

Securing Borders: China's Doctrine and Force Structure for Frontier Defense

M. TAYLOR FRAVEL

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

ABSTRACT The study of military doctrine is one tool that scholars can use to understand a rising power's potential for involvement in interstate war. In its evolving joint operational doctrine, China pursues a defensive approach to securing its land borders and maintaining territorial integrity. Despite the prominence of a Taiwan conflict in China's defense planning, frontier defense remains a core mission for China's armed forces, involving almost half of the PLA's ground forces. China's force structure is consistent with a defensive doctrine for securing its borders, as light infantry units are stationed on the border itself while most maneuver units capable of offensive operations are based hundreds of kilometers away in the interior. Due to the potential for ethnic unrest in the frontiers, which places a premium on cooperation with neighboring states, China's defensive posture on the Asian continent is likely to endure.

KEY WORDS: China, strategy, military doctrine, borders

China's rise as a great power generates concern about how it may use its growing military capabilities. Historically, major shifts in the balance of power have been linked with episodes of tension and conflict among the leading states in the international system. Although they are not necessarily violent, such power transitions are often not peaceful, either.¹ Based on this history, China's rise raises questions about the future of peace and stability in Asia, questions driven in part by uncertainty about how China will use its military power and how neighboring states will respond.

¹See, for example, Nazli Choucri and Robert Carver North, *Nations in Conflict: National Growth and International Violence* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman 1975); Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge UP 1981); A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (New York: Knopf 1958).

Examination of China's evolving military doctrine provides one method for understanding the likelihood of armed conflict in the region. A key component of a country's grand strategy, military doctrine outlines how a state plans to employ military means to achieve its political goals. Doctrine describes the types of military forces to be used and the manner in which they will be employed. Whether a state adopts a defensive or offensive doctrine, for example, carries important implications for how other states evaluate their own security and the military capabilities that they might seek to develop.² During power transitions, a rising power's military doctrine can help signal its intentions to other states and, if the doctrine is seen as defensive, potentially reduce strategic uncertainty. The consistency between the military requirements of a state's doctrine and its force structure can further bolster the credibility of such signals.³

In the past decade, the study of China's military modernization has largely examined how the country plans to fight in a potential conflict over Taiwan. This emphasis is understandable, as such a conflict would likely involve the US and allied forces, and because these capabilities could enable the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) to project power beyond the Taiwan Strait in East Asia.⁴ Although the importance of Taiwan cannot be overstated, it provides only a partial view of the implications of China's military modernization for regional stability. The emphasis on Taiwan overshadows how the mainland's armed forces prepare for their core mission, defending the territorial integrity of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Indeed, the unification of Taiwan is but one of China's declared national strategic goals.⁵ As described in the 2006 white paper on national defense, other goals for China's armed forces are to 'Guard against and resist aggression... ensure that the nation's territorial waters, airspace and borders are not violated... be on guard against and strike all forms of terrorism,

²On military doctrine, see Barry Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1984).

³On the role of doctrine in signaling, for example, see Evan Brady Montgomery, 'Breaking Out of the Security Dilemma: Realism, Reassurance, and the Problem of Uncertainty', *International Security* 31/2 (Fall 2006), 151–85.

⁴See, for example, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: The Military Power of the People's Republic of China* (Washington DC: Dept. of Defense 2006).

⁵As David Finkelstein notes, China does not publish a document similar to the *National Security Strategy* in the US, but its strategic goals for the development of military power can be identified through a range of Chinese sources and statements. See David M. Finkelstein, 'China's National Military Strategy Revisited', paper presented at the conference 'Exploring the "Right Size" for China's Military', Carlisle Barracks, PA, 6–8 Oct. 2006.

separatism and extremism.⁶ Despite the centrality of territorial integrity as a mission for the PLA, understanding how China plans to achieve this goal and the implications of its approach for the region remain understudied by scholars and policy analysts alike.

China's rise might seem to deter external threats to its territorial integrity, decreasing the proportion of its military assets required for this mission. The nation's relative power might also imply that future conflicts at or near its borders are unlikely to erupt, as its boundaries are indisputably secured by the PLA's size and strength. Nevertheless, the lack of focus on China's doctrine for maintaining its territorial integrity, which Chinese sources describe as 'frontier defense' (*bianfang*), is striking for two reasons.

First, many of China's armed conflicts since the establishment of the PRC have emphasized the goal of maintaining territorial integrity. These campaigns include battles with the Nationalists over coastal islands in the early 1950s, operations against Nationalist irregulars in Burma in 1960–61, the 1962 border war with India, the 1969 clash over Zhenbao Island with the Soviet Union, aspects of the 1979 invasion of Vietnam, intense border clashes with Vietnam in the 1980s as well as conflicts with the US in Korea and Vietnam and crises in the Taiwan Strait.

Second, although China is strengthening its air and naval power projection capabilities, it can today still most readily employ military force over land with its army and land-based air power. To date, China has yet to develop expeditionary forces to project power over water far from its shores.⁷

While acknowledging the importance of a Taiwan conflict, analysis of China's military doctrine and force structure for frontier defense should yield several insights. First, how the PLA seeks to secure its borders provides a context for assessing the amount of resources devoted to Taiwan as opposed to other contingencies for which China's armed forces must plan, prepare and train. Second, it can help determine whether China will adopt an offensive or defensive posture on the Asian continent as it continues to rise in power. Third, similarly, it can illuminate the PLA's ability to project power over land in the region. Historically, rising powers have pursued territorial expansion as one

⁶2006 *nian Zhongguo de guofang* [China's National Defense in 2006] (Beijing: Guowuyuan xinwen bangongshi, 2006), http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2006-12/29/content_5545898.htm.

⁷Paul H.B. Godwin, 'China as a Major Asian Power: The Implications of Its Military Modernization', in Andrew Scobell and Larry M. Wortzel (eds.), *Shaping China's Security Environment: The Role of the People's Liberation Army* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute 2006), 107–35.

means by which to provide for their security, a scenario worth pondering as China continues to grow economically and modernize its armed forces.⁸

Newly available primary materials from China permit a detailed study of its doctrine and force structure for frontier defense. These materials include *On Frontier Defense* written by scholars from the PLA's Academy of Military Science (AMS) and *The Science of Frontier Defense* from the Urumqi Army Academy.⁹ Other military sources include writings on strategy and operations from both the AMS and the National Defense University (NDU), such as *The Science of Campaigns*, *Campaign Theory Study Guide* and two editions of *The Science of Military Strategy* as well as paramilitary training manuals on border control and border management.¹⁰ One especially important publication is the Nanjing Army Command Academy's *The Science of Army Campaigns Under High Technology Conditions*, which was based on the classified and unpublished army campaign outline issued in 1999.¹¹

Based on these materials, I advance three arguments.

First, China's current doctrine reflects a defensive approach to securing its land borders. A key source of this defensive orientation is the persistent threat of ethnic unrest within its vast frontier regions, unrest which can become a locus of conflict with neighbors or attract foreign intervention.

Second, frontier defense remains a core mission for China's armed forces. This task involves a large percentage of military assets, as almost

⁸See, for example, John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 138–67, 396–400.

⁹Li Xing (ed.), *Bianfang xue* [The Science of Frontier Defense] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe 2004); Mao Zhenfa (ed.), *Bianfang lun* [On Frontier Defense] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe, [internal circulation] 1996).

¹⁰On China's military strategy, see Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi (eds.), *Zhanlue xue* [The Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe 2001); Wang Wenrong (ed.), *Zhanlue xue* [The Science of Military Strategy] (Beijing: Guofang daxue chubanshe 1999). On campaign doctrine, see Wang Houqing and Zhang Xingye (eds.), *Zhanyi xue* [The Science of Military Campaigns] (Beijing: Guofang daxue chubanshe 2000); Xue Xinglin (ed.), *Zhanyi lilun xuexi zhinan* [Campaign Theory Study Guide] (Beijing: Guofang daxue chubanshe 2002). On paramilitary training manuals, see Cai Xiru (ed.), *Bianfang lilun* [Theory of Frontier Defense] (Beijing: Jingguan jiaoyu chubanshe [internal circulation] 1996); Ping Qingfu (ed.), *Bianjing guanli xue* [The Science of Border Management] (Beijing: Jingguan jiaoyu chubanshe [internal circulation] 1999).

¹¹Chen Yong *et al.* (eds.), *Gaoji jishu tiaojian xia de lujun zhanyi xue* [The Science of Army Campaigns under High Technology Conditions] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe 2003).

half of the PLA's infantry and armored maneuver units participate in the defense of China's borders in addition to approximately 225,000 army and paramilitary border guards.

Third, China's force structure is largely consistent with this defensive orientation. Small detachments of light infantry units are deployed on or near the borders, while maneuver forces to repel an attack or conduct offensive operations are based hundreds of kilometers away in the interior.

Several caveats are necessary before proceeding. First, by focusing on the concept of frontier defense, this article examines only China's approach to securing its land borders. Future research should study China's approach to maritime defense (*haifang*), where the country lacks the strategic depth that it enjoys on the Asian continent. Second, I exclude Taiwan from the analysis even though it is China's most important sovereignty dispute linked ultimately to territorial integrity. I do so first because Chinese military sources consistently treat the goal of unification (*tongyi*) as a separate mission from territorial integrity (*lingtu wanzheng*). In addition, other scholars have examined in detail how China might fight in such a conflict.¹²

This article starts with an overview of the concept of frontier defense in Chinese military writings. The next section describes China's doctrine for frontier defense, which is geared around countering an attack on its borders. I then detail the force structure for frontier defense, demonstrating the sizeable number of troops involved in this mission and the consistency of their deployment in China with current doctrine. Before concluding, I examine two types of preventive defense mentioned by military scholars.

The Twin Goals of Frontier Defense

In Chinese military thought, the concept of frontier defense, or *bianfang*, includes more than just border defense. It also encompasses the internal political stability of China's frontier regions (*bianjiang*), especially the absence of ethnic unrest, in addition to the protection of

¹²For scholarly studies of doctrine regarding conflict over Taiwan, see Thomas J. Christensen, 'Posing Problems Without Catching Up: China's Rise and Challenges for US Security Policy', *International Security* 25/4 (2001), 5–40; Thomas J. Christensen, 'Coercive Contradictions: Zhanyixue, PLA Doctrine, and Taiwan Scenarios', in David M. Finkelstein and James Mulvenon (eds.), *The Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People's Liberation Army* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses 2005), 307–27.

borders (*bianjing*) from external aggression.¹³ The Urumqi Army Academy study on frontier defense, for example, reflects this broad approach. It defines the tasks of frontier defense as ‘safeguarding the integrity and security of territorial sovereignty; defending against foreign aggression; maintaining border order and promoting good neighborly relations; [and] ensuring the political stability and economic development of border areas’.¹⁴

The broad nature of frontier defense reflects a linkage between external security and internal stability that stems from China’s ethnic geography. As an ‘empire state’, China contains a core region populated by an ethnic majority that is surrounded by periphery of minorities.¹⁵ Members of the Han Chinese group constitute more than 90 percent of the country’s population, but reside in roughly only 40 percent of the landmass along the coast and river valleys, an area known as ‘inner China’ (*neidi*) or ‘China proper’.¹⁶ By contrast, a variety of ethnic minorities such as Tibetans or Uighurs account for less than 10 percent of the population, but they live mostly on the other 60 percent of the PRC’s landmass in regions known as ‘outer China’ (*waidi*) or the ‘frontiers’ (*bianjiang*).¹⁷ Importantly, many of these minorities, some of whom have pursued independence in the past, are strategically located. They live along 90 percent of China’s borders and

¹³On this distinction, see Li, *Bianfang xue*, 1–39; Mao, *Bianfang lun*, 1–6; Zheng Shan (ed.), *Zhongguo bianfang shi* [History of China’s Frontier Defense] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe 1995), 1–3.

¹⁴Li, *Bianfang xue*, 5. Also, see Mao, *Bianfang lun*, 5.

¹⁵This paragraph draws on M. Taylor Fravel, ‘Regime Insecurity and International Cooperation: Explaining China’s Compromises in Territorial Disputes’, *International Security* 30/2 (Fall 2005), 55–60. Also, see Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1940); Mao, *Bianfang lun*; Gerald Segal, *China Changes Shape: Regionalism and Foreign Policy*, Adelphi Paper No. 287 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1994); Michael D. Swaine and Ashley J. Tellis, *Interpreting China’s Grand Strategy: Past, Present, and Future* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2000), 21–96; Joseph Witney, *China: Area, Administration and Nation Building*, Dept. of Geography Research Paper No. 123 (University of Chicago, 1970); Zheng Shan, *Zhongguo bianfang shi*.

¹⁶Bu He, ed., *Minzu lilun yu minzu zhengce* [Nationality Theory and Nationality Policy] (Huhehaote: Neimenggu daxue chubanshe, 1995), p. 27.

¹⁷On the frontier areas, see Ma Dazheng and Liu Ti, *Ershi shiji de Zhongguo bianjiang yanjiu: yimen fazhan zhong de bianyuan xueke de yanjin licheng* [China’s Borderland Research in the Twentieth Century] (Harbin: Heilongjiang jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998), 1–60; Niu Zhongxun, *Zhongguo bianjiang dili* [China’s Frontier Geography] (Beijing: Renmin jiaoyu chubanshe, 1991), 1–7.

many of them have kinsmen who reside in neighboring states.¹⁸ As a result, border security supports efforts to maintain internal stability by limiting the influence of external actors within large parts of the country. Likewise, internal stability bolsters national defense by reducing the need to devote additional resources to securing China's borders from potential external threats.

In addition to maintaining the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the PRC, frontier defense is vital for other reasons. Due to their size and location, the frontiers are described as buffer zones or 'protective screens' (*pingzhang*) for China proper. In the words of Wang Enmao, former party secretary of Xinjiang, the frontiers are China's 'great rear area' (*da houfang*).¹⁹ At the same time, military publications view ethnic unrest as a source of direct conflict with neighbors or pretext for external intervention.

Finally, unrest in one frontier can lead to unrest in other areas, including China proper. The Urqumqi Army Academy study concludes, for example, that the 'stability of frontier defense connects directly with the stability of the nation'.²⁰ Likewise, a Chinese military historian views 'frontier problems... as great strategic issues that relate to national unification, social stability... [and] economic development'.²¹

External Defense

From an outsider's perspective, China's land borders today appear to be secure. The end of the Cold War enhanced China's security greatly, as the collapse of the Soviet Union removed the largest land-based threat to the PRC since its establishment in 1949. In the 1990s, China strengthened the security of its borders by reaching demilitarization and boundary agreements to reduce troop levels and settle outstanding territorial disputes with many continental neighbors.²² The clear improvement in the external security environment aside, military sources still stress potential external threats that might arise on China's periphery. According to Lieutenant General Wang Guosheng, Chief of the General Staff for the Lanzhou Military Region, 'Although our security environment for frontier defense has clearly improved... nevertheless because territorial conflicts and ethno-religious, terrorist

¹⁸Sun Jianmin, *Zhongguo lidai zhibian fanlue yanjiu* [Research on China's Historical Approach for Governing the Frontiers] (Beijing: Junshi kexue chubanshe 2004), 395.

¹⁹Wang Enmao, *Wang Enmao wenji* [Wang Enmao's Collected Works] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe 1997), 393.

²⁰Li, *Bianfang xue*, 189.

²¹Sun, *Zhongguo lidai zhibian fanlue yanjiu*, 401.

²²Frael, 'Regime Insecurity'.

and resource disputes... still have not been completely eliminated,... the threats that may cause border conflicts and limited war remain.²³

Despite the comparatively benign nature of the current security environment, Chinese strategists identify several external threats to the frontiers. Conflicts of interest with neighboring states such as disputed territory are the most common type of threat discussed.²⁴ In the past, China has fought over contested land with India, Russia and Vietnam. Although the PRC has settled almost all of its territorial disputes along its frontiers, it still contests territory with India and Bhutan and, likewise, planning for armed conflict with India in mountainous regions and high plateaus is one focus of current operational doctrine. The potential for conflict over other issues, especially natural resources, persists and might become more acute as China's economy continues to expand.

In addition to conflicts of interest, military sources identify other threats to the frontiers. The Urumqi Army Academy study, for example, notes three additional external threats that might arise. First, it concludes that border conflicts are likely when superpowers seek to expand their 'sphere of influence' (*shili fanwei*). Although the authors discuss mostly events in the Cold War, they express concern about current US military deployments in Central Asia as a potential threat.²⁵ Second, the study indicates that conflicts on the frontiers can also erupt when regional powers pursue aggressive or expansionist foreign policies, a list of neighbors which presumably includes former adversaries Russia and India who might seek to balance China's growing power in the future. The third potential source of threat resembles the theory of diversionary war. The Urumqi study concludes that border conflicts are more likely when leaders in one country create a crisis to divert the public's attention from internal troubles.²⁶

The diplomatic environment along China's frontiers adds a layer of uncertainty to these threats. As many publications observe, the country shares a land border with 14 states. The military strength, ethnicity and political diversity of these neighbors create potential combinations of threats that could emerge on different locations of China's borders, possibly at the same time. Russia and India maintain large standing armies, while these states in addition to Pakistan and North Korea possess nuclear weapons. At the same time, the history of encirclement

²³Wang Guosheng, 'Sunzi bingfa yu xiandai bianfang jianshe [Sun Zi's Art of War and Modern Frontier Defense Construction]', *Zhongguo junshi kexue* 19/5 (2006), 23. Also, see Li, *Bianfang xue*, 493–8; Sun, *Zhongguo lidai zhibian fanlue yanjiu*, 399.

²⁴Xue, *Zhanyi lilun xuexi zhinan*, 265.

²⁵Li, *Bianfang xue*, 192.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 355–8.

in the imperial era as well as the Cold War increases China's sensitivity to diplomatic alignments on its borders, especially those today that involve partnerships or agreements with the US.

To plan for these potential threats, Chinese strategists note several challenges that their armed forces must address. The first is the sheer length of China's land border, which stretches for more than 22,000 kilometers and is one of the longest continental boundaries in the world. The defense and management of a border this long is no simple task, even under the most benign international environment. China's leaders must balance the total number of troops to commit to border security versus other missions for which the PLA must prepare, including internal security.

The second challenge stems from the physical environment of the frontiers, which limits China's ability to sustain large numbers of troops in forward-deployed positions and respond to crises on its borders rapidly. Especially in western regions that account for two-thirds of the frontiers, the borders are often situated in harsh environments, including elevated plateaus, tropical forests and deserts. Although these factors generally favor the defense, they also limit force mobility, both along the border and across regions within China. At the same time, many of China's frontiers represent the more impoverished areas of the country, where the development of transportation networks has lagged behind the rest of the country, further impeding force mobility and logistics. The relative poverty of the frontiers also limits the local resources that can be mobilized to support and sustain troops, especially if a conflict erupts.²⁷

The complexity of border management in the era of economic reform and globalization presents a third external challenge to defending the frontiers. China must now seek to balance efforts to secure its frontiers with the opening of its borders to ever-growing flows with neighbors that facilitate trade, investment and other interactions key to economic growth. A strident approach to border management might limit the promotion of economic development by restricting trade flows and weakening investor confidence, while a loose approach might facilitate the flow of contraband or resources that could be used by separatist groups to undermine political stability.²⁸

Nevertheless, what is striking about Chinese military writings on frontier defense in the past decade is the persistence of what Nan Li has described as the PLA's 'conservative nationalism'. Each work

²⁷Xue, *Zhanyi lilun xuexi zhinan*, 304.

²⁸Wang Qing, 'Jia shi hou gongan bianfang gongzuo ying zhuyi de wenti' [Problems in Public Security Border Defense Work to Note After China's Entry into the WTO], *Gongan yanjiu* 4 (2002), 23–6.

demonstrates a clear acceptance of China's current boundaries and a high degree of respect for the boundary agreements that the central government has concluded since 1949 to settle territorial disputes with neighboring states.²⁹ Although some sources refer to China's history of 'lost' territory, none of these works suggest that Beijing should seek to recover these areas, either through force or diplomacy. Indeed, the overriding sense of purpose conveyed in these sources is the importance of securing and defending current boundaries, including those where China compromised over the allocation of disputed territory and dropped potential claims to land once controlled by the Qing and previous dynasties.³⁰ Instead, the challenge of securing even these boundaries is one theme in all sources that reinforce a conservative nationalism.

Internal Stability

The need to maintain internal stability distinguishes frontier defense from border defense. China's ethnic geography as an empire state links political unrest in the frontiers with the defense against external threats, a linkage which sustains the prominence of frontier defense in Chinese military writings in the post-Cold War era. Ethnic unrest receives this attention because the frontiers, which constitute more than half the country, are regions where the authority and legitimacy of the central government has been weak compared to China proper and where neighbors could under certain conditions influence internal affairs, threatening territorial integrity, ethnic stability and regime security. As Deng Xiaoping noted back in 1950, 'on a border this long...if the issue of ethnic minorities is not resolved, then the matter of national defense cannot be settled'.³¹

The reasons for the persistence of instability in China's frontiers are numerous. After 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) struggled to consolidate political authority in these regions because the legacy of indirect rule during the Qing bequeathed few institutions with which to govern these vast areas.³² Many of the ethnic groups in the frontiers

²⁹Nan Li, 'From Revolutionary Internationalism to Conservative Nationalism: The Chinese Military's Discourse on National Security and Identity in the Post-Mao Era', *Peaceworks* No. 39 (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace 2001).

³⁰On these compromises, see Fravel, 'Regime Insecurity'.

³¹*Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* [Deng Xiaoping's Selected Works], Vol. 1 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe 1994), 161.

³²For an overview of frontier policy during the Qing, see Nicola Di Cosmo, 'Qing Colonial Administration in Inner Asia', *International History Review* 20/2 (1988), 287-309.

maintained stronger economic and social ties with neighboring countries than with many parts of China proper. Moreover, these groups enjoyed considerable autonomy before the establishment of the PRC and, since then, have at various times sought independence from the central government, such as the 1959 revolt in Tibet or the violence in Xinjiang throughout the 1990s. The location of these minorities on and sometime across borders increases the potential influence of neighboring states within China. At the same time, these groups can challenge China's territorial integrity from within, especially with support from neighbors.³³

Military sources identify three different types of 'sudden incidents' (*tufa shijian*) through which domestic instability can increase tension on the borders. The most frequently discussed internal threat is terrorist violence that might occur near national borders by those groups opposed to the central government.³⁴ The second is riots or rebellions (*saoluan baoluan shijian*) near borders that can arise when groups mobilize along the basis of religious or ethnic identity, events which would spill easily across China's borders. As a result of these two sources of instability, counterinsurgency operations remains a component of the PLA's doctrine for its ground forces, which describes how to execute 'counter-separatist military actions' (*fan fenlie junshi xindong*) when local rebellions escalate to high levels of violence and begin to spread within China.³⁵ A third source of domestic friction is illegal flows across the borders, especially refugees from neighboring states such as North Korea.

Chinese strategists view frontier instability as weakening external defense in three different ways.

First, and most importantly, the fragility of political stability in the frontiers provides a means for other states to exert influence within China, especially during a conflict over territory or resources. In essence, minority groups are viewed as a fifth column that China's neighbors or adversaries can manipulate to their advantage. According to the NDU study on campaign doctrine, 'when foreign enemies in the future want to undertake military operations in border areas, it is highly likely that while actively engineering ethnic separatists to make

³³Bu He, *Minzu lilun yu minzu zhengce*, 27; Zhang Hui, 'Woguo kuajie minzu ji qi dui bianfang gongzuo de yingxiang' [Our Country's Cross-Border Ethnic Groups and Their Influence on Frontier Defense], *Wujing xueyuan xuebao* 18/3 (2002), 17–19.

³⁴These are summarized in Li, *Bianfang xue*, 346–7. On counter-terrorism, see Zhang Zhenfa *et al.*, 'Bianjing fankongbu zhandou de tedian ji duice' [Characteristics and Countermeasures for Border Counterterrorist Action], *Wujing xueyuan xuebao* 18/6 (2002), 63–5.

³⁵Chen, *Lujun zhanyi xue*, 490–505.

trouble in the interior, they will use this opportunity to launch an attack suddenly to occupy some territory in border areas'. The study concluded that 'international hostile forces will also seize this opportunity to intervene or get involved, strategically advancing containment and intervention'.³⁶ The Urumqi Army Academy echoes this concern, stating that 'various ethnic groups in the frontiers... have a major impact on the strength or weakness of frontier defense'. In particular, 'ethnic separatist forces within our country's borders are always an internal power of foreign enemy forces to carve off our frontier land'.³⁷

These concerns may sound implausible or self-serving. Nevertheless, the frequency within which they are voiced in Chinese military sources, both openly published and internally distributed, reflects the sense of vulnerability that Chinese strategists assess in the frontiers. One reflection of this belief is discussion of the potential for a 'chain reaction' of conflicts along China's frontier. One author, for instance, argues that religious tensions, territorial disputes and terrorism form 'a chain reaction zone' (*liansuo fanying dai*) along China's western border.³⁸ Other military scholars describe a 'chain reaction' border conflict that would erupt during a crisis across the Taiwan Strait. They posit that 'enemy countries' on China's borders 'coordinating with Western great powers and internal enemy forces will seize the opportunity to invade and provoke armed conflicts in our country's border areas'.³⁹

Second, similarly, during a crisis or armed conflict on its border, the PLA cannot take for granted the security of its rear areas in the frontiers. Chinese strategists note the importance of managing relations with local ethnic groups, rapidly suppressing any rebellions that might arise against the central government and preventing the sabotage of key roads.

Third, when it crosses international boundaries, ethnic unrest itself can become a source of conflict with neighboring states. When suppressing a rebellion, the deployment of forces to the border might

³⁶Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi xue*, 459.

³⁷Li, *Bianfang xue*, 151. Also, see Mao, *Bianfang lun*, 232–4, 256–61; Zhang Hui, 'Woguo kuajie minzu', 19.

³⁸Li Qing, 'Yazhou diyuan chongtu bankuai yu woguo de anquan huanjing' [Asia's Geopolitical Tectonic Plates of Conflict and Our Country's Security Environment], *Junshi lishi yanjiu* 2 (2004), 178.

³⁹Wang Jun and Wang Yongming, 'Liansuo fanying beijing xia bianjing diqu fanji zhanyi zhihui de qiantan [Brief Exploration of Campaign Command in a Border Area Counterattack Under the Background of a Chain Reaction]', *Guofang daxue xuebao* 5 (2002), 37.

increase tensions with adjacent states and unintended spirals of escalation, especially if troops from one country cross the border in hot pursuit of rebels seeking sanctuary in a neighboring state.⁴⁰ Such escalation occurred, for example, in 1959 when the rapid deployment of Chinese troops to the China–India border during the Tibetan revolt resulted in several clashes with Indian forces.

Given the external consequences of internal instability, military sources note at least three means for ensuring the stability of frontiers.

The first is internal security and policing. Chinese sources highlight ‘counter-separatist, counter-terrorist and counter-rebellion struggles’ on the frontiers.⁴¹

A second source of frontier defense mentioned in military sources is economic growth, which in turn reduces ethnic tensions and enhances political stability. In 1999 China launched the ‘great western development’ (*xibu da kaifa*) campaign to focus on the growth of inland provinces and especially border regions.⁴² In addition to furthering China’s overall economic development, the emphasis on the hinterland was strategic. In the words of Jiang Zemin, the campaign represented a ‘long-term development strategy’ to ‘maintain the unity of ethnic groups, national unification and social stability’.⁴³

The third source of internal stability in the frontiers is diplomacy. The benefits of cooperation with neighbors include policing terrorist activity, limiting the potential for inadvertent escalation during internal security operations, expanding cross-border trade and securing the border from unwanted flows.⁴⁴ In the 1990s, for example, as violent unrest peaked in Xinjiang, China settled outstanding territorial disputes with its Central Asian neighbors, trading territorial concessions for agreements to deny Uighurs and other groups access to support and material from abroad.⁴⁵ At the same time, China helped lead the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Central Asia’s first multilateral institution. Since its formal establishment in 2001, the

⁴⁰Wang, *Zhanlue xue*, 270.

⁴¹Wei Yanping *et al.*, ‘Xibu bianjing diqu wujing jidong budui fanji zuozhan zhi guanjian’ [Opinions on Armed Police Counterattack Operations in Western Border Areas], *Wujing xueyuan xuebao* 19/1 (2003), 80–1.

⁴²Li, *Bianfang xue*, 161–72, 195–6; Mao, *Bianfang lun*, 241–8; Wang, ‘Sunzi bingfa’, 23–4; Wang Yaning, ‘Shilun woguo bianjing anquan zhanlue de neihan’ [On the Implications of Our Country’s Border Security Strategy], *Wujing xueyuan xuebao* 21/6 (2005), 14–16.

⁴³*Renmin ribao*, 16 Sept. 2000, p. 1. Also, see Harry Hongyi Lai, ‘China’s Western Development Program: Its Rationale, Implementation, and Prospects’, *Modern China* 28/4 (2002), 432–66.

⁴⁴Mao, *Bianfang lun*, 241–55; Wang, *Zhanlue xue*, 270.

⁴⁵Fravel, ‘Regime Insecurity’, 78–82.

organization has focused on efforts to counter the ‘three forces’ of ‘terrorism, fundamentalism and extremism’ in the region, including the establishment of an anti-terror center and joint counter-terror exercises.⁴⁶

Doctrine for Frontier Defense

Reflecting the PLA’s conservative nationalism, China’s military doctrine describes a defensive approach to securing and defending territorial integrity. Among the campaigns that form the core of current joint operational doctrine, the ‘border area counterattack campaign’ (*bianjing diqu fanji zhanyi*) outlines how China plans to defend its borders from external threats.⁴⁷ A border area counterattack campaign typically begins with an attack on Chinese territory and its military objectives are limited. As one NDU publication describes, the goal of the campaign is ‘to destroy and expel the invading enemy to restore the territorial sovereignty of the border area’.⁴⁸ The Nanjing Army Command Academy describes the basic campaign method as ‘show force to impede, counterattack key points, simultaneously destroy and expel’ (*zukung zaoshi, zhongdian fanji, jianqu bingju*).⁴⁹

All military sources stress that any campaign in border areas should be conducted in the service of national strategic priorities, including the timing of the counterattack and the termination of combat operations. Importantly, these sources note that the campaign might be terminated according to diplomatic imperatives before the military goals of destruction and expulsion have been achieved. According to the Nanjing study, for example, ‘even though the situation on the battlefield could be very advantageous for us, nevertheless resolutely end the campaign’ when dictated by diplomacy.⁵⁰ Reflecting the strategic advantage provided by China’s continental depth, none of the available military sources indicate that the PRC should seize territory beyond its current boundaries to ensure its territorial integrity. Available sources also provide no indication that success on the battlefield will be used to

⁴⁶Xu Tao and Li Zhiye (eds.), *Shanghai hezuo zuzhi: xin anquan guan yu xin jizhi* [Shanghai Cooperation Organization: New security concept and new mechanism] (Beijing: Shishi chubanshe 2002).

⁴⁷The other joint campaigns include blockades, amphibious assaults, air defense, anti-landing operations and airborne operations. Unless otherwise stated, the description of the campaign is synthesized from Chen, *Lujun zhanyi xue*, 303–23; Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi xue*, 459–73; Xue, *Zhanyi lilun xuexi zhinan*, 264–79.

⁴⁸Xue, *Zhanyi lilun xuexi zhinan*, 264.

⁴⁹Chen, *Lujun zhanyi xue*, 305.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 319.

expand the goals of a campaign to seize and occupy land beyond national borders.⁵¹

The campaign occurs in two phases. The first phase begins with an adversary's initial attack or assault. In this phase, defensive operations are used to create favorable conditions for the counterattack by blocking the enemy's advance, stabilizing the situation in the border area and supporting the deployment of main force units from the interior. Principal tasks in this phase include the defense of key points (*yaodian*) through positional defense and mobile operations, conducting counter-assaults (*fan tuji*) as necessary. Numerous descriptions of the campaign note the importance of establishing a mobility corridor (*jidong zoulang*) to provide cover (*yanhu*) for units as they deploy to the front.⁵²

The second phase begins with the counterattack, which is the decisive operation of the campaign for destroying and expelling enemy forces. In the words of one source, it is the 'crux and focal point of the campaign'.⁵³ As the campaign starts with China in a passive position, the counterattack allows the PLA to seize the initiative on the battlefield through offensive operations. The counterattack begins after main force units have arrived in the theater of operations from the interior, regardless of the progress achieved by defensive operations. The first battle in the counterattack is seen as critical, as this action aims to disrupt the offensive, weaken the enemy's defensive capabilities or force it to adopt a defensive posture. In this battle, China will concentrate forces to target the enemy's own key points of vulnerability. If successful, this attack will 'reverse the course of the battle' (*niuzhuan zhanju*) and create conditions for 'comprehensive counterattack' (*quanmian fanji*) to expel the invading force.⁵⁴ Counterattacks mix firepower attacks, operations to divide, surround and destroy enemy forces, and operations to pursue and destroy fleeing forces.⁵⁵

The border area counterattack campaign is similar to the doctrine for countering a Soviet invasion that dominated Chinese military planning

⁵¹The history of expanding war aims, however, demonstrates this can never be ruled out. See Eric J. Labs, 'Beyond Victory: Offensive Realism and the Expansion of War Aims', *Security Studies* 6/4 (1997), 1–49.

⁵²Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi xue*, 464; Xue, *Zhanyi lilun xuexi zhinan*, 273–6.

⁵³Xue, *Zhanyi lilun xuexi zhinan*, 265.

⁵⁴Chen, *Lujun zhanyi xue*, 314.

⁵⁵In many ways, the combination of defensive and offensive operations reflects the continuity of doctrinal principles developed by Mao Zedong in the 1930s, especially the concept of 'active defense'. See Paul H.B. Godwin, 'Change and Continuity in Chinese Military Doctrine: 1949–1999', in Mark A. Ryan, David M. Finkelstein and Michael A. McDevitt (eds.), *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe 2003), 23–55.

in the 1970s and early 1980s, but at least three key differences should be noted.⁵⁶

First, although both are defensive in orientation, current doctrine does not anticipate the potential of waging a protracted war within China. Current doctrine also emphasizes the importance of using defensive operations not just to halt the enemy's advance, but to deploy combat units from bases in the interior to the front line.

Second, past doctrine contained three distinct phases of defense, counterattack and offense. Current doctrine combines the counter-attack and offensive into one phase and one type of operation. Moreover, the timing of the counterattack is independent of the success of defensive operations.

Third, past doctrine contained elements of 'people's war', whereby guerrilla forces would launch attacks behind enemy lines within China. Under current doctrine, airborne and special operations units, not guerrillas, will execute such tasks. This is because these operations may need to be conducted across the boundary in an enemy's territory and because China cannot rely upon the local population in many frontier areas to support, much less participate in guerrilla operations.⁵⁷

Although the campaign typically starts with China in a passive position, military sources note that preemptive strikes should be executed under certain conditions. In this way, China's approach to frontier defense mirrors its doctrine for other contingencies that stress seizing the initiative and the core principle of 'active defense'. According to one NDU study, commanders should consider a preemptive attack 'when war is clearly unavoidable and the enemy's operations already constitute actually actions of war'.⁵⁸ Describing the principle of 'strive to seek a decisive occasion to subdue the enemy' (*lizheng xianji zhidi*), the Nanjing study suggests that if strategic conditions permit, Chinese forces should seize the initiative to attack just before the enemy launches its own offensive. This preemptive action is described as a limited operation to disrupt the enemy's offensive capabilities and operational tempo, thereby preventing an attack on China.⁵⁹ In both publications, however, the scope for

⁵⁶For a description of this strategy, see M. Taylor Fravel, 'The Evolution of China's Military Strategy: Comparing the 1987 and 1999 Editions of *Zhanlue Xue*', in David M. Finkelstein and James Mulvenon, (eds.), *The Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People's Liberation Army* (Alexandria, VA: Center for Naval Analyses 2005), 79–100.

⁵⁷In addition, past doctrine envisioned a Soviet attack on Beijing, where Han Chinese would be more likely to engage in guerrilla operations.

⁵⁸Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyu xue*, 465.

⁵⁹Chen, *Lujun zhanyu xue*, 305.

preemption is limited by an adversary's deployment of offensive forces on or near the border. In addition, preemption is only possible when China has also moved its main combat units to the border, as the lightly armed border defense troops are unable undertake such decisive military actions.

What military sources do not discuss in great detail is how China deters an attack in the first place. When describing defensive operations in the campaign, the Nanjing study outlines the principle of 'opposing the enemy's nibbling with a tit for tat response' (*zhenfeng xiangdui, fandi canshi ruqin*) through the establishment of blocking positions.⁶⁰ Presumably such actions would seek to signal China's determination to defend territory and, similar to the confrontation in 1962 with India, be linked to diplomatic efforts to communicate resolve. Likewise, the Urumqi Army Academy notes 'stressing deterrence' (*zhongshi weishe*), including diplomacy, military maneuvers and limited surprise attacks.⁶¹

By stressing the use of offensive operations to achieve military ends, this campaign reflects many of the principles in China's current joint operational doctrine. Nevertheless, Chinese writings suggest that it will remain primarily an army operation, with limited support from the PLA Air Force (PLAAF).⁶² Although conventional missile forces are discussed briefly in several descriptions of the campaign, the mention appears to be perfunctory, as Chinese sources do not indicate any serious planning for the use of the conventional missile force in conflicts on its land border.⁶³

Writings on the campaign note at least five challenges to its successful execution.

First, the campaign often starts with China in a passive position of responding to an attack. Moreover, as only lightly armed garrison forces are stationed permanently near the border, military sources acknowledge that 'our border area defensive capabilities are weak' and that the border itself is difficult to defend from attack because combat units to be used in the campaign are often based hundreds of kilometers away from the border.⁶⁴

Second, rapid reaction is required in the campaign, but the harsh physical environment and poor transportation networks in the frontiers

⁶⁰Chen, *Lujun zhanyì xue*, 310.

⁶¹Li, *Bianfang xue*, 369.

⁶²One explanation for the lack of detailed discussion of the PLAAF's role might stem from the sources consulted for this study, which come primarily from the army or army-dominated institutions such as the National Defense University.

⁶³Xue, *Zhanyì lilun xuexi zhinan*, 269.

⁶⁴Chen, *Lujun zhanyì xue*, 304; Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyì xue*, 460.

limit the ability to deploy reserve and combat units quickly to border areas and provide the necessary logistical support. In addition, while deploying, combat units are vulnerable to long-range strikes, which requires additional defenses.

Third, mobile operations are critical in the counterattack phase, but the varied topography of the frontiers, especially in the west, limits force mobility and maneuverability on the battlefield.

Fourth, among just the ground forces, command and control necessary for integrated operations requires coordination among many different types of units, including garrison forces on the border, main force combat units, paramilitary forces and local militias.

Fifth, rear stability cannot be taken for granted because of the potential for ethnic unrest on the frontiers. All sources indicate that one component of the campaign will be to suppress rebellions that might erupt and prevent sabotage efforts, that may be linked to the enemy's attack, especially along communications lines.⁶⁵

Force Structure for Frontier Defense

China's troop deployments demonstrate a high degree of consistency between its doctrine for frontier defense and its force structure. China currently divides responsibility for frontier defense among two key components of its armed forces. Under a 'division of labor defense management' (*fengong fangguan*) system, the PLA is responsible primarily for external defense and the security of China's borders. By contrast, the country's paramilitary force, the People's Armed Police (PAP), is responsible for internal security in areas adjacent to China's borders.

People's Liberation Army (PLA)

Two different types of PLA units are tasked with defending China's borders. The responsibility for securing the 'first line of the border' (*bianjing yixian*) lies with the PLA's border defense troops (*bianfang budui*). Unlike the maneuver units in the group armies in each military region, border defense units fall under the command of the provincial-level military district.⁶⁶ In particular, these troops are organized into

⁶⁵Chen, *Lujun zhanyi xue*, 309, 313–14; Wang and Zhang, *Zhanyi xue*, 462–3; Xue, *Zhanyi lilun xuexi zhinan*, 265, 275.

⁶⁶For overviews of the PLA's command structure, see Dennis Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today: Tradition and Transformation for the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge 2006), 16–46; David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press 2002), 108–83.

border defense regiments (*bianfang tuan*) in each military subdistrict (*jun fenqu*) adjacent to an international boundary.⁶⁷ Each regiment is normally composed of three battalions, each with three companies, in addition to regimental headquarters units. In addition, several independent border defense battalions (*bianfang duli ying*) are located in military subdistricts in Xinjiang and Tibet to bolster the security of certain sections of China's western border. As outlined in Table 1, the PLA's order of battle for border defense includes 60 regiments and 9 battalions. Although China has not openly published the size of this force, it likely numbers roughly 124,500 in strength, accounting for around 8 per cent of the PLA's ground forces.

The border defense regiments are composed of lightly armed infantry units, which lack artillery and other heavy weapons to engage in a wide range of combined arms operations. To defend the first line, border defense troops are usually located several kilometers behind the actual international boundary. In peacetime, these troops man sentry posts, conduct routine patrols and other activities such as surveillance to prevent illegal crossings of the border or 'nibbling' by neighboring states. In wartime, they constitute the first line of defense in an attack on the frontiers and defend the key points behind the first line during the defensive phase of the border area counterattack campaign.⁶⁸

The responsibility for repelling an attack or conducting a preemptive strike in a conflict on China's border lies with the PLA's main force (*zhuli*) combat units. These refer to infantry and armored divisions and brigades, which are organized into group armies in each military region in addition to several independent units assigned to certain military districts adjacent to China's land border.⁶⁹ These maneuver units form the principal combat force that would be employed in an armed conflict on the borders as well as large-scale counterinsurgency operations in frontier regions. Within the group armies, these maneuver units rely upon support from artillery and other forces to conduct combined arms operations.

The deployment of the PLA's maneuver units throughout China reflects the twin goals of frontier defense, highlighting the consistency between doctrine and force structure. Whether measured by troops or

⁶⁷Directory of PRC Military Personalities (n.p., Oct. 2006).

⁶⁸Li, *Bianfang xue*, 304–6.

⁶⁹The military regions adjacent to China's international boundaries include Lanzhou (Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India), Chengdu (Nepal, India, Bhutan, Burma, Laos and Vietnam), Guangzhou (Vietnam), Shenyang (North Korea, Russia) and Beijing (Russia and Mongolia).

Table 1. Order of Battle for PLA Border Defense Troops

Military District	Adjacent Countries	Regiments		Battalions		Total
		Number	Troops	Number	Troops	
Liaoning	North Korea	1	2,000			2,000
Jilin	North Korea, Russia	4*	8,000			8,000
Heilongjiang	Russia	11*	22,000			22,000
Inner Mongolia	Russia and Mongolia	9	18,000			18,000
Xinjiang	Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India	13	26,000	4	2,000	28,000
Tibet	India, Bhutan, Nepal, Burma	6	12,000	5	2,500	14,500
Yunnan	Burma, Laos, Vietnam	12	24,000			24,000
Guangxi	Vietnam	4	8,000			8,000
Total		60	120,000	9	4,500	124,500

*Denotes inclusion of regimental-sized border patrol craft units.

Note: All figures approximate. Assumes 2,000 soldiers per regiment and 500 soldiers per battalion. Excludes coastal defense troops.

Sources: *Directory of PRC Military Personalities*; postings on <www.war-sky.com and blog.sina.com> (available from author).

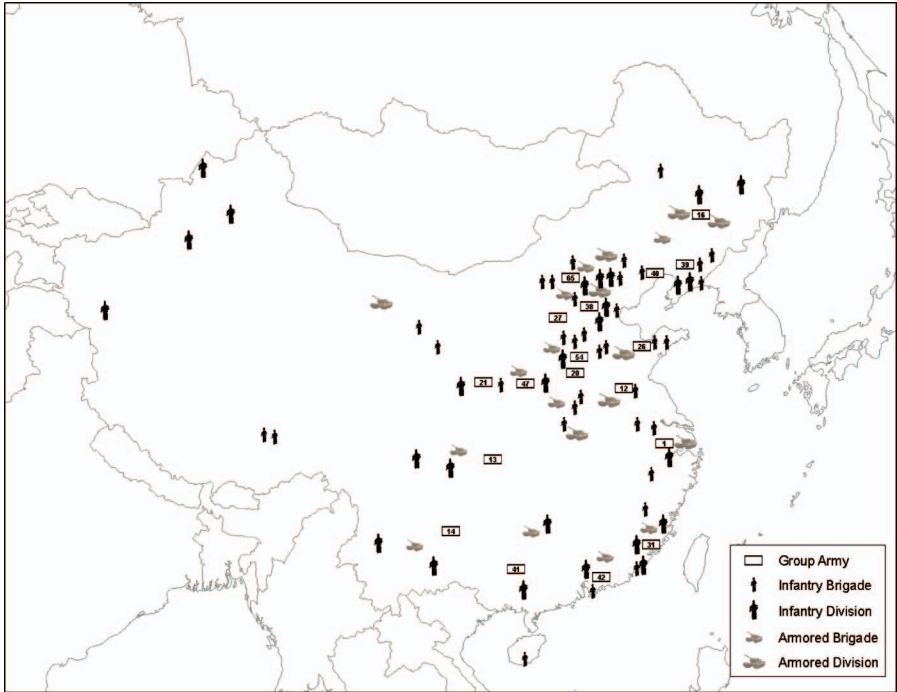
unit type, a significant number of soldiers are tasked with frontier defense as a primary or secondary mission. Of China's 18 group armies, the PLA's largest military formation, 12 armies or 67 percent are based in military regions with a land boundary. As noted in Table 2, more than half of China's infantry divisions along with one third of its armored divisions are based in a provincial military district with a land border. Measured in terms of personnel, these forces account for roughly 42 percent of all soldiers in infantry and armored maneuver units. Frontier defense is not necessarily the sole mission for these troops, but this figure nevertheless demonstrates that it is a primary responsibility that should not be overlooked in assessments of the PLA's overall warfighting capabilities.

Although troops from these maneuver units are located in provinces adjacent to China's frontiers, they are based far from the boundary itself. As demonstrated in Map 1, the order of battle for maneuver units reflects the continued emphasis on defending a strategic 'inner line' (*neixian*), roughly at the edge of what would be considered China proper, engaging any invading force between this line and the 'outer line' (*waixian*) near the border itself. The primary exception to this pattern is in the northeast, where maneuver units are located closer to the North Korean border. The location of most of these troops in the interior has remained constant for the past 20 years and remains focused on defending China's key population centers from traditional

Table 2. PLA Maneuver Units by Location of Military District

	Border	Coastal	Inland	Total
Infantry				
<i>Divisions</i>	13 (50%)	5 (19%)	8 (31%)	26
<i>Brigades</i>	11 (35%)	10 (32%)	10 (32%)	31
Personnel	203,000 (45%)	110,000 (24%)	143,000 (31%)	456,500
Armor				
<i>Divisions</i>	3 (33%)	4 (44%)	2 (22%)	9
<i>Brigades</i>	3 (27%)	2 (18%)	6 (55%)	11
Personnel	36,000 (32%)	44,000 (39%)	32,000 (29%)	112,000
Total Personnel	239,500 (42%)	154,000 (27%)	175,000 (31%)	568,500

Note: All figures rough estimates only. Excludes all artillery, anti-aircraft, support and headquarters units. Percentages reflect the total in each row. Assumes 11,000 soldiers per infantry division, 5,500 per infantry brigade, 10,000 per armored division and 2,000 per armored brigade. *Source:* Blasko, *The Chinese Army Today*, 42, 71–87; *Directory of PRC Military Personalities*; personal communication with Dennis Blasko.



Map 1. Order of Battle for PLA Maneuver Units (author's own artwork)

routes of invasion.⁷⁰ Importantly, this pattern of deployment is inconsistent with a force structure for conducting offensive operations far from the national borders. Indeed, given that most rear areas and logistics support centers are at least 500 kilometers from the boundary, often over rough terrain, it would be difficult for China to move and sustain large numbers of troops at great distances from their main bases, even today, a challenge Chinese strategists readily acknowledge.⁷¹

Nevertheless, several key units are located in forward-deployed positions near China's borders. These units include, for example, four independent divisions in Xinjiang and two independent mountain brigades in Tibet. As most are based in or near population centers that have experienced high levels of ethnic unrest in the 1990s, the main

⁷⁰Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military*, 153. On traditional invasion routes, see Shen Weilie and Lu Junyuan (eds.), *Zhongguo guojia anquan dili* [The Geography of China's National Security] (Beijing: Shishi chubanshe [internal circulation] 2001).

⁷¹Wang, 'Sunzi bingfa', 24.

function of these units is to deter revolts against the central government. The 8th Motorized Infantry Division, for example, is based in Tacheng near the border with Kazakhstan, an area that witnessed significant violence in 1997. Moreover, these independent units are deployed without artillery, anti-aircraft and support units required for combined arms operations against foreign militaries.

People's Armed Police (PAP)

The paramilitary PAP force contributes two types of units to frontier defense. First, the PAP maintains its own public security border defense troops (*gongan bianfang budui*), light infantry units which fall under the supervision of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS). Unlike the PLA's border defense troops, the primary responsibility of these PAP units is law enforcement and internal security in border areas. In peacetime, these units are responsible for border inspection work, including immigration and port security. The public security border defense troops are also responsible for stability, counter-intelligence, counter-separatist and counter-terrorist efforts in the frontiers, missions designed to maintain political stability near the border. In wartime, these PAP troops assist the PLA border defense forces in defending the first line and related key points.⁷² According to official statistics, there are 100,000 public security border defense troops, though some of these troops are engaged in coastal defense.⁷³ Although the overall size of the PAP is unknown, it is likely that the public security border troops accounts for roughly 10 percent of the PAP.

Second, the responsibility for internal security in the frontiers beyond the border lies with the PAP's internal security forces (*neiwei budui*). These troops include contingents (*zongdui*) headquartered in each provincial-level administrative region as well as 14 demobilized PLA infantry divisions (*wujing shi*) that were transferred to the PAP in the past two decades. Six of these divisions are based in China's frontier regions, including Liaoning, Gansu, Sichuan, Xinjiang and Yunnan.⁷⁴ The relationship between the PAP's border guards and internal security force in border areas is unknown, though operationally both appear to fall under the command of the military subdistrict.

⁷²Li, *Bianfang xue*, 304–6.

⁷³<http://www.mps.gov.cn/cenweb/brjlCenweb/jsp/common/article.jsp?inoid=ABC000000000033760>

⁷⁴Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 87–8. In addition, border defense militias (*bianfang minbing*) serve as a reserve force for both the PLA and PAP border defense troops, supporting both external and internal security missions. See Li, *Bianfang xue*, 304–5.

Organization of Frontier Defense

China's management of frontier defense has evolved over the past few decades, but it mirrors the division of labor for external and internal security between the PLA and the PAP. Previously, from the early 1950s, the PLA and various predecessors of the PAP divided responsibility for frontier defense based on geography (*fenduan fang-guan*), with the PLA managing frontier defense in areas where China faced external military threats and the armed police overseeing frontier defense elsewhere.⁷⁵ By 1963, for example, the PLA was responsible for frontier defense along the borders with Burma, India, the Soviet Union and Mongolia, more than half of the land borders, a move reflecting threat assessments during this phase of the Cold War.⁷⁶ In 1966, just as the Cultural Revolution erupted, the PLA assumed responsibility for all aspects of frontier defense, including border defense, border management and public security in the frontiers.

In the early 1970s, however, China began to develop the division of labor system used today. In 1974, a State Land Frontier Defense Work Conference moved to establish this system by transferring border management and internal security missions from the PLA to public security organs, including the PAP's predecessors. The division of labor system, however, was only implemented in 1981, when the CCP's Central Committee established the Frontier Defense Work Leading Small Group (*bianfang gongzuo lingdao xiaozu*) and, in December 1981, issued instructions formally establishing the division of labor system under 'unified leadership'.⁷⁷ The establishment of this system was completed only in 2003, when the Central Military Commission (CMC) transferred responsibility for the defense of China's borders with North Korea and the southern portion of Burma from the PAP to the PLA.⁷⁸

The division of labor system requires the coordination of numerous organizations within the military and the government. To ensure policy

⁷⁵On the tortured evolution of the PAP, see Murray Scot Tanner, 'The Institutional Lessons Of Disaster: Reorganizing The People's Armed Police After Tiananmen', in James Mulvenon and Andrew N.D. Yang (eds.), *The People's Liberation Army as Organization: V 1.0., Reference Volume* (Santa Monica: RAND Corp. 2002), 587–635.

⁷⁶Li, *Bianfang xue*, 246–8.

⁷⁷Mao, *Bianfang lun*, 116.

⁷⁸The Ministry of Public Security had assumed responsibility for the external security of these border areas in 1981. Apparently, the transfer of PLA troops to secure China's border with North Korea stemmed from efforts to bring all borders into conformity with the 'divided work defense management' system, not efforts to coerce North Korea amid the ongoing nuclear crisis. See Li, *Bianfang xue*, 246–8.

coordination among these actors, the CMC and State Council established a State Frontier Defense Commission (*guojia bianfang weiyuanhui*, SFDC) in 1991, perhaps giving it equal status to the State National Defense Mobilization Commission. To facilitate coordination and policy implementation, parallel Frontier Defense Commissions have been established in all provinces or autonomous regions adjacent to an international boundary, coastal provinces and in all associated military regions, military districts and military subdistricts.

The leadership of the SFDC follows the division of labor structure. In recent years, the SFDC's director has been a CCP Politburo member with the law and order portfolio. Zhou Yongkang, Politburo member and public security minister, is the SFDC's current chairman. The vice-chairmen are the Deputy Chief of the PLA's General Staff Department (GSD) responsible for operations, the Deputy Secretary-General of the State Council and deputy ministers of foreign affairs and public security.⁷⁹ Additional members of the commission include customs and civil aviation among others. Although the PLA only holds one of the vice directorships, it staffs the commission's secretariat through the GSD's Operations Department (*zuozhan bu*). According to State Council sources, the GSD, not the MPS, is authorized to handle the SFDC's official business (*yishi*).⁸⁰

Preventive Defense on the Frontiers

In addition to active diplomacy on its periphery and economic development of the frontiers, military sources highlight the role of preventive actions in frontier defense. In particular, these sources note the positive contributions of infrastructure investment in border areas and conflict prevention measures in maintaining external and internal stability.

Border Area Infrastructure

Under the SFDC's leadership, China has engaged in a decade-long effort to upgrade its infrastructure in border areas. In February 1994

⁷⁹Guowuyuan bangongting, Zhongyang Junwei bangongting guanyu tiaozheng guojia bianfang weiyuanhui chengyuan de tongzhi' [State Council and Central Military Commission Notice on Adjusting the Members of the National Frontier Defense Commission], *Guobanfa* [1999], no. 63, from <http://www.fsou.com.cn/html/text/chl/234/23485.html>. Also, see 'China Data Supplement', *China Actuell*, Dec. 2006, 16.

⁸⁰http://www.gov.cn/zwgk/2005-08/13/content_22245.htm.

the third State Land Frontier Defense Work Conference outlined a plan to improve the basic infrastructure (*jichu jianshe*) for frontier defense. After launching pilot projects in 1994 and 1995, the SFDC proposed to build patrol roads, barbed wire fences, inspection facilities and alarms as part of the Ninth Five Year Plan. These efforts were seen as a ‘trinity’ to improve ‘reporting, obstructing and handling’ (*baozhi, zulan, chuzhi*), thereby enhancing the overall security and management of China’s borders.⁸¹ In particular, this infrastructure plan reflected a response to the tension created by the need to facilitate the flows of goods and people across borders while blocking elements that would undermine stability on the frontiers. As a result, these upgrades sought to increase the efficiency of patrolling China’s long borders, while also strengthening the ability to control movement into the country at certain points.

In January 1996 the CMC and State Council approved the SFDC’s infrastructure plan. Ten years later, more than two billion *yuan* had been spent on various projects to build or widen 20,000 kilometers of patrol roads, erect 6,000 kilometers of barbed-wire fences and install 600 sets of alarms monitoring equipment.⁸² As described by the *Liberation Army Daily*, these investments sought ‘to improve the conditions for patrol duty’, normally considered a hardship tour.⁸³ Many of these roads appear to link sentry posts and patrol stations with each other and rear bases.⁸⁴ Moreover, much of this infrastructure investment might be described as ‘basic’. In Xinjiang, for example, projects included building 40 new roads, which finally connected eight frontier defense stations that previously were accessible only on foot or by horseback, as well as adding water and electricity to sentry posts and bases and gas stations.⁸⁵

In general terms, this program reflects other efforts to improve China’s national transportation infrastructure and carries at least four implications for frontier defense.

First, these upgrades improve the PLA border defense forces’ capabilities by reducing the time required to patrol the border.

⁸¹*Guofang bao*, 30 Aug. 2004, 4, web edition.

⁸²2006 *nian Zhongguo de guofang*. This amounts to approximately 250 million US dollars at current exchange rates or more than 1 billion US dollars using the World Bank’s purchasing power parity methodology.

⁸³*Jiefang junbao*, 6 Aug. 2002, 6, web edition.

⁸⁴*Guofang bao*, 30 Aug. 2004, 4, web edition.

⁸⁵‘Xinjiang Military Region has Remarkably Improved the Conditions for Frontier Defense Companies’, *Urumqi Renmin Jundui*, 12 March 2002, in OSC #CPP20020405000149.

Second, by seeking to seal some areas of the border with barbed wire and other obstacles, the effectiveness of border control should be increased, perhaps reducing both smuggling and infiltration.

Third, the road construction effort may also enhance the mobility of PLA forces during a conflict, especially in areas along the first line. The quality of these roads has not been discussed in the press, but the road network presumably facilitates the deployment of main force units to border areas.

Fourth, enhanced monitoring of the borders may improve advanced warning as well as intelligence gathering, other key components of executing the counterattack campaign as well as conflict prevention.

Conflict Prevention

The Urumqi Army Academy study on frontier defense highlights the importance of conflict prevention in frontier defense. In particular, the study highlights three components of conflict prevention.⁸⁶

The first is confidence building measures (CBMs) to reduce mistrust along the border. Agreements that China reached with Russia, India and Central Asian states in the early to mid-1990s, for example, included pre-notification of military exercises near the border. Recent reports indicate that the pace of implementing these agreements has increased in the past several years, but their mention in a PLA study suggests that they have, in part, been successful from China's perspective in terms of reducing the potential for conflict on the frontiers.⁸⁷

The second component of conflict prevention is the role of transparency programs regarding China's national defense policy. These efforts are believed to reduce suspicion and project a less threatening image to neighboring countries. The Urumqi study notes in particular the role of China's own white papers on national defense, which indicate continued support for transparency efforts within the PLA going forward. The most recent white paper, for example, included for the first time an entire section on frontier and coastal defense, which summarized the country's basic goals, policies and organizational structure.⁸⁸ Although China could be far more forthcoming in terms of its military policy and organization in these white papers, recognition of the role of transparency is important.

Institutionalizing cooperation among border defense forces is a third element of conflict prevention on the frontiers. China since the early

⁸⁶Li, *Bianfang xue*, 374–6.

⁸⁷Interview with Indian diplomat, March 2005.

⁸⁸2006 *nian Zhongguo de guofang*.

1990s has reached bilateral agreements with its neighbors on border management (*bianjing guanli*). Starting in the late 1990s, China has signed agreements on border defense cooperation (*bianfang hezuo*) with Mongolia (1999), Burma (2001), Kazakhstan (2002) and North Korea (2004). Typically, these agreements detail areas of cooperation in intelligence-sharing, rules of engagement for border violations and direct communications across the border to maintain ‘the stability of border areas and strengthen mutual trust’.⁸⁹

An additional element of conflict prevention has been joint military exercises with neighboring states. To date, most of these exercises except those with Russia in 2005 have focused on counter-terrorism operations, which are directly linked to internal security and escalation control on the border. In the past several years, China has conducted such exercises with the members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Kyrgyzstan (2003), Pakistan (2004, 2006) and Tajikistan (2006).

Conclusion

In the history of world politics, power transitions often result in conflict over territory or spheres of influence among the leading states in the international system. With China’s emergence as a rising power, such conflict is indeed a possibility, as the PLA has been engaged in a sustained modernization drive to create a professional and capable military. In this context, the study of China’s military doctrine can help illuminate its potential involvement in violent conflict by identifying how it plans to use its growing power to achieve national political goals.

In its evolving operational doctrine, China pursues a defensive approach to securing its land borders and maintaining territorial integrity. Moreover, frontier defense remains a core mission for the Chinese armed forces, involving almost half of the PLA’s combat forces and a sizeable share of its land-based airpower and paramilitary units. The force structure for addressing threats to the frontiers is consistent with a defensive doctrine, as light infantry units are stationed on the border itself while most maneuver units capable of offensive operations are based hundreds of kilometers away in the interior.

China’s approach to frontier defense carries three implications for peace and stability in the region. Although Taiwan remains the

⁸⁹Waijiao bu (ed.), *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo bianjie shiwu tiaoyue ji: ZhongHa juan* [Collection of Treaties of the PRC’s Boundary Affairs: China-Kazakhstan] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe [internal circulation] 2005), 546–51.

'primary strategic direction' (*zhuyao zhanlue fangxiang*) in Chinese military planning, the amount of resources that can be devoted to this mission are constrained by the requirements of frontier defense. Even though the ongoing downsizing of the PLA targets the ground forces, the need to secure land borders and maintain internal stability still consumes a sizeable share of military assets. Frontier defense is likely one factor in the current emphasis on deterring Taiwan's formal independence, not compelling unification. Due to the lack of transparency, the share of China's military expenditure on frontier defense is impossible to determine, but the personnel, training and equipment costs are substantial. The number of troops who have trained for amphibious assault operations for a Taiwan conflict reflect one of the constraints imposed by frontier defense. By the end of 2004, only about 25 percent China's maneuver units had participated in some type of amphibious exercise in the preceding three years, roughly equivalent to the proportion of maneuver units located in the coastal provinces.⁹⁰

China is likely to maintain a defensive posture on the Asian continent as it continues to rise in power. Not surprisingly, the content of military doctrine varies with the CCP's political goals, which on the frontiers remain conservative in contrast to Taiwan. One objection to this conclusion might be that China's defensive posture on the frontiers makes a virtue out of the necessities that the potential for conflict over Taiwan creates and the resulting need to minimize tensions elsewhere, especially in rear areas on the land borders. If unification is achieved, or some other interim agreement over Taiwan is reached, then China's military planning might turn its focus either offshore or to the Asian continent.

Nevertheless, the factors that underpin the defensive approach on land in current doctrine are unlikely to change in the short to medium-term. Despite the recent investments in border area infrastructure, the logistical challenges of securing and policing a 22,000-kilometer boundary remain high. Among these challenges are the development of long-range mobility and rapid reaction capabilities, a goal which the 2006 national defense white paper stressed when describing the PLA's ground forces ambition to shift from a 'regional defensive model' (*quyu fangwei xing*) to 'all-regional mobility model' (*quanyu jidong xing*) for forces within China.⁹¹ At the same time, as the January 2007 deadly raid on a suspected terrorist base in southern Xinjiang indicates, the potential for ethnic unrest on the frontiers persists and is likely to grow with the continuation of Han migration from the interior to the

⁹⁰Blasko, *Chinese Army Today*, 155.

⁹¹2006 *nian Zhongguo de guofang*.

frontiers. Cooperation with neighbors remains key to continuing economic development while ensuring internal political stability in these regions, cooperation that an offensive force posture might threaten. China's defensive posture also supports its current grand strategy of reassuring its neighbors about its rising power and preventing the creation of counter-balancing coalitions or alignments, especially on its borders, where combined regional forces facing China are significant.⁹²

The national force structure for frontier defense suggests that its future ability to project military power far from its land borders will be limited in the next decade and beyond. A counterargument might be that efforts to increase force mobility within the country will also facilitate long-range power projection. Two factors, however, complicate the development of this capability. Efforts to increase force mobility within China are likely to focus on road and rail transportation networks unavailable beyond the borders. In addition, without a large tanker fleet for sustained air-to-air refueling, the combat range of the PLAAF's advanced aircraft will extend only several hundred kilometers beyond China's borders, limiting the availability of air power necessary for air superiority and strategic lift operations.

The future remains uncertain, but China's approach to frontier defense provides a clear baseline for assessing how its power projection capabilities on the Asian continent might change. Scholars and analysts can look for changes in the orientation of military doctrine and force structure for frontier defense that would signal a shift towards a more offensive posture. In addition to the content of doctrine, other indicators of such a shift would include the permanent forward-deployment of entire group armies and air divisions to bases near China's land borders as well as the development of sizeable strategic lift capabilities for transporting and supplying at least one group army for a sustained period of time at a significant distance beyond China's borders. China today, however, has yet to pursue such reforms.

Acknowledgements

I thank Kenneth Allen, Michael Glosny, Paul Godwin, Evan Medeiros, Ellis Melvin, Christopher Twomey, Andrew Yang and especially Dennis Blasko for helpful comments and suggestions. Ruijie He provided expert research assistance. A previous version of this article was presented at the November 2005 CAPS-RAND-CEIP International

⁹²Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security* (Stanford UP 2005).

Conference on the PLA, in Taipei, Taiwan. The Princeton-Harvard China and the World Program supported by Harvard University's Fairbank Center for East Asian Studies and the Visiting Scholars Program at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences provided generous financial support for this research.

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