

Military Tactics as Cross-Cultural Public Relations Gesture: Chinese Military Tactics in Tibet as Possible Indicator of Paralleled Chinese Actions Outside of China

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Abstract This report addresses how the military actions of China exemplify public relations gestures of intention within the realm of armed conflict. In doing so Chinese military tactics used in Tibet are interpreted as gestures of intent that can serve as foundation for speculating on possible paralleled Chinese actions outside of China. The study of cross-cultural relations encompasses a wide range of perspectives and contexts. Cross-cultural relations can occur on multiple levels, from subtle nonverbal expressions within interpersonal encounters to bold military attacks that play out in the international arena. The findings conveyed are presented in a developmental progression whereby the preceding section(s) serve as context and foundation for what is conveyed.

Keywords: *Tibet, Chinese military tactics, cross-cultural gesture, public relations*

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1. Introduction

The focus of this report is on how the military actions of China exemplify public relations gestures of intention within the realm of armed conflict. In doing so Chinese military tactics used in Tibet are interpreted as gestures of intent that can serve as foundation for speculating on possible paralleled Chinese actions outside of China. Cross-cultural relations can occur on multiple levels, from subtle nonverbal expressions within interpersonal encounters to bold military attacks that play out in the international arena.

This report is divided into three sections: I.) Description of PLA (People's Liberation Army) Tactics Used in Tibet; II.) Implications Regarding Possible PLA Tactics That Might Be Used Outside of China; and III.) Recommendations for U.S. Military Planners in Relation to Possible PLA Tactics Outside of China. The findings conveyed are presented in a developmental progression whereby the preceding section(s) serve as context and foundation for what is conveyed.

A consistent theme regarding PLA military tactics in Tibet, from the initial invasion in 1950 to present day, centers on a propaganda campaign to create a backdrop supportive (in the public mind) of the necessity for Chinese intervention in Tibet. That is, Chinese actions are stressed not as an "invasion" but, instead, as a "liberation."

The military tactics employed typically follow a familiar macro level pattern that plays out in micro level tactics. Quietly take up positions near desired territory,

slowly advance toward specific objectives, deflect & recoil if challenged by opposing forces, when the threat subsides then continue to persevere with advances and—when confronted with unavoidable challenges from opposing forces that require direct confrontation—be immediate, concise, relentless and brutal with actions designed to unquestionably assert the inevitability of Chinese goals being realized. There will be variations on this theme but this is a common paradigm. The initial invasion can be clearly understood within this framework.

Thus, in the early 1950s the PLA amassed large numbers of soldiers and weaponry on the border areas of Tibet to create an ominous inevitability of Chinese control. The PLA then proceeded to unceremoniously enter into Tibet, dealing with military opposition as they advanced, and over time ultimately moved into the capital of Lhasa. The speed of the aforementioned was tempered by international reaction and reactions in Tibet. All the while the PLA sought to win the hearts & minds of the local population and this approach carried on into the establishment of the occupation. [1] An inch might be given to Tibetan dissent in order to gain a foot regarding overall objectives.

Once firmly asserted in Tibet the Chinese government, via PLA actions, sought to gain contractual concessions from the Tibetans—most notable of such concessions was the "17 Point Agreement" in 1951. As China proceeded to assert policies they encountered instances that required decisive military tactics to quell disturbances and deal with varied forms of opposition. Such military tactics were decisive and bold in order to subdue opponents and then return to a more restrained and harmonious demeanor

while they continued incrementally with their advances. [2] Within months 20,000 PLA soldiers were stationed in Lhasa. This accounted for half the city's population at that time [3].

Using such an incremental approach the Chinese can afford to take two steps forward and one step back because, by some measures, time is on their side. Since the PLA invasion of Tibet the Chinese government has been acutely aware of Tibetan loyalty to the Dalai Lama. At the same time they continually seek to manipulate that loyalty toward some type of compromise agreeable to the Chinese and the Dalai Lama. He seems to be the only person who can bridge the gap between the Chinese government and Tibetans. Many Chinese officials favor waiting until the eventual death of the aging leader before solving the Tibet issue. However it should be recognized that his image after death could have more impact than the Dalai Lama has in life [4].

PLA domination of Tibet is blatantly obvious. "Between 300,000-500,000 PLA troops are permanently stationed in Tibet. Tibetans are drafted into the PLA. China has an estimated 14 military airfields, 17 radar stations and five nuclear bases in Tibet." [5] The PLA is probably the largest single employer in Tibet. There is only one civilian airport [6].

The brutality of PLA actions, when they do exert military power, should not be minimized or understated. PLA tactics and reprisals have included savage actions: beatings, starvation, and rape of prisoners' wives in front of them to solicit confessions. Monks and nuns have been forced into sex acts to force renunciation of celibacy vows. Such torturous acts have often been followed by murder of the victims. [7] PLA bombing, pillaging and destroying of monasteries has been widespread. [8] The impact of Chinese brutality overall is daunting. It is estimated that 1/6 (1,200,000) of the Tibetan population died during the initial Chinese occupation [9].

The overarching goal within this process has not been to score huge military victories but, rather, to slowly consistently make progress with the imposition of Chinese will in Tibet. It is important to remember that the PLA is just one of the tools in the Chinese arsenal that can be used to advance Chinese will in Tibet. The PLA will be used in concert with other political, economic and cultural tools.

The aforementioned often involves the development of a hybrid PLA force that has varied structures, applications and purposes. Academy of Military Planning strategist Chen Zhou summarized these varied purposes the PLA is tasked with. "The Chinese military must develop the ability to deal with diverse security threats and accomplish diverse military missions being able to deal with non-traditional security threats being able to deal with internal threats brought about by unstable factors domestically." [10] Tibetan separatist actions are perceived as exemplifying such internal threats.

An illustration of this occurred on March 14, 2008 when Tibetans rioted in Lhasa. "The unrest had begun with demonstrations on March 10, 2008, the 49th anniversary of the failed uprising in 1959 in Tibet against Beijing's rule." [11] There was no overt PLA presence although there are thousands of PLA troops stationed in the area. The PLA did not intervene so as to avoid negative public relations ramifications that would not be

commensurate with preferred images in relation to the upcoming Beijing Olympics. [12] The PLA in this instance not only practiced restraint; it was nowhere to be seen until after the rioting had subsided.

2. Method

This section describes methodology for studying tactics used by the PLA in Tibet beginning with the initial Chinese invasion, regarding imposition of Chinese control in Tibet, and the long term occupation. The material presented in this section and the report overall must be understood in the larger context it exists within. None of the PLA tactics occur in a vacuum. They have a beginning, middle and ongoing ending. Understanding of each of these stages regarding specific tactics can be further clouded by the changing political landscape. Each action has a historical context.

To ignore such contextual markers is to invite misunderstanding. There are certainly parallels with military operations undertaken by the U.S. military. For instance, our entry into Iraq in 2003 and related undertakings were affected by the public mind that had memories of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia 40 years earlier. Had the latter not occurred then our perspective on the former would have been different.

The aforementioned is affected by the reality that China is a high context culture. That is, Chinese meanings rely on context to a great deal. Gesture and symbols take on more meaning than in western societies such as the United States (that tend to be at the low context end of that continuum). Thus, we find there are Chinese tactics in Tibet that have vague objectives and minimal gains but are performed because of the psychological value to be realized. An example of this in the U.S. can be recognized via the bombing of Japan by Doolittle's Raiders during World War II. The bombing had minimal military gains but had significant psychological impact (recognition that the Japanese homeland was within reach of U.S. military forces). Again, keep in mind that such gestures and symbolic acts carry more weight with the Chinese.

3. Results

The mass media can be used to blur the connection between image and reality—the former being the most relevant in that it ultimately impacts the latter. The psychological strategies of Sun Tzu and Mao Tse Tung are clearly at play in these kinds of scenarios. The continual evolution of slow advances, concise military actions, and retrenchment, followed by cycles of slow advances, concise military actions and retrenchment is a recognizable theme regarding the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Throughout the years the Chinese leadership has been clear in stating "Tibet has been an inalienable part of the motherland. The schemes of domestic and foreign splittist forces will never succeed." [13].

During the March 14, 2008 rioting in Lhasa, Chinese language television news aired hours of the anti-Chinese rioting that was occurring in Lhasa and "the People's Daily (the Chinese language Communist Party newspaper) called on the government to resolutely crush the Tibetan

independence conspiracy and sabotaging activities.” [14] Thus the March rioting was a benefit to the Chinese government position that characterized the Tibetan rioting as legitimization for PLA intervention. As part of this mass media manipulation the “Chinese authorities restricted the ability of foreign and Hong Kong media to enter and freely report on the region.” [15] Similarly, Chinese authorities also sought to block access to major internet outlets during this period.

Manipulation of mass media outlets is a common tactic. On April 15, 2008 China was “caught using provocateurs to stage violence and blame it on Tibetan protestors.” [16] That is they staged an attack on a wheelchair-bound woman who was an Olympic torch bearer and made it appear that the attack was executed by a Tibetan and his fellow culprits as a means of demonizing Tibetans. In actuality the attacker was not Tibetan.

China has not been nearly as successful with their propaganda campaign outside of China as they have within China. John Powers, in his book *History as Propaganda*, states

“I did a key word search for ‘Tibet’ on the Internet, and among the first 230 URLs found only three supported the Chinese government position. All three were run by the Chinese government.” [17].

One of the most pronounced tactics used by the Chinese government has been the practice of “population transfer” whereby Han Chinese (the predominant ethnic group in China) are encouraged to immigrate to Tibet. The intrusion of large numbers of Han Chinese into the area has served to dilute Tibetan culture and Tibetan control of the area. This has been accompanied with initiatives whereby Tibetan youth are sent out of Tibet to be educated in other areas of China (in the Mandarin language). Such measures have resulted in intermarriage and alteration of the Tibetan cultural landscape with the ultimate result being a diluted Tibetan culture. These types of gains have occurred with minimal overt military action. “By the mid-1990s the Han Chinese, including 500,000 troops, police and other ‘security services’ came to outnumber the estimated six million indigenous Tibetans.” [18].

It is worth noting that the battle for the hearts and minds of the Tibetans, by the Chinese, has been a two-way street. Though the PLA is a formidable organization with rigid discipline it should be remembered it is composed of individuals. “Not infrequently, CCP (Chinese Communist Party) functionaries themselves, PLA officers included, become Buddhists right after retirement.” [19].

This first section of this report focused on PLA tactics used in Tibet but in doing so addressed a variety of background variables that create the context within which these tactics have been employed. In many instances the context for the tactics carries more lasting meanings than the actual employment of the tactics. Section II of this report will address PLA tactics more directly and give less attention to contextual matters. This approach is not intended to diminish the importance of such contextual variables.

4. Discussion

The previous Method section will be used as foundation for speculation on possible PLA tactics that might be used

by China should it seek to militarily impose Chinese will on other entities outside of China. This section will offer discussion of implications regarding possible PLA tactics that might be used outside of China. A key consideration in this regard is to acknowledge, understand and interpret that the invasion/liberation/occupation of Tibet is seen by the Chinese as an internal matter whereas such military adventures outside of China will be seen as external matters (under the auspices of foreign policy objectives). Still, military tactics used in Tibet can realistically be considered as foundation for speculating on what tactics might be applied elsewhere.

Many of the tactics used in Tibet that can easily have paralleled applications in other locations are in the realm of psychologically oriented operations given the Chinese emphasis on the propaganda domain. Creating fabrications, such as the previously described artificial attack on the wheelchair-bound female athlete, will be a type of tactic that can be expected in future PLA interventions.

A focus on manipulations of meaning should be expected via limiting journalistic access to areas that could produce news reporting that is contrary to Chinese goals and objectives. This could include outright denial of journalistic access in specified areas and closing down access to relevant web sites.

Using the PLA occupation of Tibet as a guide one can foresee the PLA employing a similar approach in other locations. Such an approach could stress the PLA gaining a foothold in the desired area via a show of ominous military might, introducing PLA troops into the designated area under the auspices of foreign aid intervention, deliberate advancement with PLA goals and desires, crushing any significant resistance after weighing the political costs of such military actions and employing deceptions throughout the aforementioned processes. PLA force multipliers could be realized via leverage of political and economic influences in relation to the intended military advancements.

The approach of China’s Central Military Commission appears to be to “task-organize specific units for specific campaigns or local missions, rather than to modernize the force across the board and expect each unit to conduct myriad missions.” [20] This approach is within the larger construct of doctrinal shift “into what is commonly labeled ‘local, limited war under high-tech conditions’ that focuses on the correct mix of ‘informationized’ and mechanized forces and concepts to conduct short-duration, high-intensity combat in the information era.” [21].

This has involved “bringing in high-technology qualified reservists and militia members to form new high-tech units and to leaven existing or transforming units with more capable engineers and computer technicians.” [22] PLA planners will be seeking a “quick battle to force quick resolution but with an emphasis on preemptive and unexpected strikes to remove an enemy’s technological superiority—a tactic which is labeled ‘structural destruction operations.’” [23].

Future PLA tactics will no doubt be driven in part by technological innovations that impact war fighting capability. As such the PLA “is speeding up the upgrading and informationization (translated term) of its active main battle equipment to build a new type of ground combat force which is lean, combined, agile and multi-functional” [24] This will obviously be an ongoing effort that will

involve continual development. Within this process “the PLA gives priority to developing new types of equipment which are advanced and reliable in technical performance and effective in operations. It is speeding up the development of integrated electronic information systems, enhancing the comprehensive integration of various types of weapon systems and support systems, and facilitating information sharing and fusion.” [25].

Speculation about possible PLA tactics that might be used outside of China can also be enhanced via consideration of PLA tactics used in Vietnam against the United States in the 1960s. “Because of the American air superiority and to achieve surprise the Chinese moved at night. The Chinese soldier’s day began after sunset and lasted ‘til about two hours before sunrise when he dug a shelter, camouflaged all equipment and ate his food and rested ...” [26] This approach could go on for weeks.

In cases when the decision to engage enemy forces was made it is apparent the Chinese executed maneuvers with “fast, hard hitting and untiring infantry; their tactics were first to destabilize the enemy with surprise attacks by commando platoons which helped to spread confusion.” [27] A commonly repeated tactic was to appear without warning at night from daunting mountains and forests, thus providing them degrees of surprise.

These types of attacks stressed human waves that evolved from guerilla warfare tactics such as emphasis on precision, rapid attacks, abrupt disengagement and quickly & quietly disappearing from the area. A common approach was to attack a location from two directions while firing on it from a third direction and, if possible, following up with an attack from the rear. Units were often divided into cells composed of three men who monitored fellow cell members. All structures were in threes. There were three men to a cell, three cells to a section and three sections to a platoon etc [28].

Three general phases can be recognized. The first phase stressed agitation and propaganda to gain the hearts and minds of local inhabitants. Followed by a second phase that emphasized open violence as needed, guerilla operations and the creation of bases that could be used to exercise control over the population. The final phase, as needed, perpetuated open warfare with any organized opposition. [29] Such PLA practices from the past can be used as foundation for speculation about PLA tactics of the future.

From more of a macro-level the fundamental tenets of PLA doctrine “will likely include rapid application of the principles of mobile warfare and preemptive strikes against an enemy’s C4ISR (command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance & reconnaissance) and logistics capabilities ... using small numbers of highly trained teams.” [30].

5. Conclusions

This report has addressed how Chinese military actions have manifested public relations gestures of intention within the realm of armed conflict. In doing so Chinese military tactics used in Tibet can be interpreted as gestures of intent that can serve as foundation for speculating on possible Chinese actions outside of China. As such one can observe how military actions playing out in the

international arena exemplify a complex form of cross-cultural exchange of meaning.

China is a distinctly unique culture compared to the United States and has corresponding practices that evolve from their cultural framework. Seek to differentiate between what is tactical strategy and what is irrational behavior (and what is a combination of both). Using the past as a guide one can see that incoherent strategies lead to incoherent tactics.

6. Recommendations

Consideration for a wide range of variables will be given due to the varied scenarios that could evolve regarding possible Chinese foreign policy objectives in the region and beyond. This section will convey applied speculation (about the aforementioned) regarding recommendations U.S. military planners should consider in relation to possible PLA tactics that could be employed as part of Chinese military adventures outside of China

1. Be careful not to use a U.S. mindset when speculating about possible Chinese PLA tactics in scenarios outside of China. That Chinese perspective will give more emphasis to the role of image, perception and gesture in the development of their tactics.

2. What the Chinese have done in the past regarding PLA tactics is a good indicator of what to expect in the future but this is acknowledged with the caveat that situational variables regarding considerations stated in Recommendation #1 will be key.

3. National honor will be more a consideration for the Chinese than is the case in other regions of the world, including the U.S. Their humiliation at the hands of foreign powers is still a current issue for the Chinese.

4. PLA tactics used in Tibet are not necessarily a good indicator of what might be applied outside of China (remember that the Tibet issue is considered by the Chinese to be an internal matter). The context is considerably different.

5. Overall, expect lighter specialized teams that will be more focused with specific skill sets for specific kinds of operations rather than larger groups being assigned more massive operations. This parallels increased U.S. emphasis on Special Operations over the past 20 years.

6. Watch for Chinese use of mass media venues to create distortions of truth and total fabrications in attempts to impact public opinion insofar as it can benefit the advancement of their goals. The perception of truth will be stressed as much as the importance of truth itself.

7. Be aware the Chinese may limit journalistic access to areas and seek to close down web sites per their goals

8. Remember that China is grounded in an ancient culture that is not as focused on immediate gratification (immediate results) as we are in the U.S. The PLA will use decisive tactics but such bold tactics can be part of a larger methodology that is couched in incremental change over time.

9. Expect a mix of political, military and economic tools in addressing Chinese objectives but also expect lapses in coordination of such varied tools of influence. For instance, civilian control of the PLA is not nearly as thorough in comparison to civilian control of the U.S. military. There are clearly situations where the right hand

of the Chinese bureaucracy does not know what the left hand is doing.

10. In the early days of a PLA operation expect computer systems of their enemies to be hacked and sabotaged to inhibit effective use of such systems.

11. Expect Chinese HUMINT (intelligence gathering using human sources) operations to be large in scope—larger than paralleled tactics in the U.S. The large Chinese population provides them with significant manpower to employ in such undertakings. OPSEC (Operations Security) will be especially important during active engagements against the PLA. At the same time, although they are able to gather much information they are not as skilled at analyzing it and drawing meaningful conclusions from the collected data.

12. Expect Chinese civilians to be contacted and drawn into service to support government interests on a scale that is much more common than what is found in the United States. For instance, many Americans would actively avoid providing support to U.S. military initiatives.

13. Be aware Chinese tactics and behavior can be impacted by mild forms of superstition. For instance, anniversary dates of past events can carry more meaning for Chinese than would be the case in the U.S.

14. Use the past as a guide. The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Contemporary Chinese history periodically evidences governmental quasi-irrational behavior conveying there isn't always one sole source of authority governing the country. This can lead to, what seems to be and often what is, disjointed leadership at the macro level. There are times where the PLA has the upper hand with decisions, other times it can be the Foreign Ministry etc.

Over the past twenty years I have participated with four scenarios that pitted U.S. interests against Chinese interests, directly and indirectly, and in each scenario the Chinese tactics reflected instability with regard to coherent decision making.

A) The 2001 U.S. Navy EP-3 plane emergency landing on Hainan Island after a mid-air collision with a Chinese fighter aircraft. I was working at the Defense Attache Office in Beijing during the ongoing negotiations in the aftermath of this incident. The public exchanges evidenced limited, if any, coherent Chinese strategy for dealing with the event.

B) The 1999 accidental bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade by the U.S. I was on attaché duty during negotiations of that period, that included Chinese stoning of the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, and the public exchanges evidenced limited, if any, coherent Chinese strategy for dealing with the event.

C) The 1996 Taiwan Straits controversy when U.S. warships moved toward Taiwan in relation to PLA exercises off Taiwan. I was in Beijing during that event and the public exchanges evidenced limited, if any, coherent Chinese strategy for dealing with the event.

D) The 1989 nationwide protests that resulted in thousands of deaths, martial law and a military crackdown. I was working in Beijing as a civilian professor at Beijing Jiaotong University during the preliminary protest periods that led up to the students occupying Tiananmen Square. The public exchanges between student leaders and the Chinese government evidenced limited, if any, coherent Chinese strategy for dealing with the event.

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