power while simultaneously reducing manpower. The PLA's modernization and continued transformation make any assumption out of one-child policy, or even two-children policy on their willingness to fight, quite unhelpful in that its requirements for "boots-on-ground" are correspondingly reducing.

The fourth point that the speaker covered is on the assumption that "loss of face is a uniquely Chinese socio-political characteristic". It is incorrect to think of it as a predominantly Chinese characteristic. The speaker pointed out that some analysts have over-interpreted "loss of face" in assessing the way Chinese leadership thinks or predicting China's actions to events.

Rather than predicting the dynamics and subsequent military actions from a "loss of face", it is more advisable to adopt the "fear, honor and interest" prism postulated by Thucydides to explain the drivers for war and peace. The idea of loss of face is inherent in honor, which is only one of the three Thucydidean drivers. A country could choose to avenge loss of face or lump it to bide its time, depending on the complex and contextual evaluation of fear, honor and interests. The speaker reminded the audience that China as, in many instances, accepted loss of face.

The last assumption that the speaker pointed out is to believe that the Chinese follow Sun Tzu. There is no doubt that the military strategy that Sun Tzu and Mao Zedong

advocated has an impact, but it should be careful not to overstate the relevance of thoughts of Sun Tzu and Mao to the behavior of the PLA. Over-simplification and inadequate analyses could lead to wrong assumption that China would never be keen on going to war. The speaker argues the *Art of War* should be read in the contemporary context that emphasizes the PLA's rapid modernization and its need to be ready for war and combat. The PLA is not dogmatic about Sun Tzu, they are also embracing the ideas of Mackinder and Alfred Thayer Mahan.

In the concluding section, following his brief discussion on other incorrect assumptions on China's military hardware, the speaker revisited his central argument and emphasized that making assumptions with biases, or with incomplete analyses or misplaced confidence in intuition, individual experience or gut feeling would exacerbate problems instead of reducing them.

*Report prepared by Feng Renjie, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.*