

# THE PLA AND THE KOSOVO CONFLICT

June Teufel Dreyer

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## FOREWORD

The U.S. armed forces are not the only military that has sought to discern the lessons of the Kosovo campaign in the spring of 1999. The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) has also analyzed the conflict and drawn its own conclusions. In fact, as Dr. June Teufel Dreyer, Professor of Political Science at the University of Miami in Florida, observes, rather than reach a single set of conclusions, different groups within the Chinese military drew different judgments. Dr. Dreyer argues that these differences of opinion reflect the considerable diversity of thinking about defense modernization and future war that exists within the PLA today. The analysis that follows therefore provides an opportunity for readers to learn about the different strands in Chinese strategic thinking as that country enters the 21st century.

I would like to thank the editors of the journal *Issues and Studies* for kindly permitting the Strategic Studies Institute to republish this essay, hence enabling a wider audience to benefit from its insights into Chinese analyses of Kosovo. The different views that Dr. Dreyer identifies remind us of the dangers of treating the PLA as a single monolithic entity. Only through careful study and analysis can we anticipate trends in the future direction of the PLA.

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## Introduction: The "China Threat" or a Threatened China?

The discussion of the "China Threat" in the industrialized countries of the world, and especially in the United States, has been prompted by a number of factors. Although facing no external threat and having many internal needs, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has for a decade raised its defense budget between 12 and 13 percent a year. Moreover, numerous substantial military expenditures are not included in the defense budget; the actual defense budget is generally estimated at three to four times the published figure. China has made major weapons purchases, mainly from Russia and Israel, and has achieved advances in indigenous development as well. A U.S. congressional committee report issued in early 1999 has disclosed that several of these advances occurred as a result of Chinese espionage operations in the United States.<sup>1</sup> In addition, a U.S. Defense Department report issued at the same time predicted that the balance of power across the Taiwan Strait would shift in favor of the PRC in the next 3 to 5 years.<sup>2</sup> The PRC's rhetoric has also become increasingly militant.

As China appeared more threatening to the West and to Japan, its own media increasingly portrayed the PRC as menaced by an industrialized world bent on forcing its ideology on the rest of the planet, and on China in particular. In China's analysis, Washington, unable to cope with the idea of a powerful PRC, wants to dismember China so that the United States can remain the hegemon of the international system. This was the prism through which the Chinese leadership viewed the Clinton administration-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). The operation

was construed as a possible prelude to intervention into the PRC. The People's Liberation Army (PLA), charged with the defense of the ancestral land, debated with particular urgency what would be the most appropriate way to respond to foreign pressure. This monograph will summarize those debates and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the strategies advocated.

### Kosovo and the "American Threat."

For 78 days from March through June 1999, NATO carried out a bombing campaign against the FRY. Its major stated objective was to reverse Serb efforts to remove ("ethnically cleanse") Muslims from Kosovo. The air forces of 13 NATO members participated, battering Yugoslav terrain daily until FRY President Slobodan Milosevic agreed to withdraw his forces from Kosovo and allow a U.N. peacekeeping force into the territory.

The operation did not enjoy strong popular support among the collective citizenries of the participant countries.<sup>3</sup> However, there was widespread sympathy for the plight of Muslim Kosovars at the hands of their Serbian antagonists. The Western media had for months prior to NATO's military action reported stories of mass murders and brutal torture; television news carried nightly reports of sad survivors huddling in the ruins of their homes or burying family members. The perception that foreign countries had no important interests in the FRY was mitigated by the conviction that a higher humanitarian purpose was being served. Moreover, the event was described as a technological marvel. Air power enthusiasts observed that this was the first time in history that a land army had been defeated by air power alone. This victory was achieved, moreover, without the loss of a single life among the allied forces.<sup>4</sup>

In China, however, reactions were quite different. Beijing did not see the intervention as a just cause to save the ethnically and religiously oppressed from their

tormentors. Rather, the view from China's capital was that the United States—the main organizer of and contributor to the coalition—was bent on enforcing its vision of proper global order on the rest of the world, even if the attainment of this goal required armed aggression. China's interpretation derived from two sources—first, Washington's China policy, and second, U.S. international behavior in the post-Cold War era.

American actions were seen in light of a decade of hostile behavior toward China beginning with the U.S. media coverage of the pro-democracy demonstrations of 1989. Beijing leaders were, moreover, angry at the United States for having imposed sanctions on the PRC after the party/government killed unarmed demonstrators at Tiananmen Square in 1989. The treatment of the demonstrators and all other dissidents was, Beijing argued, a purely internal affair. The concept of sovereignty holds that the disposition of all affairs within a country's borders are the prerogative of that state alone. Although not articulated publicly, the Beijing leadership knew that to argue otherwise would set a dangerous precedent with regard to the central government's hold over such restive areas as Tibet and Xinjiang, as well as for the CCP's plans to absorb Taiwan at some point in the future.

Only a few months after the Tiananmen incident, the Soviet Union began to disintegrate. Having become adept at playing one superpower off against the other to Beijing's benefit, the Chinese leadership was acutely aware of the resulting loss in its leverage over the United States. The Chinese media began to remark uneasily that the world now had only one superpower. Thus, the PRC soon began to feel threatened by U.S. actions around the globe.

American aggression against Iraq, for instance, showed that the sole superpower, now unrestrained by fear of Soviet retaliation, meant to bully the rest of the world into accepting Western liberal values. In that conflict, Washington had worked through the U.N. to force Iraq to

disgorge neighboring Kuwait, with which Baghdad had a border dispute and other disagreements. The fact that the United States worked through the U.N. put Beijing in an awkward, but not impossible, position in terms of the PRC's rigid adherence to an absolutist interpretation of sovereignty. China's diplomats argued that, although it was certainly wrong for one sovereign state to commit aggression against another, it was equally wrong for third parties to aggress against the aggressor. After extensive courting by U.S. President George Bush—which may have included his promise to veto congressional efforts to end the PRC's most-favored-nation status—China agreed to abstain in the U.N. Security Council vote on taking military action against Iraq.

The situation in Kosovo was far more dangerous from the PRC's point of view, however. To create a precedent for aggression within the territory of a sovereign state simply on humanitarian grounds was indeed an issue directly relevant to China. Virtually every high-ranking mainland leader who has traveled to the industrialized democracies over the past decade has been dogged by protestors waving banners that urge freedom for Tibet, and sometimes Xinjiang as well. By the mid-1990s, discontented Turkic Muslims moved their protests outside their own provinces and into Han areas. These "separatists" were believed to have been responsible for terrorist bomb explosions in several large Chinese cities. Most importantly, perhaps, a precedent for intervention against aggression carried out within the boundaries of a state was relevant to the mainland's claims over Taiwan: the PRC has consistently refused to foreswear the use of force as an instrument of unification.

Moreover, the military operation in Kosovo showed a degree of sophistication beyond that evinced during the Gulf War. Chinese analysts contrasted the two by saying that, whereas the former had had some characteristics of modern high-tech war, the latter was a truly modern high-tech war with "hyperconventional" features that must be analyzed

and digested if the PRC were to be able to defend itself properly.<sup>5</sup> Information warfare (*xinxi zhanzheng*) was the wave of the future.

Russian leaders, for somewhat different reasons than those of China, also opposed intervention in Kosovo. They regarded the eastward expansion of NATO as directed against Moscow, and had considerable sympathy for the Serbs, with whom they shared a common religion. Like Beijing, they were concerned about external intervention on humanitarian grounds, which would be relevant to conflicts within Russia such as Chechnya. Beijing and Moscow had already agreed to cooperate in opposing Washington's efforts to develop a national missile defense system.

Knowing that, as permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, both Russia and China could, and probably would, veto military intervention, the Clinton administration decided to work through NATO. This gave the Beijing leadership yet another grievance: the industrialized liberal democracies were again conspiring to force the U.S. value system on a Third World state. After the NATO bombing raids against the FRY began, the PLA's deputy chief of the General Staff General Xiong Guangkai<sup>6</sup> hosted a 1-day seminar to debate strategy against an "increasingly unstable international environment." The approximately 100 attendees, including economists and foreign policy experts as well as retired and active military figures, were said to have reached consensus that "unholy military alliances" were being strengthened and "gunboat policies are once again running rampant." China must develop plans to protect itself.<sup>7</sup>

How to Counter the "American Threat"?

In this environment of fear of American unilateral militarism, the PRC did become quite involved in discussion of how to counter this threat from the United States. In particular, the Chinese armed forces—the PLA—set to work analyzing the military lessons of the Gulf War. At first

shocked and taken aback by the success of American “smart weapons” and tactics, the military soon discovered many flaws in both. The PLA was helped in this endeavor by Western analysts, who freely admitted such shortcomings as Patriot missiles whose timing was off, incompatibilities between certain naval and air force communications equipment, and antiquated Iraqi mines that kept American ships further offshore than planned.<sup>8</sup>

PLA analysts discussed these vulnerabilities and how they might be exploited. Some of their more extreme statements may be discounted as being motivated by a desire to project confidence against a vastly stronger enemy. There can be little doubt, however, that the PLA expended considerable effort to study American vulnerabilities and devise ways to ensure that the PLA would not be humiliated in the event of confrontation. Military analysts pointed out, for example, that technologically superior platforms could be successfully attacked with low-tech equipment such as World War II-vintage mines.

By the time of the Kosovo confrontation, the conviction that the sole remaining superpower was not invincible had grown. A humanitarian relief operation in Somalia had gone awry, resulting in casualties that were abhorrent to the American people. This was a further vulnerability that a technologically weaker enemy could exploit: if faced with the possibility that U.S. lives would be lost, the Americans would back down.

As revealed by discussion in such periodicals as *Jiefangjun bao* (*Liberation Army Daily*), *Guofang* (*Defense*), and the Hong Kong press, there was less consensus on precisely what the PRC needed to do in order to protect itself. Not surprisingly, different factions of the PLA learned different lessons from the U.S.-NATO effort in Kosovo. Although the actual debates are more nuanced and there exists some overlap among them, opinions fell roughly into three categories:

1. those who felt that the tenets of Maoist People's War were still relevant and should be applied;

2. those who believed that the PRC should make strenuous efforts to develop high-tech weapons to equal or exceed those of the West and Japan; and,

3. those who advocated doing a better job with existing weapons.<sup>9</sup>

The remainder of this paper explores and evaluates these three points of view in more detail.

### On People's War.

Advocates of People's War stressed that, although the side with technologically superior equipment will first appear to have the advantage, in a just struggle, the laws of People's War will prove decisive in the long run. For example, proponents pointed out that in the first 10 days of the conflict the FRY army had managed to bring down 10 planes, including an F-117 stealth fighter, as well as several score cruise missiles.<sup>10</sup>

They argued that the fact that the FRY population had maintained its resolve in the face of repeated attacks dealt an immense psychological blow to "U.S.-led NATO." Such acts as widespread war mobilization, the staging of peace concerts, the defiant cancellations of blackouts and curfews, the formation of human shields to protect bridges, and the holding of mass sports events regardless of the bombing were given as examples of creative development of people's war by the Yugoslav people. In addition, in terms of combat tactics, Yugoslavia had created what a contributor to *Jiefangjun bao* terms "guerrilla air defense." Statistics were produced showing that, using predominantly old equipment, Yugoslav forces had brought down 0.475 percent of total U.S. sorties, compared to the 0.268 percent attained by the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War. Although U.S.-NATO strikes had fairly good results in the first few weeks of the war, the success rate deteriorated

after that. Chinese analysts judged that, after their low-altitude activities had met with rebuffs, NATO planes were forced to use guided weapons, which operate at a higher altitude and longer distances, to attack from beyond the range of Yugoslav ground air defenses. Hence people's war had reduced the effectiveness of the strikes. PLA strategists noted that by the time the air strikes had entered their fourth week without achieving their objective, U.S.-NATO found itself in an increasingly difficult political situation. Protracted war had begun to erode enemy morale and solidarity.<sup>11</sup>

Other commentaries pointed out that hiding troops underground and concealing targets—including industrial installations—from enemy planes could play a positive role in coping with an adversary's superior firepower. The FRY had preserved its military strength in this way, as had Iraq during the Gulf War. Thus, China should begin making preparations by digging tunnels in potential battlefields and constructing permanent fortifications and air raid shelters. A system of in-depth protection works must be built in major cities and at strategic points, with tunnels as the mainstay, complemented by fortifications for ground fighting. After the outbreak of war, command posts, communications hubs, heavy-duty equipment, and important materials should immediately go underground. What could not go underground should be camouflaged, including airports, runways, missile positions, command posts, communications hubs, and other vital targets. Temporary pits and other field works should be dug or built in order to conceal massed troops. Efforts must be made to locate and utilize all reconnaissance blind spots, such as those formed by steep cliffs, valleys, caves, ravines, jungles, and other natural shelters.

As the FRY had done, China should set up false targets and build false positions to confuse and deceive. They should employ imitative materials and disguise civilian vehicles as military vehicles. Scrapped weapons and equipment should be set up to look as if they were still

operational. Fake command posts, fake airports, fake radar stations, and fake positions would cause the enemy to dissipate his firepower and miss the real targets. Interestingly, although the author could have credited Mao Zedong for this sage advice, he chose instead to cite Sun Zi's maxim that "skilled defenders hide themselves underground."<sup>12</sup>

Yet another advocate of People's War pointed out that the "empty city" stratagem of ancient Chinese military theorists would be effective: plans must be made to move people and resources elsewhere. A resolute people could defeat a high-tech enemy through creative ruses. Smokescreens could counter laser-guided bombs, water could be sprayed over potential targets to reduce their temperature and confuse infrared-guided bombs, civilians could mingle with military forces, and decoys and electronic deception tricks could be practiced.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from proving once again the continuing applicability of People's War, the lessons for the PRC were that "the greatest deterrent to any enemy involves paying close attention to and doing a good job of national defense education and patriotic education and fostering a sense of national pride and confidence." There were efforts to put the above-mentioned suggestions into action. In May 1999, the Mobilization Committee of the Nanjing Military Region met and discussed plans to upgrade the area's militia and expand the floor space for underground projects for people's air defense.<sup>14</sup> In mid-November, *Xinhua*, the official Chinese news agency, reported that major breakthroughs had been made in building shelters for integrated production, efficiency, fast reaction, and survival capability. These included technical innovations such as an automatic control system that would turn on power generators in the tunnels only a few seconds after the breakdown of external electricity supplies.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, other bomb shelters were being converted into underground shopping malls and wine cellars.<sup>16</sup>

## Fighting High Technology with High Technology.

While the value of People's War cannot easily be publicly questioned without risking serious harm to the career of the questioner,<sup>17</sup> it was permissible to question the parallels between the FRY on the one hand and the PRC on the other. One general said pointedly that "China is not Yugoslavia," since the PRC has nuclear weapons and missiles with which to retaliate, and therefore should not expect to employ the same tactics in battle.<sup>18</sup> Other generals were said to be using the threat of a Chinese Kosovo—i.e., an attack on the PRC by U.S.-NATO—to pressure the central government for an increase in the defense budget. Retired generals, whose advanced age and iconic status as heroes of the revolution allow them to speak more freely than officers on active duty, were especially vocal in this regard. For instance, 83-year-old Li Desheng was quoted as saying, "We must have whatever new weaponry other countries have. Even if they [other countries] don't have them, we need to acquire them."<sup>19</sup>

There was considerable discussion of the need to develop high-tech weapons to counter those of the United States and other NATO countries. A participant in a forum on Kosovo held by an unnamed group army in the Guangzhou Military Region held that science and technology were the only available options for winning. Using what worked in the past, adhering to old conventions, and following prescribed routines would not enable China to prevail in a high-tech conflict. Training that measured battlefield skills in terms of meters, seconds, or points (i.e., traditional indicators of battlefield success as calculated in territory gained within time elapsed) would not allow the PLA to win a modern war. Another participant in the same gathering argued that, although the attacks on the Yugoslav Federation were reprehensible acts of banditry, they had created an opportunity for China to learn how to fight a high-tech war. The most realistic and sensible choice would be to set off a high tide of military training with science and technology.

The PLA must be brave enough to discard what is outmoded and draw on the beneficial experiences of others so that China could “scale the heights and win on a borrowed ladder of high technology.”<sup>20</sup>

Such views were reinforced after American planes bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. The Beijing government rejected Washington’s explanations that an out-of-date map had been responsible for what U.S. officials termed a tragic accident. There were calls to boost military strength so that the PRC would not be bullied the way U.S.-NATO forces were attempting to bully the FRY.<sup>21</sup> Advocates argued that the developmental trend of technology was shifting from platform-centric to network-centric, and that strategy based on attrition was giving way to strategy based on the speed of command. Although proponents of this point of view did not explicitly say so, the strategy of attrition is an important component of People’s War: to describe attrition as outmoded is to cast doubts on the strategy of People’s War as well. Network-centered warfare would increase the command speed of various units and allow them to continuously monitor the battlefield.

A “system of systems” must be constructed that would link all computers on the ground, in the air, and on the sea through satellite communications. Concerning just one branch of the armed force, antisubmarine operations, these would be connected through main and auxiliary sonar detecting devices and non-sonar detecting devices, signals processing, and command and control systems. Such systems would significantly enhance the users’ ability to search and attack enemy submarines. Not to possess these capabilities might doom China to losing the war before even a single shot was fired.<sup>22</sup>

This emphasis on acquiring cutting-edge military technology and simultaneous denigration of the role of military platforms did not prevent proponents of acquiring an aircraft carrier from advocating what they had already

been lobbying for intermittently for at least a decade: the acquisition of perhaps the most expensive platform of all. Students at two of China's most prestigious institutes of higher learning, Beijing University and Qinghua University, were reportedly demanding that "China must build its own aircraft carriers. This is a necessity for safeguarding peace and national dignity. The aircraft carrier is necessary equipment for winning local wars under high-technology conditions."<sup>23</sup> An internet campaign begun by a woman former soldier was said to have collected 11 million yuan in donations. Advocates pointed out that the PRC was the only permanent member of the U.N. Security Council without an aircraft carrier battle group, "a handicap which fails to match China's status."<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to escape the implication in these and other statements that they are motivated more by the symbolism believed to be conferred by possession of a carrier than by its military efficacy. One aircraft carrier battle group is of limited utility; the three or four that could provide better power projection would be proportionately more expensive.

Although proponents of large increases in the defense budget are mindful of the opportunity costs that would have to be borne by other sectors of society, their attitude seems to be that such expenditures are necessary because survival is at stake. An aerospace official summed up their arguments about the bombing of the Chinese embassy succinctly: "The bloody lesson teaches us that a strong defense, not just a prosperous economy, is what makes a nation powerful."<sup>25</sup>

### Doing More with Existing Equipment.

Still a third group took the position that China could not be expected to catch up with U.S.-NATO capabilities in the near term, and that to try to do so would be extremely foolish. While China would not confront the U.S.-NATO hegemonists, neither should China shrink from confrontation if such a situation were forced on it. In the

next several years, the PRC should concentrate on building its economic strength. To engage in an arms race with the West would be disastrous to the country's future. Moreover, such a race might be exactly the trap that the hegemonist states were setting for the PRC. An unnamed scholar, described as a moderate, was quoted as saying that the Soviet economy was ruined partly because of excessive spending on new weapons.<sup>26</sup> Others expanded on this view. The American purpose in bombing the PRC's embassy in Belgrade was to "probe" China's capabilities and responses. A Hong Kong newspaper known to have ties with Beijing accused the West of hatching six major conspiracies against China. Conspiracy number one was to "lure China into the trap of increasing military spending so that the Chinese would step into the shoes of the former Soviet Union."<sup>27</sup>

Advocates of the "make do" school pointed out that much could be done to improve military capability without the vast expenditures that the "catch up with the West" group's plans would entail. In many cases, this group pointed out, the advanced equipment the PLA already possessed was not being properly utilized. Some equipment stayed in storage. Even when it did not, resources too often did not appear in training exercises, which tended to proceed exactly as they had in decades past. Sometimes officers did take the trouble to learn how to use new weapons, but mistakenly thought that they had somehow automatically increased their combat capability. In short, the military needed to think more creatively about how to integrate men and weapons.<sup>28</sup> Members of this group asked rhetorically how the acquisition of more new weapons could possibly benefit the PLA, since the military had not even mastered the application of the new weapons it already had.

Another weak point in the PLA, they argued, was the educational level of troops and officers. Here was an area where low-cost and low-tech solutions could produce big benefits. The PLA needed "scholar generals," and could start by recruiting more officers who were university graduates.<sup>29</sup> Several PLA branches set up scholarships at

universities in different parts of China, with the understanding that the recipients would join the military after graduation. The military academy network was revamped. Increased emphasis on science and technology was to be part of the new curriculum. Other proposed reforms included more sophisticated training that employed high technology.<sup>30</sup>

For most members of this third group, doing more with existing methods did not preclude the acquisition of more effective weapons: they argued only that China would find catching up with the United States in all areas impossible without destroying the country's economy. In a situation of "one low and five insufficiencies" (the information component of armaments was low and there were insufficient numbers of high-powered armaments; weapons for launching attacks; precision-guided weapons; means of reconnaissance, early warning, command and control; and electronics armaments), certain "trump card" weapons (*sashou jian*) were urgently needed. These trumps would enable China to defeat the more technologically advanced enemy.<sup>31</sup> In selected areas, the PRC could leapfrog (*wayue*) over intermediate stages already gone through by advanced Western powers and achieve state-of-the-art capabilities without incurring huge expenses.

A favorite topic of these writers was the concept of asymmetric warfare (*buduicheng zhanzheng*): that of bringing a particular superiority of the PLA to bear against the enemy's weak point. Using "acupuncture" (*dianxue*) techniques, the aggressor's satellites could be blinded by a PLA laser, and his computers foiled by the insertion of viruses.

A variant of this school suggested "unlimited warfare" (*chaoxian zhan*). In a book by that name published in early 1999, the authors, two air force senior colonels, argue that the PRC must be prepared to act without regard for the so-called rules of war. Colonels Qiao and Wang view these rules as having been devised by the West and therefore

favoring the West. There is also, they observe, a veneration of technology in the developed world which may not be suitable for China. Another driver of the quest for more and better weapons on the part of the West, and particularly the United States, is the obsession with avoiding casualties.

In Qiao and Wang's analysis, as more weapons are developed and deployed, the value of each individual weapon in combat is diminished. As a corollary, they reasoned, no single type of weapon can be decisive, save in the highly unlikely event of nuclear weapons in a total war. This proliferation in types and costs of weapons may even cause the American economy to collapse. China, a much poorer country, must use whatever means are at its disposal, unfettered by rules and codes devised without its participation and which work against it. Biological and chemical warfare, terrorism, and the manipulation of environmental conditions—for example, producing harmful climate changes in the enemy's territory—must all be employed.<sup>32</sup>

Proponents of this point of view seem to regard asymmetric warfare as a relatively low-cost quick fix for the PRC's defense without adequately considering the strategy's deficiencies. In fact, asymmetric warfare is not the creation of contemporary Chinese military thinkers but has been practiced from time immemorial. Such a strategy is central to the myth of Achilles' heel and the tale of David and Goliath. The notion that one can expect to attack an enemy's satellite and computer networks while the enemy will not have thought to do so against oneself, or that the enemy will not have tried to take precautions against such an attack, is dangerously naive.

Withal, there were evident efforts on the domestic scene in China to restrain the more militant from taking concrete action. President Jiang Zemin appears to have been in the forefront of these. While careful not to appear so conciliatory as to invite criticism of cowardice from his domestic enemies, Jiang stated, although we know perfectly well that

the wolf is going to attack man, we still need to deal with the wolf. That is, we must “dance with the wolf.” This is the reality we must face and the diplomatic strategy we must adopt.<sup>33</sup>

He vowed to discuss the matter with U.S. President Clinton at an appropriate time. A provincial party chief strongly supported Jiang’s contention vis-à-vis the hard-line military faction. Sichuan party head Xie Shijie took direct issue with those who would put economic growth and diplomatic relations in thrall to a stronger military presence, saying that:

We must unify the safeguarding of state sovereignty and national dignity with the continuation of the policy of opening to the outside world. The overall masses must differentiate between the authorities of the U.S.-led NATO bloc and improvements in the investment environment. One hand must court business and attract investments, while the other hand must increase exports.<sup>34</sup>

*Jiefangjun* bao also used the wolf metaphor, noting that although the predator had yet to come, the sounds of its claws sharpening could be heard from time to time. Meanwhile, continuing efforts at preparedness were needed.<sup>35</sup>

Concern with the possibility of American hostility toward China—a fear that originated out of the events of 1989-91 and was rekindled by U.S.-NATO actions in Kosovo—was intensified by remarks made by President Lee Teng-hui of the Republic of China just 2 months after the bombing of the PRC embassy in Kosovo. Lee said that relations between his country and the mainland should be regarded as a “special state-to-state” relationship. The Chinese media accused Washington of being behind the statement, and talk of war intensified. Generals were said to be debating whether to “just bend the bow but not let loose the arrow” or to take actual military action.<sup>36</sup> In the end, the bow was bent in the direction of psychological warfare. Military exercises were held and several mainland air force

planes briefly crossed the center line within the Taiwan Strait.

Advocates of the need to “dance with the wolf” appear to have overcome those who wanted to take immediate action. By the end of a summer characterized by menacing behavior and even more militant rhetoric, the fervor began to abate. Progress was made in Beijing-Washington talks on how much reparations the United States should pay for the bombing of the embassy, and the two sides struck a deal on the PRC’s entry into the World Trade Organization. In November 1999, there were cautious moves toward restoring military-to-military relations between the two sides. Discussion of how to apply the lessons of Kosovo to an unnamed enemy that could be only the United States faded from the Chinese press. The December issue of *Qiushi*, a periodical sponsored by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, opined that the international situation had “generally started to relax, while peace and development remain the main themes of the era.”<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusions.

Though the salience of the Kosovo conflict has receded, the underlying issues that caused such intense interest have not been resolved. Washington is unlikely to forswear the kind of behavior that so upset Beijing, and Beijing is unlikely to forswear the use of force against Taiwan, which drifts ever further from the mainland’s ambit, or to grant the human rights concessions that China’s ethnic, religious, or other dissidents want. Chances are that confrontation, and the debate on how the PLA should respond, will flare up again in the near future.

In fact, each of the three approaches to dealing with the United States militarily has its deficiencies. People’s War techniques will be useful only to the extent that the mainland is attacked by foreign forces, which is a highly unlikely scenario at best.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, in the event of the most likely trigger for a Sino-American confrontation—the

mainland's use of force against Taiwan—it is the citizens of Taiwan who will be able to exploit the advantages of People's War. There is, for example, already an underground wartime command center beneath Taipei.<sup>39</sup> The PRC's Tibetan and Muslim dissidents have already shown that they are adept at guerrilla warfare and irregular warfare techniques. Efforts to catch up to the United States militarily is, as its critics point out, extraordinarily expensive and would have adverse effects on the PRC's economic development. The techniques of asymmetric and acupuncture warfare will be successful only to the extent that one's enemy has not thought to attack one's own weak points or to protect its own. This, too, is highly unlikely.<sup>40</sup>

At present, the leadership seems to have decided on the time-honored bureaucratic technique of giving each of the PLA schools some resources to devote to its preferred option. This cannot automatically be assumed to be an unwise dissipation of resources. The schools are not mutually exclusive, and their different techniques could supplement each other in time of conflict. Certain techniques of People's War, including deception and underground storage, are being employed. An ambitious program of weapons development is occurring, some of it indigenous in nature and some helped by purchases from abroad, mainly from Russia and Israel. At the same time, considerable efforts are being devoted to asymmetric techniques such as laser "death rays."<sup>41</sup> How effective any of these would be in actual combat remains to be seen. What cannot be doubted is that the PLA is becoming an increasingly formidable foe.

## ENDNOTES

1. Report of the Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People's Republic of China, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1999.

2. "Report to Congress Pursuant to the FY 1999 Appropriations Bill," February 26, 1999, available at: <[www/defenseink.mil/pubs/twstrait\\_02261999.html](http://www/defenseink.mil/pubs/twstrait_02261999.html)>.

3. A variety of motives were operative. Some people were reluctant to commit troops where they could see no compelling national interest; others felt that the scope of violence did not justify intervention. Many citizens of Greece were sympathetic to the Serbs because of their common adherence to Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

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7. Daniel Kwan, "Hawks' Gathering Urges Steps to Guard Against 'Unholy Alliances'," *South China Morning Post*, Hong Kong, April 15, 1999, via internet.

8. See, e.g., House Armed Services Committee, *Defense For a New Era: Lessons of the Persian Gulf War*, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1992; Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, *The Generals' War*, Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1995; Philip J. Hilts, "Dispute in Gulf War Debate Continues to Fester at M.I.T.," *New York Times*, February 24, 1996, p. A7.

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16. Stan Sesser, "New Reds Emerge from Bars and Old Bomb Shelters," *Asian Wall Street Journal*, Weekly edition, November 29-December 5, 1999, p. 7.

17. The efficacy of People's War in the contemporary context has been quietly questioned since at least as early as 1978 when articles on the value of positional warfare, as opposed to the mobile warfare that is a key characteristic of People's War, began to appear in Chinese military writings. However, as a precious heirloom from Chairman Mao, People's War could not be publicly repudiated per se. It was deemed acceptable to advocate "People's War Under Modern Conditions," which is a vastly different strategy.

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