

PLA's Influence in Foreign Policy Making in China and Implications for India

*DS Rajan**

Spelling out the duties allotted to the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the official White Paper on "China's National Defence in 2010", released at Beijing in March 2011, stated as follows:

Adapting to changes both in times and security environment, the Chinese armed forces (i) take an active role in dealing with various security threats, (ii) safeguard national security and development interests, and (iii) play an important role in maintaining world peace and promoting common development.

Given the growing international dimensions of the three areas assigned to the PLA in the White Paper, especially the increasing linkage between the country's national security needs and foreign policy goals, the leadership in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has rightly entrusted the country's defence establishment with the task of conducting its own 'diplomacy' under a 'new security concept'. Also, as per the country's national security agenda, the Chinese authorities have given powers to the PLA for playing a role beyond the country's borders, as in, peacekeeping operations and anti-piracy missions. These activities run parallel to the functions of the foreign ministry with respect to the country's external relations within the "harmonious world" framework. In the changed geo-political situation, the protection of 'core interests' has become the common goal for both. Therefore the Chinese military, which has a tradition of having its own ideological and strategic mindset is showing, as expected, a tendency to speak and act tough on issues relating to 'national sovereignty', unlike diplomats and officials who are required to articulate China's 'peaceful development' position. An important example of this are the aggressive posture adopted by PLA leaders and officers as well as scholars associated with the military establishment on sensitive issues such as relations with the US, overseas naval bases as well as land and sea territorial claims against neighbouring countries. It is also significant

* **DS Rajan** is the Director at the Chennai Centre for China Studies, Chennai.

that these views, in general, are not officially contradicted. A chronological listing of some of such instances is as follows:

February 2010:

Condemning the US over its decision to sell arms to Taiwan, three senior PLA officers from China's National Defence University and Academy of Military Sciences - Major General Zhu Chenghu, Major General Luo Yuan and Senior Colonel Ke Chunqiao, called upon (*Xinhua*, February 9, 2010) China to sell its US debt off and urged it to increase defence spending and expand its military deployment.

PLA Navy Rear Admiral (Retired) Yin Zhuo, who is also a member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) feared (*RIA Novosty*, February 27, 2010) that the growing number of submarines operated by member countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) could pose a threat to China: "If this continues at the current rate, in several years, the ASEAN nations will have powerful naval forces, which can pose a challenge to neighbouring countries, including China." He also called for China to build a naval base in the Middle East, which prompted China's ministry of defence to respond (CCTV, March 1, 2010) that, "China has no plans for an overseas naval base."

In his book entitled *The China Dream*, published by the PLA Publishing House, Beijing, Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu, who is presently a Professor at the National Defence University challenged (*Reuters*, February 28, 2010) the targeting of China by the US 'hegemon' and asked the PRC "to build the world's strongest military", in order to uphold the country's prestige.

May 2010:

Rear Admiral Guan Youfei, deputy director-general of foreign affairs office in the ministry of national defence, speaking at a gathering of scholars, top officials and foreign representatives at Diaoyutai state guest house, openly attacked (Beijing, May 24, 2010) Washington for selling arms to Taiwan and accused the US of being a "hegemon", plotting to 'encircle China with strategic alliances'.

August 2010:

Major General (Retd.) Luo Yuan, a member of the Chinese People's Political Conference (CPPC) and deputy secretary-general of the Chinese Academy of Military sciences, in response to US-South Korea joint exercises in the Yellow Sea, attacked (*People's Daily*, August 13, 2010) the US for engaging in 'gunboat' diplomacy and showing off 'hard power'.

December 2010:

A lengthy article contributed by Xu Yunhong, an alternate member of the 15th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee, in the party theoretical journal *Qiu Shi* (December 10, 2010), accused the US of frequently prevailing upon Asian nations like India, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia as well as Australia, to hold joint military exercises with the purpose of 'encircling China militarily'. Arguing that "throughout the history of the new China, peace in China has never been gained by giving in, but only through war and that safeguarding national interests is never achieved by mere negotiations, but by war", it added that "we must send a clear signal to our neighbouring countries that we don't fear war, but we are prepared at any time to go to war to safeguard our national interests."

Major General (Retd.) Luo Yuan, questioned (*Liberation Army Daily* and *Global Times*, December 14, 2010) as to how China can boast of being a strong nation when the issue of national unification remains unsolved and the lands 'looted by China's neighbours' are yet to be recovered.

China's Defence Minister Liang Guanglie stated in an interview to the state media (December 31, 2010) that 'in the coming five years, China's military will push forward preparations for military conflicts in every strategic direction'.

January 2011:

Air force Colonel Dai Xu, an influential military strategist in his interview to Reuters, said (*China Daily*, March 4, 2011): "I am very pessimistic about the future. China is largely surrounded by hostile or wary countries beholden to the US. I believe that China cannot escape the calamity of war and this calamity may come in the not-too-distant future".

May 2011:

A former military strategist with the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, Maj. Gen (Retd.) Peng Guangqian in an interview warned (*People's Daily*, May 29, 2011) his countrymen against 'illusion of peace'. Noting that "globalised production and economic interdependence cannot fundamentally eliminate the cause of war rooted in the expansionist nature of monopoly capitalism", he stated that China may not challenge the US, but the US "hegemony" will challenge China.

Prima facie, the military viewpoints overlapped with and at times were more aggressive than foreign ministry statements. Particularly on the issue of US arms sales to Taiwan, the former's stiff position unmindful of China's diplomatic

interests, stands out. The foreign ministry officials on the other hand have adopted a more moderate stand on the subject. Worth noting in this regard is state councillor Dai Bingguo's assertion in his 9000-word essay (Chinese foreign ministry website, December 6, 2010) that: "Beijing would never to seek to replace the US as the world's dominant power", thus avoiding any excessive US bashing. The same trend towards a military-civilian attitudinal divide can be discerned in actions taking place at the ground level. On the sea territories issue, the PLA is adopting tough postures like promoting aggressive maritime surveillance and even holding military drills in order to apply pressure on China's neighbours like Japan and Vietnam. These are unmistakably casting a shadow over China's efforts at the diplomatic level to forge stable and friendly ties with nations in the region, especially to dispel fears regarding the "China Threat".

Notably, there are occasional signs appearing that the PLA may not mind bypassing the party and civilian mechanisms in the country while taking certain policy positions as substantiated¹, by the following instances: PLA's action during the US EP-3 spy aircraft incident (2001) of keeping the foreign ministry in the dark at least in the beginning; the military's handling of SARS outbreak in Guangdong (2003); undertaking the anti-satellite weapon test (January 2007) with no advance information to other official agencies; the PLA's reported denial of permission for the docking at Hong Kong harbour of the US aircraft carrier *Kitty Hawk*, over which China relented later (November 2007); and the test flight of J-20 prototype stealth fighter (January 11, 2011) about which even President Hu Jintao was reportedly unaware. In the last case, the visiting US defence secretary Robert Gates gave enough hints to reporters² that the Chinese leader, appeared not to be aware about the test flight. It is not surprise then that such signals create suspicions about PLA's real intentions in the outside world.

While discussing the PLA's influence over foreign affairs, or for that matter over any other civilian department, it may be necessary to address an important question – what is the current status of the military in the country's political system? It can be said in this connection that it was very influential during the period dominated by Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, the two 'long marchers' who had developed personal association with the army. The situation began to change in 1980s and 1990s, when military officers retiring from powerful party positions were replaced with civilians.

During the regimes of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, being described respectively as heads of 'third and fourth generation leaderships', the PLA moved away from its revolutionary roots and its role was narrowed down to defence only. Four factors seemed to have been responsible for this: The absence of a paramount

leader; generational shifts in the civilian and military leadership; increasing professionalism in the military brought about by institutional reforms and sustained economic development³. Simultaneously, the level of representation of the 'apolitical' PLA in the upper echelons of the CCP has come down. There is no PLA representative in the policy-making Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC); the last such was the navy Commander Liu Huaqing who retired in 1997. Also, 22 out of 25 Politburo members now have no military background and there is no PLA member in the powerful party secretariat.

Not to be overlooked is the fact that at a time when there is a downward trend in the PLA's political status, it is making rapid strides in another direction- the acquisition of professionalism backed by an effective defence modernisation programme, annual rises (average increase by 12.9 per cent) in the official defence budgets over the last two decades and improved promotional avenues for PLA officers and men.

Currently, the military's fighting capability is increasing as per directions of the party and state leadership. What is being witnessed is a surge in the procuring, developing and deploying of advanced weapon systems (e.g. J-20 stealth jets, aircraft carriers, carrier-killing DF21D anti-ship ballistic missiles, satellites, cyber weapons, aerial refuelling etc).⁴ Arms purchases from abroad, especially advanced fighter aircraft like SU-37 from Russia are being speeded up. Under the "New Historic Missions" directive of President Hu Jintao, the PLA's ability to project force beyond the country's borders is growing. The net result is that the PLA is no longer a land based army aimed at territorial defence. Along with the country's expanding navy and air force, it is gaining strength to protect China's strategic interests overseas – in particular, in the East and South China seas and beyond the Western Pacific. Anti-access and area-denial aims are the PLA's focus areas and it is believed that these could lead to a change in the balance of power in East Asia.

It would be appropriate to shift attention at this point to another question: In what manner, can a politically weak, but professionally strong PLA, influence foreign policy making in the PRC? For the answer one has begin by looking at the institutions involved in foreign policy making as of now. Identified⁵ in this regard are three bodies – (i) the nine-member CCP's Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), (ii) the Party's Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group (FALSG) and (iii) its attached FALSG Office. The FALSG which shares its personnel with the National Security Leading Small group, advises and makes recommendations to the PBSC on foreign policy matters; its membership is not known to the public, but is believed to include Hu as chairman, Xi as vice-chairman and has party, government and military officials

as members. It is a fact that the CCP general secretary and the PRC president Hu Jintao is only a *primus- inter- pares* in the PBSC, which makes policy decisions on the basis of a 'consensus'. Still, leaders who may have a greater say on foreign policy matters by virtue of their responsibilities, could be the four present PBSC members - President Hu Jintao, Premier Wen Jiabao, security chief Zhou Yonggang and the likely successor to Hu at the next year's Party Congress, Xi Jinping – all of whom lack military experience. The FALSG Office, which advises the leading group on foreign policy, is reportedly headed by State Councillor Dai Bingguo.

It may be seen from above that the PLA has no direct voice in the apex body, the PBSC, and that only in the FALSG, some interaction between the military and civilian leadership on foreign policy may possibly be taking place. But such interaction does not imply the PLA's exclusive influence over decision making, for the simple reason that as per reports, personnel, other than those of the army, like officials of the CCP's International Department and the ministers handling foreign affairs, commerce, state security etc are also represented in the FALSG which may have to factor in the entire spectrum of opinions in its recommendations. This may suggest a consensus-based decision-making at the level of FALSG as also, in the case of PBSC.

Along with the foreign ministry, there other players who now influence the foreign policy making process in China, like the PLA, the ministry of state security, the ministry of commerce, and energy-related establishments.⁶ As this process develops further, the traditional dominant role of the foreign ministry in managing international relations may diminish. Such expectations have figured in a recent study of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), completed on the basis of interviews with 71 Chinese officials and army men⁷. According to it, no single force is responsible for foreign policy issues. The Chinese foreign ministry has become a weak actor and a variety of other government agencies have emerged as new players wishing to impact on the foreign policy formulations. The loss of foreign ministry dominance follows the increasing pluralism within Chinese society and China's growing interdependence with the international community⁸

A leading Chinese strategist Professor Shen Dingli, in his study⁹, also recognises the waning of the foreign ministry's influence as well as the rise of different groups in the foreign policy arena, but feels that these groups function in a 'less coordinated and less centralised manner'. Rear Admiral Yang Yi, a former director of Institute for Strategic Studies, National Defence University, complained¹⁰ that "with no concrete leadership for national security and many departments involved, coordination is difficult, responses tend to be tardy, counter-measures lack focus and constantly problems emerge in certain links among the institutions dealing with matters."

In sum, it can be stated that in China's foreign policy-making process, there are now many actors including some that are new; the fact that the PLA is only one of the actors, goes to disprove the chances of the military dominating that process disproportionately. At the same time, given that 'national security' is the primary responsibility of the PLA, its influence over defence-related foreign policy issues is expected to remain strong. In particular, the PLA is expected to be pro-active in the following five areas – (i) Taiwan (ii) territorial problems with countries like India, (iii) sea boundary disputes with regional littoral powers like Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines, (iv) strategic competition with the US in the Asia-Pacific region, (v) handling North Korea situation, and (vi) strategic relations with countries like Russia and Pakistan. In coordinating their policies with respect to these five areas, China's defence and foreign policy establishments may occasionally find themselves at odds with each other; but their discord is not likely to get out of hand due to the existence of top policy-making bodies like the Politburo Standing Committee, who are capable of providing an institutional guarantee for reconciliation.

What are the implications for India given the PLA's influence - though not exclusive - over foreign policy making in China? Needing the attention of India first is the developing situation in China in which the foreign ministry is becoming a weak actor, mainly due to the entry of other institutional players into the arena. For New Delhi, it should be clear that the PLA, with national security as its charge, is bound to remain assertive with respect to all 'sovereignty-related' issues, including the one concerning the Sino-Indian border. It should learn from China's current two-pronged policy towards South China Sea - seeking on one hand ways to maintain stable political relations with the littorals like Japan and Vietnam, and on the other, flexing military muscle at the ground level, if necessary, as a tactic to reassert its sovereignty over the disputed islands from time to time.

For India, the dichotomy in China's policy and action could also be important. It may have something to do with China's "core interests" principle which allows no compromises on sovereignty-related issues and even justifies the use of force to settle them. It is obvious that 'diplomacy' is taking a back seat on selected issues. India should realise that the 'core interests' principle may also govern Beijing's policy behaviour with respect to the Sino-Indian border issue (though not so far included by China in the 'core interests' list). India-China ties may have to be looked at through the prism of Beijing's policy-action gap. The two agreed to 'resolve outstanding differences including the boundary question at an early date through peaceful negotiations' (China-India Joint Communique, New Delhi, December 16, 2010) and decided to set up a 'working mechanism for consultation and coordination on border affairs' (*Sanya, China*, April 13, 2011) for ensuring '

maintenance of border peace and tranquility'. These coupled with the fact that the agreed confidence building measures in the border are working well, go to show that a favourable political atmosphere in bilateral ties has come to prevail.

However, there seems to be no end to the mutual suspicions between the two sides. China is continuing to reject Indian sovereignty over Arunachal Pradesh, and is building military infrastructure in areas across Indian border and is very wary of India's despatch of additional Indian troops to Northeast. As a fresh irritant in its ties with India, China has shed its traditional neutral stand on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir and moved closer to Pakistan's position on the issue. China has been giving 'stapled visas' to Indians living in Jammu and Kashmir and there is still no clarity on the issue, despite the bilateral consultations which are in progress. Complicating the situation is the reported presence of Chinese soldiers as well as execution of infrastructure projects by China, in the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK), including one to upgrade the existing Karakorum Highway connecting Xinjiang and Pakistan's Punjab. A feasibility study for a railway link between Xinjiang and Pakistan's Gwadar port is also in the offing. Lastly, Beijing's moves to increase its strategic influence in important states surrounding the Indian Ocean, have generated strategic concerns in India.


China's suspicions over India's policies are also getting reflected in its ground-level military actions. Beijing last year conducted the first ever military exercise in Tibet, close to the Indian border, involving air force, artillery and electronic warfare units. It appeared as a Chinese tactic to apply pressure on India on the border issue, in response to the latter's augmentation of its force levels in its Northeast. Interestingly, China has employed similar tactics against Japan and Vietnam, the two powers contesting Beijing's claims over South China Sea islands.

The PLA operates under the principle of "Party commands the gun". Still, it has occasionally taken certain measures bypassing the Party and civilian administration. It would be illogical and hypothetical to expect the PLA to bypass the Party directive with respect to India too. Still, India, in its own interests, should not allow itself to be taken by surprise if any act of Chinese military adventurism takes place on the borders, initiated by commanders at local levels with no orders from the high command.

New Delhi should understand the meaning of China's 'diplomatic' formula of "shelving the disputes and seeking common development" with respect to disputes with India. The Chinese emphasised this formula during the recent Beijing-Hanoi territorial confrontation. It will be in the fitness of things, if China's neighbours

including India who have unresolved territorial problems with China, ponder over the possibilities of Beijing's dropping the 'shelving' and adopting an aggressive position once China becomes fully modernised militarily, say by middle of this century as officially projected.

During the recent China-Vietnam clash, the US emerged as a common challenge for China's both foreign and defence policy players. The latter appeared to be more serious about meeting this challenge, than the country's diplomats, for reasons already mentioned in the paper. There can be a parallel case with respect to India with Chinese opinions veering towards a Washington-New Delhi collusion to strategically 'encircle' China. As such, India should give priority to handling of the US-China-India triangular relations with finesse.

Last but not least, India cannot afford to miss the significance of the increasing Chinese naval activism for the security of the Indian Ocean, through which all raw material meant for the PRC, pass. One can clearly see coordination in this regard between the PLA navy and the country's foreign policy establishment at a time when China is being transformed - from a 'continental power' into a 'maritime power'. There is bound to be a strategic competition between China and India in the Indian Ocean region and without doubt, the two nations have a heavy stake in preventing such a competition from turning into an adversarial one. 

Notes:

- 1 The CCP brought forth its "new security concept" in its 16th Congress held in 2002. It provides for "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and coordination" in international security relations. The "new security concept", as part of former party chief Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents" principle, is "security guarantee for China's peaceful rise"- Xia Liping, Shanghai Institute for International Studies," *International Review*, Spring 2004 issue.
- 2 Prepared on the basis of C3S Paper No 697 dated December 24, 2010, entitled "A More Assertive PLA", written by Mr B. Raman.
- 3 Rajan, D.S., 'China: The Role of the PLA and Anti-Terrorism Drill with India', *South Asia Analysis Group (SAAG)*, Paper No.2512, December 24, 2007.
- 4 Pomfret, John, "Chinese Military Tests Fighter Jet Ahead of Hu's Meeting With Gates", *Washington Post*, January 12, 2011.
- 5 Tam, Andrew H., "Coercion and Governance in China- Analysing Civil-Military Relations", Monterey, CA: Naval Post Graduate School, March 2006.
- 6 Baker, Rodger, "China's Military Comes into Its Own", *Stratfor*, January 18, 2011.
- 7 Lawrence, Susan V., "Perspectives on Chinese Foreign Policy, Testimony Before US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *Congressional Research Service*, April 13, 2011.
- 8 Pomfret, John, "Dispute with Japan Highlights China's Foreign Policy Power struggle", *Washington Post*, September 24, 2010.

- 9 Ide, William, "Researchers Try to Explain Chinese Foreign Policy Decision Making", *Reuters*, October 12, 2010 and "Who Shapes China's Foreign Policy", Amy Wong, *Reuters*, September 24, 2010.
- 10 "New Actors in Chinese Foreign Policy", Centre for Strategic and International Studies, available at www.csis.org, October 8, 2010.
- 11 "In China, Officials in Tug of War to Shape Foreign Policy", available at www.thepeninsulaqatar.com, September 26, 2010.
- 12 Buckley, Chris, "China Military Risks Treading on Policy Issues", *Reuters*, August 31, 2010.