

2020

## Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949

Dale C. Rielage

M. Taylor Fravel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Rielage, Dale C. and Fravel, M. Taylor (2020) "Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 73 : No. 2 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol73/iss2/13>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

book's epilogue reminds the reader that the U.S. Navy has a continuing need for small, fast warships and daring sailors willing to operate them against larger opponents.

Readers will appreciate the way the author uses oral histories, letters, newspaper accounts, deck logs, military after-action reports, written recollections, and background books and articles to tell an engaging sea story. This historical narrative will satisfy World War II buffs, sailors, and casual-interest readers. It is a quick and enjoyable read. Military scholars might appreciate the focused examination of small boats. Domagalski deftly accomplishes his mission: to pay homage to the intrepid war-fighting spirit of the patrol boat and motor torpedo boat sailors of World War II.

EDWARD GILLEN



*Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949*, by M. Taylor Fravel. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2019. 392 pages. \$35.

During the Cold War, naval professionals working to understand Soviet military doctrine could call on a well-developed body of literature. Authoritative Western academic studies covered everything from the Soviets' overall strategic design to their philosophy of troop leadership. Advanced students could call on textbooks from Soviet military colleges in translation. Taken together, these works were essential to understanding that the Soviet military viewed warfare through a philosophical lens fundamentally different from our own.

Today, professionals trying to understand the modern Chinese approach to warfare find comparatively meager fare. Western academic interest in the approaches taken by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to military strategy waned after the

Maoist era. In many key areas, primary sources are scarce—often passed from practitioner to practitioner rather than being widely available. While a few overview works exist, there has been little focused academic analysis of the basics of Chinese military science.

In that context, Taylor Fravel's volume on PRC military strategy represents a groundbreaking contribution to Chinese military studies. In *Active Defense*, Fravel analyzes the nine "strategic guidelines" the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has issued since 1949. Each strategic guideline provided Chinese forces with four key elements: an authoritative analysis of the Chinese strategic situation, an explanation of warfare in the present era, and direction for both force development and force employment. Three of these documents—those issued in 1956, 1980, and 1993—each represented a major shift in direction for the PLA. Rebutting those who see the PLA as isolated and insular, Fravel concludes that these three revisions were driven primarily by PLA perception of significant shifts in the conduct of modern warfare. While in each case the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) wrote the overall analysis of the strategic situation—which is, at its core, a political assessment—the other three component parts of each strategic guidance document represented military judgments. Fravel suggests that such fundamental reassessments are possible only when the party leadership is internally unified and thus able to delegate this kind of work to its military experts. Many Western readers, focused on CCP control of the PLA, will be surprised at this long-standing empowerment of the PLA military leadership to decide foundational operational issues.

The level of trust the party extends to the military leadership in strategy development is only one of a number of arguments

that will be both new to most readers and controversial to specialists. While granting the significant influence of the Soviet Union on PLA *development*, Fravel offers a nuanced view of Soviet influence on PLA *doctrine*. During the 1950s, the Soviet Union provided extensive support to China, offering both military hardware and advisers. Despite this close relationship, the 1956 strategic guidance was developed in part to articulate a specifically Chinese approach to warfare. While Soviet doctrine emphasized abrupt and aggressive offensive action, China remained mindful that it would be fighting from a position of relative weakness, so therefore at the operational level it focused instead on a dynamic transition between offense and defense.

Fravel also notes that “people’s war”—a powerful idea in Chinese Communist ideology—was never officially a central PLA military doctrine; rather, the PLA used guerrilla warfare only in areas where mobile forces could not be sustained. The phrase *people’s war* properly referred to the political integration of Communist military forces with the population, whether those forces were guerrilla bands or armored columns. Fravel also provides the best explanation yet of the lineage and significance of the concept of *active defense*, noting that Mao used the phrase as early as 1935. Active defense was an element of all nine strategic guidelines,

and PLA officers still cite it today as an essential element of their strategy.

While the book covers the period from 1949 to 1993 extensively, the treatment of PLA doctrine after 1993 consists of only nineteen pages. The PLA issued new strategic guidelines in 2004 and 2014, but Fravel assesses that these did not represent a basic shift in PLA approach. Given the relative scarcity of sources on more-recent PLA developments, and the fact that strategic changes take time to become apparent in forces, this view could be subject to reassessment in coming years. Nuclear strategy is covered in a separate but well-crafted section at the end of the book, reflecting Fravel’s assessment that nuclear policy never was delegated to the PLA and thus represents a distinct topic.

With its focus on the long-term development of Chinese military strategy, *Active Defense* does not offer quick and easy insights into current PLA operations. Although Fravel does an admirable job of balancing academic depth with approachable overviews of complex historical events, this is not the first book a student should read on the PLA. It is, however, an extraordinary work that will endure as essential reading for any serious student of Chinese military issues.

DALE C. RIELAGE

---

#### OUR REVIEWERS

*Edward Erwin* is a Navy chaplain who holds a PhD in theology and ethics from Duke University. Dr. Erwin has taught world religions at Troy University and ethics at the University of Maryland University College.

*Edward Gillen* is the director of institutional effectiveness at the Naval War College.

*Dale C. Rielage* is a senior civilian with Naval Intelligence Activity, assigned as director for intelligence and information operations at U.S. Pacific Fleet.