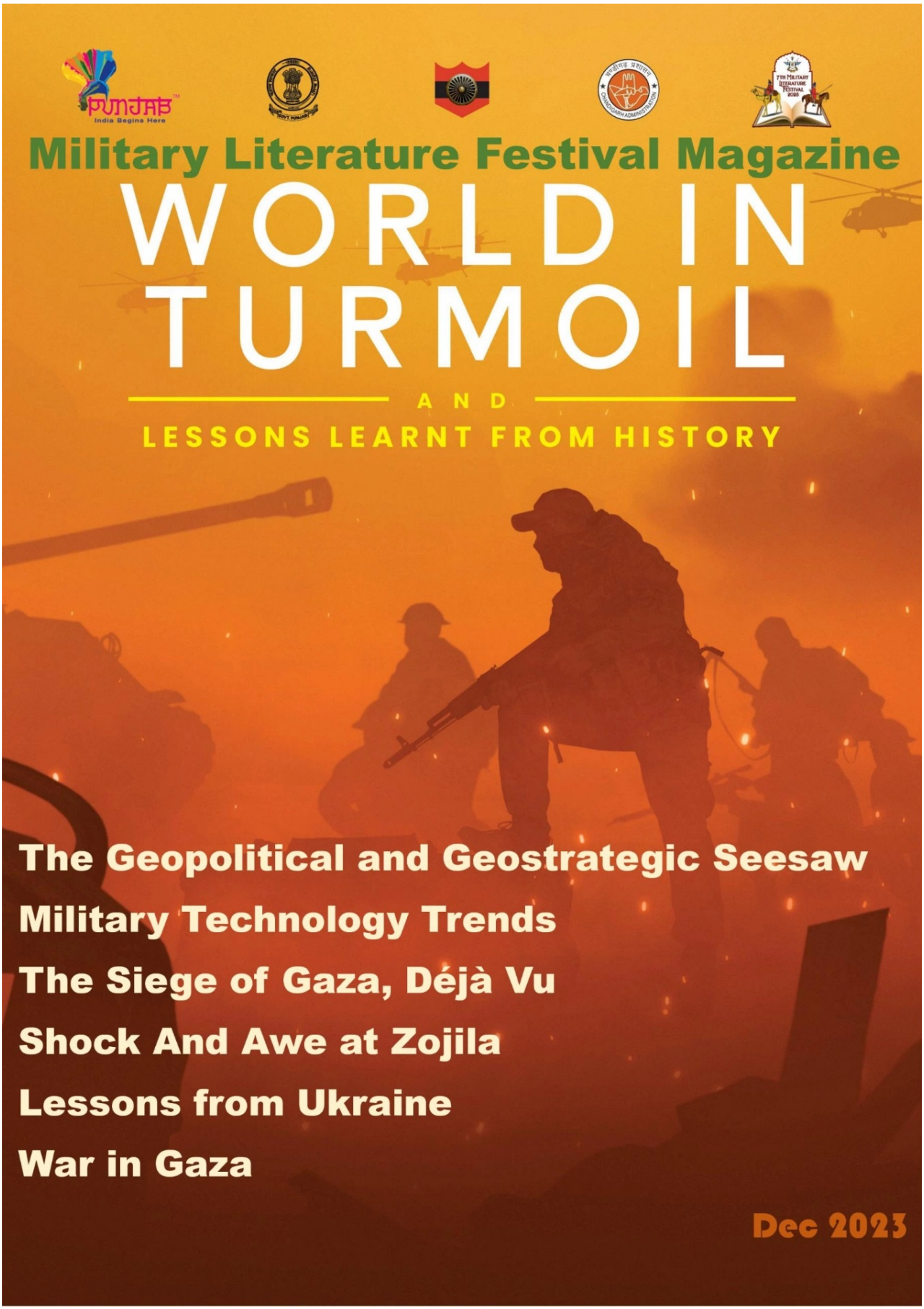
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CHINA'S STRATEGIC CULTURE-USE OF FORCE FROM YELLOW EMPERORS TO RED MONARCHS

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Introduction



Given China's opaque system, deciphering the intent of its leadership poses an enormous challenge. As per eminent Scholar Derek Bodde, those who deal with China are often bewildered when its actions send mixed signals, making clear interpretation extremely difficult. Consequently, the global polity is often taken by surprise by Beijing's unpredictable actions. This can be primarily attributed to the ignorance about the Chinese strategic culture, which richly draws from its ancient wisdom. It continues to influence the thinking and decision making of Communist leadership of 'People's Republic of China' (PRC) significantly. Hence, it is imperative to gain an insight into the Chinese strategic culture to enable decoding the perspective of its policy makers on salient national and international issues.

China's strategic culture refers to distinctive set of beliefs which are deeply embedded in history. In continuum of traditions and norms over millenniums, great philosophers and thinkers made yeomen contribution in adaption of ideas into statutes. Confucian (551-479 BCE) advocated the idea of harmonious society but also recognized that military force might be necessary for protecting the state and people. His doctrine of 'Guanxi' implied reciprocal relationship based on 'network of balanced interaction' among the states. Sun Zi (544-496 BCE) an ancient Chinese military strategist in his treatises, "The Art of War" espoused the 'doctrine of legalism'. He propounded military to be an instrument to rein in the adversary but laid emphasis on the cautious use of force. In traditional Chinese culture, martial virtues were highly valued attributes, particularly in the profession of arms.

The notion of 'Zhong Guo' (Middle Kingdom') and concept of 'Tianxia' (all under heaven) signify the legacy of imperial past, an idea of China's centrality in the world and its culturally superior civilization. It is symbolic to national pride and conviction to regain the past glory. Incidentally, Chinese strategic culture is not monolithic or static but diverse and contextual, relates to different historic periods, evolved over millenniums. It has fostered the practice of taking long term view of the events, adherence to extended time lines in evaluating situations and exercising 'strategic patience'.

Use of force in the Chinese culture has been influenced by numerous factors. The concept of 'just war' in the ancient Chinese texts considered use of force in response to aggression or perceived threat as absolutely acceptable and deemed it to be defensive action. 'Yizhan'- 'righteous warfare' tenets emerged during the turbulent 'Spring-Autumn' period (770-476 BCE). The traditional beliefs continue to be adhered implicitly, evident from PRC's leadership frequent use of force ever since its establishment in 1949, due to the obsession with sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Ancient Period-Reign of Yellow Emperors



Chinese military thought probably originated with neolithic village conflict, four or five thousand years ago, possibly mythologized in the clash of legendary cultural heroes and sage emperors. It was the third of China's mythological Yellow Emperor (Huangdi) Xuan Yuan, who is believed to have founded China on the plains of Yellow River with his army after waging 56 battles against other tribes, around 2697 BCE. The Xia Dynasty ruled China during the mythological period, wherein chiefs of clans imposed their will over other groups to expand their domains. King Jie, the last ruler was cruel and oppressive and was overthrown by Shang Dynasty, the first confirmed dynasty in 1760 BCE. It was Emperor Wen of Zhou Dynasty who overthrew Shang Dynasty in 1060 BCE and claimed the 'Mandate of Heaven', which became the core of Chinese political ideology. It connotes that rulers and governments have legitimacy to rule justly and benevolently but can lose the mandate if they perform poorly. In case of rulers deemed to have lost mandate, use of force in uprising was considered fair as means to restore order and justice.

The 'Spring and Autumn' period during Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BCE) was characterized by fighting between the vassal states. Confucious classics were written during this period and Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE) onwards these were studied by the people to pass exams for bureaucracy. The 'Warring States' period (475-221BCE) saw China fragment into seven competing nations. The fiefs who had acquired importance during the end of Zhou Dynasty became states of their own and engaged in conflict to expand territories and gain predominance. Sun Zi 'The Art of War' emerged during this time, emphasizing strategy of deception, maneuvering, flexibility and understanding of the opponent.

Having traversed through a thousand years of conflict, it was at the end of 'Warring State' period that Chinese State was unified for the first time under the Qin Dynasty's Shi Huang (Yi Zheng) who ruled for a decade (221-210 BCE). Through ruthless military campaigns, employing brutal, controversial and innovative methods, he united the bickering states thus expanding the empire. Shi Huang centralized political power by abolishing the feudal system that had led to the fragmentation and conflict between various states. He established highly controlled-loyal bureaucracy, standardized Chinese society including language script, legal system and currency. Shi Huang's harsh and authoritarian ways laid the foundation of subsequent dynasties which shaped the structure of Chinese system of governance for centuries to come. Throughout Imperial China's history, major dynasties which followed the Qin namely Han (206 BCE-220 CE), Wei (220-581), Sui (581-618), Song (960-1279), Yuan (1271-1368), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1912), the strategic culture devolved around maintaining stable empire, by ensuring strong central authority. During the 19th and early 20th Centuries, China faced plethora of challenges. These included the Opium Wars, colonization forcing China to sign unequal treaties and internal strife. The humiliation, disintegration of Qing Dynasty and ultimately its fall was the result of China's military weakness, especially the naval power. It marked a turning point in China's history, reaffirming its approach to use of force and need for a strong modern army.

Modern Period-Rule of Red Monarchs



Republic of China was established in 1912 as a sequel to the successful revolt by revolutionaries (Xinhai Revolution) in Southern China by overthrowing the Qing Dynasty, thus ending the three millennium of imperial era. Mao Zedong's revolution theory was based on the dictum, "Political Power grows out of the barrel of gun". During the Chinese Civil War, Mao was instrumental in founding the Red Army, the military of the Communist Party. He successfully developed the guerrilla warfare tactics as a tool to wage asymmetric war against the Jiang Kai-shek superior conventional army.

After establishing PRC in October 1949, Mao sought to use force for internal ideological struggle and consolidation of Power. In a bid to ensure conducive periphery, Mao sent PLA to annex Tibet in 1950. To protect China's national interest and assert itself in the global arena, Mao exemplified his willingness to use force by jumping into the Korean War in November 1950, so as to save the Kim Il Song's Communist regime. Again in 1962, Mao launched aggression against India to resolve the border issue by force. Even during the Cultural Revolution (1964-76) Mao ruthlessly used force, wherein around 1.5 million people were killed.

Post Mao, China's strategic culture underwent significant shift when Deng- his successor- initiated path breaking economic reforms and engagement with the international community to develop the nation. Although Deng adopted China's 'peaceful rise' approach, yet he went on to attack Vietnam in 1979 to teach the latter a lesson. Again, in June 1989, Deng employed PLA to quell student uprising in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. During the reforms period, Chinese leadership focused on economic development, adopting 'hide and bide' strategy enunciated by Deng, avoiding military confrontation. However, China continued with the military modernization, a key component of its 'Comprehensive National Power' (CNP).

During the recent times, especially after Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012-13, Chinese assertive behaviour has become a matter of serious concern for the global polity. Deep rooted military reforms to transform PLA into world class modern force further raise questions, given PRC's aggressiveness in the South and East China Seas which has led to escalation of tensions amongst the ASEAN nations and Japan. China's White Paper of 2019, 'National Defence in New Era' legislates use of force as an option to achieve reunification of Taiwan with the motherland. PLA's large- scale intrusion in Ladakh in May 2020 to against India further vindicates China's aggressive behaviour to settle disputes by force.

China has now resorted to 'Unrestricted Warfare' which encompasses 'Grey Zone Warfare' (GZW) wherein its military avoids direct confrontation but continues with its expansionist designs by employing coast guards and marine militias. Sub set of GZW, the 'Three Warfare' tactics includes media-propaganda, psychological and legal dimensions. Recent issue of maps showing territories depicted by the 'Nine Dash' claim line in South China Sea and inclusion of Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin as part of China are part of GZW. China is increasingly using its economic clout as a tool of its foreign policy by launching mega projects under 'Belt Road Initiative' (BRI). Employing 'cheque book diplomacy' to debt trap nations and seize assets, China is now using trade and economic means to coerce the nations.

Ramifications

China's cultural inclination towards use of force and aggressive behaviour have significance implication for the global polity. PRC has continued to employ assertive actions to serve its national interests and settle territorial disputes as brought out above. Since Xi assumed power a decade back, PLA's actions have been highly provocative especially in South and East China Seas, Taiwan and against India. These have led to heightened geo political tensions and instability in the region. The military escalation has resulted in the arms race and increasing the likelihood of potential conflict. It has forced the countries to go in for military alliances and partnerships to mitigate threat posed by China.

Communist leadership has scant regards for the rule of law. Beijing refused to accept the verdict of International Court of Justice with regards to Scarborough Shoal in South China Sea in 2016, which had gone in favour of Philippines. PRC's condescending behaviour only weakens the global institutions. Further, Beijing is known not to honour the agreements it has signed which has led to serious trust deficit. Case in point-China violating key agreements by undertaking large scale intrusions in Ladakh in 2020.

As an extension of its strategy of coercion, PRC has gone on to weaponize trade, using it as means to punish countries which refuse to toe its line. Recent example was Chinese heavy- handed response to South Korea's decision to deploy 'Terminal High Altitude Defence' (THAAD) anti-missile system when Beijing went on to accuse the US of risking security and creating tension on the Korean Peninsula. This forced South Korea to restricted military cooperation with US to prevent jeopardization of relationship with China. Beijing went on to impose economic sanctions on Seoul and operations of South Korean Conglomerates like Hyundai, Kia and Samsung in China. Chinese readiness to use economic leverage as tool of foreign policy has impacted global supply chains.

Chinese coercive diplomacy orchestrated through 'Wolf Warriors' makes it hard for the countries to engage in constructive dialogue with the Communist leadership for resolution of disputes. Beijing's aggressive behaviour extends even to human rights violations which it defends vehemently, straining the relations especially with the democratic nations. To evoke sense of nationalism among its people, PRC resorts to raking up tensions, thus creating conflict situation.

Conclusion

China has a proven legacy of using force to safeguard its territorial integrity and expand influence is amply substantiated by historical events which have left deep impact on the evolution of China's strategic culture, further complemented by Confucian, Daoist and Sun Zi philosophies. While Chinese culture traditionally has laid emphasis on defensive posture, yet it has invariably exercised the option to use force to achieve the national objectives often under the garb of 'Just War'.