



Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi

Talk by Lt Gen K Surendra Nath, PVSM, AVSM, VSM (Retd), Former GOC-in-C ARTRAC

On

China's Strategic Culture and Implications for India

At CLAWS Seminar Hall, New Delhi

29 July 2013

REPORT

Lt Gen K Surendra Nath was the principal speaker at the seminar on China's Strategic Culture and Implications for India organised by CLAWS on 29th July 2013. Brig Gurmeet Kanwal (Retd), former Director of CLAWS and renowned defence analyst was the Chairperson for the event. The seminar was attended by military officers academia, civilian scholars and faculty of CLAWS.

Opening Remarks: Brig RK Jagga, Deputy Director General Perspective Planning (STRAT)

Brig RK Jagga welcomed all present and informed the audience of the criticality of understanding the Chinese intent and capabilities, which are deeply ingrained and dictated by the Chinese culture and national historical traditions. The talk by the principal speaker would dwell on this very important topic and provide an insight into the workings of the Chinese society. Brig RK Jagga introduced the principal speaker to the audience and the speaker's expertise on the subject on account of his experiences gained while in service for nearly forty years.

Chairperson's Remarks: Brig Gurmeet Kanwal (Retd)

The chairperson welcomed Lt Gen Surendra Nath and gave a brief background of the main subject of the seminar. China is a rising power and has an economy which is fast catching up with that of the USA. According to varied estimates, the overtake period would be between the years 2017 to 2020. With growing economic power the ability to spend on military modernisation is also increasing within China. China's defence budget has been growing at 15 to 16 percent in nominal terms and 9 to 10 percent in real terms annually. The region around China is worried and there are global indicators such as US Asia-Pacific re-orientation which are in part due to China's rapid rise. As far as India is concerned, China's rise will pose a strategic challenge. The question arises is whether competition will lead to conflict. If China is to use its military power then that will depend to a great extent on China's strategic culture. Thus, it is a privilege to preside over such a crucial subject "China's Strategic Culture and Implications for India". He then handed over to Lt Gen Surendra Nath for his expert deliberations on the topic.

Talk by Lt Gen K Surendra Nath (Retd), PVSM, AVSM, VSM, Former GOC-in-C ARTRAC

Last time I was at CLAWS the talk was on future wars and the capabilities of the Indian Army. I had commanded a brigade on Arunachal Pradesh border and had various assignments on India's eastern border. My talk today will focus on the Chinese national traditions and culture with its impact on their military strategy and strategic thinking. The presentation would dwell upon the following important areas namely:

- China's geo-strategic dynamics
- China's strategic culture
- India-China 1962 War (Chinese Perspective)
- Implications for India

Historically, China has had some natural protection on its South and South West borders and virtually no safety on the northern borders. China also has considerable disputes in the maritime domain. Demographically, China is 91 percent Han with 55 different minorities within its territory. Strategic culture is a distinctive set of beliefs, values and habits regarding threat and the use of force, which have their roots in geopolitical setting, history and political culture. Strategic culture analysis helps in providing key insights into crisis behaviour of states, policy preferences and motivations during times of crisis as well as peace. National historical and cultural traditions feed into the national character which ultimately shapes the national strategic culture of any nation state.

China's propensity to use force is defined by strategic culture, political culture, civil-military interactions and military organisational structure. China also shows strains of cultural superiority as is evidenced from the Middle Kingdom ideology. It believes in patient, clever and ambitious projection of power. In case of China, strategic culture exhibits the dual strands of Confucianism and *Real-Politik*. Confucianism professes harmonious and pacific world relations whereas Sun Tzu believes that the world is in a perpetual state of zero sum games. The strategic culture of China has the following main characteristics:

- The ability to remove threat at an opportune time and as far as possible in distance from Chinese periphery and as soon as possible in time in order to defeat the adversary before it can make gains.
- Focus is on non contact war, guerilla tactics and information superiority.
- Endorsement of Active-Defence doctrine through self defence nature which means safeguarding national unity, territorial integrity and maritime rights.

- Bargain from a position of strength. Balancing of status quo versus expansionist/ revisionist policies.

The political culture of China asserts that the party is supreme and military is subject to the party interests and commands. The crucial interests of the party are national unification and preservation of the existing system, decrease chances of ethnic separatism, control of Chinese periphery and promote the dream of Greater China. In terms of civil-military relations, the party interests override the military stratagem. Generally the party has been more aggressive than the military but, in recent times both have shown an equal propensity for aggression. Another crucial feature is the Chinese belief of political negotiations at every stage of the conflict. The current military doctrine of China focuses more on limited wars under high tech conditions with informationised environment. The military doctrine lays stress on combined arms operation, modernisation and most importantly professionalism in higher commands and intensive training of soldiers. Indian Army can also draw inspiration from the importance accorded to professionalism and training in Chinese military.

China has had a long history of war lords and standing armies. The Chinese military has undertaken a highly intensive modernisation programme to equip its forces to project power beyond its borders in consonance with its rising world power status and huge ambitions. The Chinese doctrine shows a preference for short and decisive wars with early and complete disengagement. The impact of the strategic culture of China on India manifests itself from the ability of India to challenge China in spheres of trade and commerce, territorial integrity and the notion of cultural superiority. China's perceived threats include threat to its existing political system, national diversification and social disharmony. China's non negotiable core interests consist of Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan and South China Sea.

The Chinese political aims against India are to assert regional dominance over India so as to influence its decision making process. To achieve this end, China intends to use economic means such as using India's economic growth needs to further its own economy and influence India through trade and capital investment. Other means include asserting diplomatic pressure, collusion with India's neighbours particularly Pakistan and ability to use military force which acts as leverage in the unresolved border disputes. The possible triggers to India-China conflict in the future could include claim over disputed areas, succession of Dalai Lama and the issue of Tibet, fear of containment of China, India's threat to China's western highway and Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) and India's stand on South China Sea.

The implications for India can be categorised under:

- Cooperation in global commons, environment and trade
- Competition in economic and political spheres, Asia-Africa region.
- Conflict arising out of unresolved border disputes, Tibet etc.

China has been able to resolve 17 out of 23 territorial disputes since 1949. Its main strategy to manage territorial disputes revolves around delay tactics, concession and comprise and use of force options with the first two being the preferred policy options. The induction of Rapid Reaction Forces (RRF) is the most potent threat against India with non RRF PLA units presenting acceptable levels of risk. The critical challenges for India vis-a-vis China are infrastructure in the border regions, strategic ISR, collusive threat from China-Pak nexus, the nuclear dimension and cyber and space capabilities.

Chairperson's Comments: Brig Gurmeet Kanwal (Retd)

The main aim of the Chinese in respect to India is to contain India to the backwaters of Indian Ocean and highly constrain it to the South Asia region possibly through the use of Pakistan as a proxy. Some of the questions that need to be answered in the course of the discussion to follow can be what constitutes China's vital national interests and what are its red lines, what could be the possible set of triggers for conflict between India and China and what would be the state of affairs in Asia in the short to medium term. The border issue seems to have been left to future generation of leaders to resolve, with China being content with status quo. Lastly, nuclear weapons are a non starter in India-China conflict south of Lhasa due to the presence of Brahmaputra river.

Discussion

The questions were wide and varied with initial discussion being held on Chinese military recruitment pattern in context of the two year serving period and the notion of a standing voluntary military. The ability of China to engage in plateau warfare versus mountain warfare was also put to debate. The notion of China taking a maximalist stand in case of negotiations was also challenged with a focus on the unresolved border dispute with China and the Chinese claims on large parts of Indian territory. The need to demystify China and its superior system syndrome was pointed out and the speaker answered that the needful is being done at all level. Another crucial aspect discussed was the ability of India to manage its external environment like the Chinese and use it as a source of strength to promote its own national interests.

Concluding Remarks: Col Vivek Verma, Deputy Director, CLAWS

The talk and discussion were most refreshing and contemporary in nature. The presentation by Lt Gen Surendra Nath was abundant in the knowledge of Chinese culture and recommendations for future policy directions for India. CLAWS thanks the speaker, chair and audience for their valuable inputs.