

DEFENSE PRIORITIES IN POST-MAO PEKING

by

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In spite of the continuing prominence naturally given to "Mao Tse-tung thought" in People's Republic of China (PRC) publications—a prominence that is more than lip service—there is little doubt that the new party leadership has been reassessing its priorities and strategy for bringing China to "the world's front ranks" by the turn of the century. The reassessment is underlined by the spate of over 20 high-level conferences held on critical economic and defense-related matters between the winter of 1976 and the summer of 1977. The overall plan is the one repropounded by Chou En-lai in his January 1975 speech during the National People's Conference meeting. It involves two phases: the achievement by 1980 of "an independent relatively comprehensive industrial and economic system," and, by the year 2000, "comprehensive modernization of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology."¹

The "four modernizations" of the second phase are obviously interrelated. Heavy industry remains the key, but it can grow only by increased investment in agriculture and light industry. The defense industry, similarly, grows only in its proper place within heavy industry. Science and technology, moreover, serve all other modernization: "Productive forces continue to develop as science and technology keep on making progress."² We will return later to these interrelations.

As to defense priorities, two basic funding problems arise. The first is the percentage of the national budget to be devoted directly to defense; the second is the appropriate allocation of resources within the defense budget itself. The PRC press has published

much—although only in general terms—on the first of these problems, and one can risk fairly firm predictions on probable trends for the coming decade. The second problem, however, is a matter of some sensitivity for China's national security and has consequently had little, if any, open discussion; one can make only enlightened guesses on the subject.

DEFENSE AND THE NATIONAL ECONOMY

Peking's perception of the threat from abroad is a principal driving factor in its assessment of defense needs. One recent statement of that threat quotes Mao: "National defense is indispensable," and "If we are not to be bullied . . . we cannot do without [nuclear weapons]." It goes on to explain:

This is because the enemies are still around and we are still being bullied and surrounded by the enemies. . . . We are now still confronted by imperialism and social-imperialism which are armed to the teeth with modern weapons and equipment.³

By "imperialism," of course, is meant the United States, and by "social-imperialism," the Soviet Union. The article specifically points to the USSR's "million-strong army" on China's northern borders. Another source warns of Soviet expansion of its Pacific fleet, and quotes Mao's 1949 inscription, "We must build a navy!"⁴

A People's Liberation Army (PLA) article, "Be Prepared Against Surprise Attacks from Aggressors," reviews the history of modern

surprise attacks—including Hitler’s against Poland and against the USSR, Japan’s at Pearl Harbor, and the Soviet Union’s into Czechoslovakia—and presents ideological explanations for them. As a pointed conclusion, it refers to Chairman Mao’s directive on “heightening our vigilance to defend the mother country” and cites Chairman Hua’s call for “struggle to accelerate revolutionization and modernization in the building of our Army.”⁵

Numerous articles also portray the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union as a threat to world peace and to the security of China. To cite only one, the *Peking Review* of 18 February 1977 quotes Drew Middleton on respective annual US-USSR defense expenditures: the United States, 5.4 percent of Gross National Product (GNP); the Soviet Union, 12-14.5 percent.

War between the two superpowers is considered inevitable, and China foresees its own involvement. “By their very nature, imperialism and social-imperialism mean war. We must definitely be ready for war.”⁶ “Defense industry demands a modern industrial base, and war is sure to come. The interior of China must be transformed into ‘strategic rear bases.’”⁷ There is no doubt of Peking’s desire for large, strong, modern conventional forces backed by a considerable nuclear *force de frappe*. The questions are only how much, in what balance, and how fast.

In considering the place of defense in the overall economy, Mao’s early views are recalled: “To build a powerful defense, we must start with accelerating the construction of the national economy, that is, we must vigorously strengthen agriculture and the basic industries.” Former head of state Liu Shao-chi is criticized for urging drastic cuts in defense spending, saying “The defense industry has gone too far, too fast and become useless.” Ex-Minister of Defense Lin Piao is attacked for the opposite offense: “one-sidedly expand[ing] the plan of construction for the national defense industry.” Finally, the “Gang of Four” (Mao’s widow, Chiang Ch’ing, and three Politburo colleagues) is accused of putting the

defense industry into disorder, disrupting the national economy.⁸

A proper balance is proposed:

The defense industry is a component of the national economy. . . . The development of the defense industry must be suited not only to the development of the entire national economy, but also to the progress of the modernization of national defense. Therefore, the defense industry also possesses considerable independence and initiative. It should be carried out as fast as possible so that a good foundation may be laid and necessary preparations made before the outbreak of war.⁹

This does not mean accelerated defense spending at the expense of other sectors of the economy. On the contrary, the same article quotes Mao in stating, “One reliable way [to strengthen the economy] is to cut military and administrative expenditures down to appropriate proportions and increase expenditures on economic construction. Only with the faster growth of economic construction can there be more progress in defense production.”

Some indication of what proportions might be considered appropriate for military expenditures appeared in Mao’s comments in the 1950’s that the previous 30-plus percent of the national budget allocated to defense should be reduced to the neighborhood of 20 percent. The announced percentage declined from 22.1 in 1955 to 20 in 1956 and presumably to about 19 percent in 1957.¹⁰ The figures released then did not, of course, include considerable funds earmarked primarily for research and development but concealed under such other budgetary headings as economic construction; administrative expenses; and social service, culture, and education.

Considering the very real constraints on the PRC economy today and in the foreseeable future and the indications in recently publicized articles, it seems unlikely that the direct defense allocation will vary much from 20 percent of the national budget. It should

be noted, however, that maintaining that percentage constant in a growing economy where inflation is not a major problem would result in annual increases in the actual amounts expended on the military.¹¹

Significantly, the first three of Mao's "Ten Great Relationships" are, first, between industry and agriculture and between heavy and light industry; second, between coastal and interior industry; and third, between economic and defense construction. Mao's essay on this topic, written in 1956, was first published openly in 1976 in the fifth volume of Mao's *Selected Works*, edited by the new Party Chairman and Premier, Hua Kuo-feng. The presumption is that the post-Mao leadership has been and is looking long and hard at realities and that defense, as one of the "four modernizations," is expected to improve in tandem with the economy as a whole. As Robert Dernberger points out, the items essential to improve the PRC's conventional forces must come from a wide variety of sources—among them, the metal industries, the machine-building industries, the chemical industry, the fuel industry, and the transportation industries.¹² As those sectors of the economy grow, so will the ability to accelerate the modernization of the PLA.

Similarly, the emphasis given by the new leadership to advances in science and technology indicates a realization of the contributions that sector can make to all others, including the military. On 6 July 1977, the *Kuang-ming Jih-pao* stated that "The key to the four modernizations lies in the modernization of science and technology." This echoed a 3 July statement in the *Jen-min Jih-pao* that modernizing science and technology "should walk ahead of the other three modernizations," and it presaged the "unanimous view" of the work conference of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, reported by the New China News Agency on 8 July, "that scientific research should advance ahead of production and construction." Chairman Hua gave his imprimatur to such opinions by proclaiming at that work conference, "May science flourish and advance!"

The flourishing and advancement of science and technology in China is a goal not easy to attain. Even before the setbacks of the Cultural Revolution, Peking's skilled manpower resources were extremely limited. Various estimates have been made,¹³ but the following summation will not be misleading as to the magnitude of the difficulties: The US population of 220 million includes 3 million scientists and engineers; the USSR population of 235 million includes 4 million scientists and engineers; yet the PRC population of 920 million includes only 1.2 million scientists and engineers.

Peking clearly realizes the problem and proposes two concurrent solutions, both of them matters of heated controversy in the past. The first is an intensified educational program to produce the highly qualified personnel needed. The other is the borrowing of technology from abroad.

Approximately half of China's present pool of qualified researchers was educated in China, the other half abroad. Of the latter, those from the West are in the minority and are aging beyond their productive years; those from the USSR are in their forties or fifties.

An intriguing assertion on the role of intellectuals, so criticized during the Cultural Revolution, appeared in the 24 June 1977 *Kuang-ming Jih-pao*: "At present those playing a leading role in all realms of the scientific and technical front are precisely the intellectuals brought up by our Party in those [pre-Cultural Revolution] 17 years." This

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echoes published remarks, explicitly critical of the "Gang of Four" but implicitly critical of some aspects of the Cultural Revolution, that those preceding 17 years cannot be ignored.

The "Gang of Four" is currently taking the major share of the blame for setbacks in indigenous scientific education, though the present dearth is the result of years of basic Maoist policy. Now a new emphasis appears. To correct the "gap" in scientific and technological ranks "caused by the Gang of Four," a system of training postgraduate students is to be organized, and the teaching of basic theory is to be strengthened. "The building and training of a mammoth contingent of working-class scientists and technicians who are both red and expert is of tremendous significance." In context, the primary goal is expertise.¹⁴

Even if this policy shift is pursued consistently and vigorously, the "mammoth contingent" of scientific and technological personnel will not be available for many years. And, there will undoubtedly be delays as a result of periodic reassessments of the relative importance of "redness" and "expertise." Nevertheless, the prognosis is for substantial progress in the long run. In the meantime, the second solution—borrowing from abroad—holds considerable promise.

That solution, as has already been suggested, involves deliberate decisions to ignore past criticisms. During his second fall from grace, Teng Hsiao-p'ing was compared with Chang Chih-tung (1837-1909) who advocated borrowing from the West, with the slogan, "Take Chinese learning as basic substance and Western learning for utility." Most recently the "Gang of Four" is accused of "preventing scientists . . . from studying the latest scientific and technological developments in other countries."¹⁵ In rebuttal, Mao is quoted: "Our policy is to learn from the strong points of all nations and all countries." "Make foreign things serve China." "In the natural sciences we are rather backward, and here we should make a special effort to learn from foreign countries." "In technology I think at first we have to follow others in most cases." But there is the

caution, "Rely mainly on our own efforts while making external assistance subsidiary." Chou En-lai's attitude toward foreign technology is also cited: "First application, second criticism, third transformation, fourth creation."¹⁶

A *Kuang-ming Jih-pao* article of 8 June 1977 comments that "Every country or nation has its own strong points and unique features," and it suggests the value of exchanging experiences. China should "critically but not blindly learn from foreign countries," maintaining its own independence, keeping the initiative in its own hands, relying on its own efforts, and introducing the necessary advanced technical equipment from abroad.

All this was, as already mentioned, the basis of one of the major criticisms of Teng Hsiao-p'ing during the period of his second fall. During his first return to power, Peking had shown increasing interest in borrowing from abroad—in military-related fields, the interest lay in borrowing primarily from France, Great Britain, and the United States. While Teng was out of favor after Chou's death, he (and, by implication, Chou himself) was attacked for such initiatives and the point of view which prompted them. Since his second resurgence, that approach to policy has again been defended.

Science and technology, then, revitalized by the double approach of educating and training the skilled manpower needed in China while importing the foreign technology required in this stage of development, bears a heavy responsibility in the "four modernizations." While agriculture and industry will benefit greatly by scientific and technological advances, so will defense, and it is there that our primary interest rests.

ALLOCATION OF DEFENSE RESOURCES

Discussing what priorities Peking observes when slicing the budgetary pie within the defense sector of the economy is an uncertain business. One can make guesses and hazard predictions, but they must be more tentative in the case of the PRC than are most projections of foreign military development.

There are two basic areas in which priorities must be set: conventional versus strategic allocations, and the conflicting demands of various elements of the conventional forces.

The triple mission of the PLA remains valid, restated as recently as 9 May 1977 by Yeh Chien-ying at the Taching Conference and published in *Jen-min Jih-pao* on 13 May. The army should be ready, first, to fight; second, to produce its own food and run small and medium-sized factories; and third, to take part in political work among workers and peasants. On 24 June 1977, however, the *Jen-min Jih-pao* made the pregnant assertion that "An army is primarily a fighting force." A series of *Jen-min Jih-pao* articles on that date placed new emphasis on the importance of military training for the army, navy, and air force, quoting the old proverb "Sweating more in peacetime means bleeding less in time of war."

This is not to imply that the traditional triple mission will be abandoned, either in the short or the long term, nor that "redness" will be neglected in favor of "expertise." It simply reasserts the discredited Defense Minister P'eng Te-huai's 1956 statement:

We must intensify our study of modern military science and technique, the art of commanding a modernized army in battle, and new military systems. Unless we put greater effort into the study of these things, we shall not be able to master and make use of the most up-to-date weapons, or command a modernized army in battle.

More recent *Jen-min Jih-pao* statements, while insisting that "Politics is the commander, the soul," assert "At the same time it is also necessary to strengthen military training so that commanders and fighters can proficiently master tactics and techniques." "Military training [is] the only road to improve military art." "[We have] laid down training plans, set rational training targets, carried out necessary inspections and investigations," and all of these actions were opposed, it is alleged, by the "Gang of Four."¹⁷ Political reliability and

indoctrination will remain essential, but there is to be increased emphasis on professionalism.

Along with this drive for improved professional military capabilities in the regular forces is the simultaneous reassertion of the militia's role and the whole concept of "people's war." China must have "not only a powerful regular army, but organize contingents of the people's militia on a big scale." The militia "is an inseparable part of China's military system." It is the "strong support and powerful reserve for the PLA." Every province must have its own ordnance factory. And the old assertion reappears that an invader will "drown in the vast sea of our people's militia."¹⁸

The concepts—indeed, the words themselves—are nothing new. The significance is that Peking's new leadership realizes that it cannot, now or in the foreseeable future, disregard the value of its huge manpower and vast territories in defending against potential aggressors who are far ahead in the quantity and quality of their armaments. At the same time, the military aspect of the "four modernizations" will be pushed at the maximum rate consistent with the balanced development of a socialist economy and attainment of "the world's front ranks."

In the field of strategic weapons systems, too, there must be continued progress, and such progress must necessarily draw on resources which otherwise could be used for more rapid modernization of conventional forces. There is no available evidence to permit an assessment of what portion of the military budget is to be allocated to each of the two sectors. All that can be said with certainty is that progress in both sectors will be sought simultaneously. Personally, I am convinced that the strategic nuclear capability envisaged is the minimum which will serve to deter both the United States and the Soviet Union while increasing PRC prestige regionally and worldwide.

In discussing Mao's assertion that "The atom bomb is a paper tiger" to be heeded tactically but despised strategically, a recent editorial addresses the "reactionary essence of

nuclear blackmail by the two hegemonists," and makes explicit a statement made by Mao in 1955: "We have a population of 600 million and 9.6 million square kilometers of land. Those atom bombs of the United States could not destroy the Chinese people." Mao went on to say that even if the whole world were destroyed, it might be of some import to the solar system, but of no import to the universe—implying, perhaps, the triumph of socialism in extraterrestrial life. The editorial speaks of "making good preparations against wars of aggression" and asserts that although nuclear weapons are necessary, "We must embrace the concept of [inevitable] war . . . and put ourselves on a footing of fighting on a large scale at an early date. We should be prepared against conventional as well as nuclear war."¹⁹

As for priorities in modernization of the various arms and services of the conventional forces, there is firm evidence of natural rivalries but little information on current policy decisions. The distribution of military manpower is heavily overbalanced in favor of the ground forces (army, 3,250,000; navy, 300,000; air force, 400,000).²⁰ However, the naval construction program is apparently being reemphasized, after setbacks attributed to the "Gang of Four"; there is interest in more advanced aircraft; and the army recognizes well its qualitative and quantitative inferiority to potential enemies in tanks, artillery, transport, communications, and logistical backup.²¹

CONCLUSIONS

In assessing Peking's defense priorities for the period up to the turn of the century, I have made three assumptions. First, development of the "Maoist" line proposed by such leaders as Hua Kuo-feng and Teng Hsiao-p'ing will continue to be dominant. Second, there will be no domestic political or economic upheavals of sufficient magnitude to disrupt the national effort. And third, there will be no international developments—particularly a war—important enough to cause a basic reorientation of long-range plans. These assumptions are not unreasonable, but neither are they certainties.

In the fall of 1977, the PRC announced one basic policy decision which will have a definite impact on its integrated program to attain "front rank" status in the world by the year 2000: the first pay raise for lower-level industrial workers since the period before the Cultural Revolution.²² This will divert some monies which might have been used for capital investment in all four sectors of modernization; it will also aggravate the problem of differences between urban and rural standards of living. At the same time, however, it should give a shot in the arm to the overall development of the economy and, with careful attention to agriculture as the foundation of the national economic system, it could well bring the annual rate of growth of the GNP well above five percent to, perhaps, seven or eight percent.²³ The implications of such an increased growth rate for the defense budget, even if its share of the national budget remains at or just below 20 percent, are obvious.

In the area of strategic weaponry, Peking will continue its present programs. These appear to include nuclear weapons deliverable by close support and medium-range bombers; medium-range ballistic missiles; regional ballistic missiles capable, with deployment to Western China, of striking the Moscow area; full-scale intercontinental ballistic missiles; and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. In the case of the first two—bombers and medium-range ballistic missiles—it is quite likely that they might be employed within the borders of China if Soviet forces were to cross the western or northern borders in force.

As to the rate of development of the various systems, only conjectures can be made. It would seem likely that the PRC believes that its presently operational strategic weapons capability is sufficient to deter any aggressor for the next few years, allowing time for development of its ultimately more sophisticated, though quantitatively limited, deterrent of intercontinental and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Thus, approximately the same levels of investment in strategic systems can be maintained without undue risk and without overstraining the economy.

In the area of conventional armaments, the

rate of expansion of programs and facilities for the defense industry will depend on the overall rate of industrial growth within a balanced economy. Manpower levels will remain relatively stable, but with attention paid both to paring down the number of people unnecessarily engaged in administration and to improving the technological and ideological qualifications of those accepted and retained for military service. Logically, a better balance should be sought between air, sea, and ground forces, though the ground forces will remain the core of the military establishment. In the ground forces, it seems likely that primary emphasis in modernization will be given to mobility, communications, firepower (including armor and artillery), and logistical support. This last area is one in which it is possible that planners do not yet appreciate the criticality of the intermediate area between the battlefield and the industrial base.

The training of conventional forces, including larger-scale combined arms and joint maneuvers, almost definitely will receive increased emphasis, particularly with the introduction of more sophisticated materiel. During the next two decades, however, it is unlikely that concurrent emphasis on political reliability ("redness") will be slighted. Similarly, the traditional triple mission of the PLA will remain integral to the armed forces for at least several generations.

As for the matter of domestic production versus acquisitions from abroad, the attitude of national self-reliance will predominate. China is unlikely to ever again put itself in a position of critical—or even substantial—dependency on a foreign power. Nevertheless, there will be more willingness to look abroad for technologies, and even weapons systems, which can be assimilated at home. Peking will consider carefully anything which will accelerate modernization or allow a new type of "leap forward" in defense-related fields without unacceptable costs or the danger of too much foreign influence.

The threat perception is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. The two "imperialist powers" remain the most

dangerous challenges to China's survival and progress. Of the two, the Soviet Union is the more immediate threat; thus, some degree of accommodation with the lesser—the United States—is desirable in the short term. In viewing the long term, however, we must consider the attitude expressed by Keng Piao, head of the Party's International Liaison Department, when he justified the present policy of rapprochement with the United States by saying, "When we regard the time as right we will be candid and say: 'Please, Uncle Sam, pack up your things and go.'"²⁴

Additionally, the PRC warns that full-scale war between the two superpowers is inevitable. Although half the world's population may die when that day comes, the contention is that just as World War I resulted in the first socialist state and World War II in the proliferation of such states, World War III will bring about the universal victory of socialism. China, presumably, will be the great model and natural leader of that scorched socialist earth.

In considering Peking's defense priorities in the post-Mao era, we have reviewed innumerable criticisms of recent policies and those who proposed them. Additional incidents could be cited. "Capitulationists" were assailed under the guise of critiques of the 13th-century novel *Water Margin*. Ex-Defense Minister Lin Piao was linked, in a criticism campaign, with the ancient sage Confucius. Advocates of importing technology, like Chang Chih-tung at the turn of the century, have been called fools. As one considers those campaigns and the probability of others yet to come, Joe Levenson's comment about Confucius' role as an innovator inevitably comes to mind: "To criticize the present in terms of the past is to herald a future like neither."²⁵ That comment may well be the most pertinent we can make about post-Mao China.

NOTES

1. Chu Chin-ping, "The Basic Policy for Socialist Revolution and Construction—Notes on Studying Chairman Mao's 'On the Ten Major Relationships,'" *Peking Review*, 18 March 1977, pp. 10-13. The original proposal of the four modernizations was made in 1964.

2. Attributed to Marx and Engels in "Outline Report on the Work of the Chinese Academy of Sciences," *Jen-min Jih-pao*, 30 July 1977. This and other citations from *Jen-min Jih-pao* and *Kuang-ming Jih-pao* may be found in *Survey of People's Republic of China Press*, produced by the American Consulate General, Hong Kong, and distributed by the National Technical Information Service of the US Department of Commerce, Springfield, Va.
3. "Strategic Policy on Strengthening Defense Construction," *Kuang-ming Jih-pao*, 20 January 1977.
4. "Hold High the Banner of Chairman Mao, Build a Powerful Navy," *Jen-min Jih-pao*, 24 June 1977.
5. Li Chiu-lung, "Be Prepared Against Surprise Attacks from Aggressors," *Jen-min Jih-pao*, 20 June 1977.
6. "Chairman Hua Kuo-feng's Speech At the National Conference on Learning from Taching in Industry," *Peking Review*, 20 May 1977, pp. 7-14.
7. Yeh Chien-ying, at the Taching conference, quoted in *Jen-min Jih-pao*, 13 May 1977.
8. "Strategic Policy on Strengthening Defense Construction," *Kuang-ming Jih-pao*, 20 January 1977.
9. *Ibid.*
10. "Final Accounts for 1956 and the 1957 State Budget," address by Li Hsien-nien to the 4th session of the 1st National People's Congress on 29 June 1957, published in *Current Background*, 5 July 1957, p. 17.
11. For an analysis of this matter, see Robert F. Dernberger, "The Economic Consequences of Defense Expenditure Choices in China," in *China: A Reassessment of the Economy*, a compendium of papers submitted to the US Congress, Joint Economic Committee, on 10 July 1975.
12. Robert F. Dernberger and Allen S. Whiting, *China's Future* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), p. 180.
13. See Chu-yuan Cheng, "Scientific and Engineering Manpower in Communist China," in *An Economic Profile of Mainland China*, studies prepared for the US Congress, Joint Economic Committee, 1967.
14. Tang Ao-ch'ing, "Strengthen Research in and the Teaching of Basic Theory," *Kuang-ming Jih-pao*, 6 July 1977.
15. New China News Agency broadcast in English from Peking, 8 July 1977.
16. "Denouncing the Absurd Theory of the 'Gang of Four' on the Question of Introducing Technology," *Jen-min Jih-pao*, 3 July 1977.
17. "Fearlessly Grasp Training," "Crack Troops Come from Rigid Training," and "The Only Road to Improve Military Art," in *Jen-min Jih-pao*, 24 June 1977.
18. From a *Chieh-fang Chun-pao* editorial, broadcast in English by the New China News Agency, 19 June 1977.
19. "The Atom Bomb is a Paper Tiger," *Jen-min Jih-pao*, 21 June 1977.
20. *The Military Balance, 1977-1978* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1977), pp. 53-54.
21. These inferiorities were rather bluntly—and somewhat exaggeratedly—pointed out by Secretary Schlesinger during and after his 1976 tour of the PRC.
22. Fox Butterfield, "Chinese Pay Raise to Bolster Economy," *The New York Times*, 9 October 1977, p. 9.
23. In the case of a national economy like that of the PRC, Gross National Product is at best a very speculative matter.
24. *Issues and Studies*, 13 (January 1977), 130-31.
25. Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate: A Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

