

China's military past and future

The best way forward for world is to keep sword sheathed

DAVID CURTIS WRIGHT

Calgary Herald
Saturday, July 3, 2010

What are we to make of China's burgeoning military might and strategic intentions? Why, for instance, has influential Chinese strategist Zhang Wenmu written in the second edition of his book on Chinese sea power (published in China last month) about the critical importance of controlling the sea lanes of communication across the Indian Ocean?

There are various answers to these questions. At one extreme is the sentimental Confucian caricature, perpetrated and perpetuated in China and the West, of China as a uniquely nonmilitary civilization which has almost always made merely token, ritualistic use of its military and which has never invaded or expanded into neighbouring territories. At the other extreme is the recent tendency among right-wing hardliners and their journalist confreres in the United States to regard China historically as an inherently militaristic civilization and, in the modern age, as a brilliantly deceptive, expansionist dragon bent on achieving world domination.

Both of these views are, of

course, nonsense. Chinese military history is just now beginning to develop in the West, and there is much to learn. But we already know that China's history is replete with massive military action in which hundreds of thousands of troops often died in single battles or campaigns. (No, Sun Tzu's dictum about winning by not fighting does not sum up the essence of Chinese military history.) It is also clear that historically, China was no more and no less a military power than any other major civilization.

Among China watchers, there is growing awareness and consensus that China's leaders fear their own people more than the military might of any foreign country. Susan Shirk, for example, in her recent book, *China: The Fragile Superpower*, argues that more than anything else, Communist Party members dread the spectre of rising domestic instability threatening their power and authority. Regime security and survival are the primary preoccupations of China's leaders today.

A new policy paper from the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute by Elinor Sloan, associate professor of international relations at Carleton University, concurs with this consensus but gives it more focus. According to Sloan, Chinese leaders see the security of their regime as dependent on the two major tasks of gaining political control over Taiwan and maintaining economic growth domestically. Sloan argues that we can understand much of China's sometimes unsettling and befuddling strategic behaviour, including its development and expansion of submarine fleets, anti-ship missile platforms, cyber warfare, asymmetric warfare doctrines, anti-access capabilities, intensified discussion of future "informationized" local or regional high-tech wars, and a demonstrated ability to shoot down at least one satellite (all of which she discusses at some length), as reducible or attributable to these dual imperatives.

Even though Chinese strategic behaviours raise eyebrows in the West and in much of the rest of East Asia as well, they will continue unabated and likely even accelerate, Sloan concludes. She ends with a policy recommendation for the United States: "Historical precedence suggests

that a dual track of engagement and containment is the best approach to contend with a great power dictatorship actively seeking to maintain its continuance in power."

Her analysis and recommendations are sound. Wisdom and moderation indicate that between the extremes of naive, acquiescent panda hugging on the one hand and mindlessly pugnacious panda slugging on the other, run the twin paths or tracks Sloan recommends. In 1996, Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, in a foreign policy speech to the Nixon Center in Washington, D.C., said that the U.S.-China relationship would determine the prospects for peace and prosperity throughout East Asia: "U. S.-China bilateral relations will set the tone, structure and context for all other relationships in East Asia . . . China should be given every incentive to choose international co-operation which will absorb its energies constructively for another 50 to 100 years.

"This means China must have the economic opportunities to do this peacefully, without having to push its way to get resources like oil, and have access to markets for its goods and services . . . If such a route is not open to China, the world must live with a pushy China."

Because the world does not need a pushy, combative China, the United States must engage the nascent Chinese dragon in a friendly manner while still maintaining its ability, sword in sheath, to slay that dragon if it ever becomes aggressive. But the former approach is certainly preferable to the latter. In virtually any foreseeable scenario, playing nice with China will be far less costly, in blood and treasure, than playing St. George.

David Curtis Wright is associate professor in the Department of History, and executive research fellow in the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary. He is in mainland China teaching a course on human rights to Chinese and Canadian university students.