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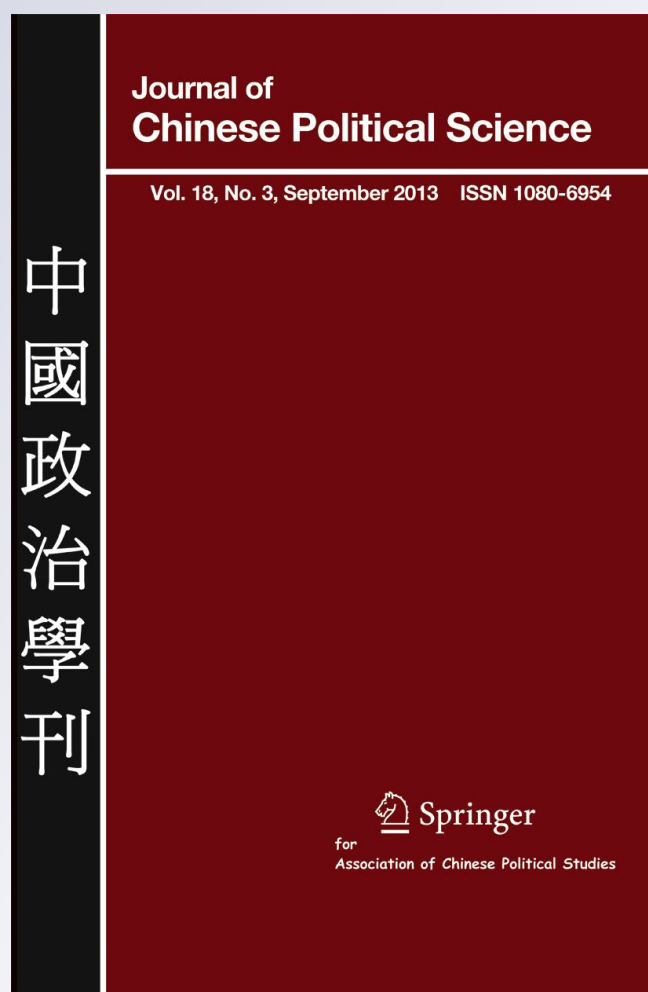
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M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949*

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019),
376p. \$35.00 hardback

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Just in time for the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China and several of its military services, Fravel has delivered a tour de force. This pathbreaking volume represents political science at its best, addressing a key empirical question with tremendous policy implications: “when and why China changes its military strategy.” After laying a systematic analytical foundation with clear definitions and methodology, Fravel offers a compelling answer and explanation. Like other socialist states, with their “interlocking directorate” of political commissars and Party committees, the People's Republic of China has not the civil-military relations common to most nations but rather Party-military relations. When the Party is united and stable, it may delegate the ability to change military strategy to senior military officers. When the Party is divided, there is no basis for changing military strategy.

Fravel substantiates this cogent argument with compelling examples constituting the majority of the volume. Major changes in military strategy occurred in 1956, 1980, and 1993, when Party unity coincided with a major shift in the conduct of warfare. Minor changes occurred in 1960, 1988, 2004, and 2014, when Party unity prevailed absent a major change in the ways of war requiring significant response. 1977 witnessed major changes afoot in the conduct of warfare, but Party disunity precluded the adoption of new strategy.

In one exceptional instance, 1964, military strategy changed despite the lack of both Party unity and substantial warfare changes. Fravel argues convincingly that Mao unilaterally imposed an anomalous strategic reversal serving his own political position and agenda. China's paramount leader cited foreign threats to justify radical domestic political intervention. Requiring tremendous government investment in “Third Line” hinterland projects, the strategy of “Luring the Enemy in Deep” allowed Mao to recapture economic policy after the disastrous Great Leap Forward.

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Fravel brackets this analysis with a pre-1949 chapter showing how Mao used his strategic thinking to seize Party leadership and lead the Party to victory in China's civil war; and a chapter on China's nuclear strategy arguing that it has remained relatively restrained and consistent since 1964. While it might be debated how nuclear policy has played out in practice, and may do so in the future, it certainly remains the exclusive province of China's top officials and merits separate treatment.

The implications of Fravel's findings are significant. First, external threats are unlikely to resolve intra-Party differences. In 1969, for example, China faced major pressure and even a border skirmish with the Soviet Union, yet would not have a new military strategy for over a decade. Second, outside observers may be operating with outdated information concerning Beijing's thinking and plans: "a new strategic guideline is not announced outside of the PLA at the time when it is adopted."

Fravel's findings, the PLA's continued development, and China's potential challenges offer numerous areas for further research. First, as Fravel explains, "The 2014 guideline was adopted to provide top-level guidance for the single largest organizational reform of the PLA since the mid-1950s." The results of these sweeping efforts will play a critical role in determining China's ability to achieve its military strategic objectives.

Second, a slowing economy, demographic decline, multifarious societal fissures, and a brittle, exclusionary political system have the potential to generate internal dissent, opposition, and threats to Party hegemony that its Army is charged with opposing and suppressing even as it frustrates formulation of new strategy. How the PLA might defend the Party in a range of potential contingencies is of inherent significance, as underscored by information that continues to emerge three decades after Tiananmen. It is likewise vital to understand the PLA's relationship with other components of China's Armed Forces, namely the People's Armed Police and Militia and their respective subordinate organizations, and what role these latter entities might play in various scenarios vis-à-vis Hong Kong and the South China Sea respectively.

Third, China's potential advantages and disadvantages vis-à-vis the United States and other leading non-socialist military powers merit further research. Fravel suggests that China may benefit from the PLA's responsibility to change as circumstances require without civilian intervention, even as centralization brings operational and tactical disadvantages for modern warfare. Meanwhile, the U.S. military and its leading-edge warfare remain the gold standard for PLA study.

Finally, there remain many critical sources for scholars to unearth. As Fravel documents, the 1956 strategic guideline is still not publicly available!

Fravel's book is replete with fascinating historical details and quotations rarely if ever found elsewhere in English, such as Mao's provocative rationale for testing China's first nuclear weapon: "Since it will scare people, let's do it earlier." An invaluable reference with great intellectual rigor and excellent explanation of sources and methods, *Active Defense* belongs in a prominent place in the bookshelf of all serious students of China security issues.

Dr. Andrew S. Erickson is a Professor of Strategy in the U.S. Naval War College (NWC)'s China Maritime Studies Institute and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. He testifies periodically before Congress and briefs leading officials, including the Secretary of Defense. Erickson helped to escort the Commander of China's Navy on a visit to Harvard and subsequently to establish, and to lead the first iteration of, NWC's first naval officer exchange program with China. His research, which focuses on Indo-Pacific defense, international relations, technology, and resource issues, is available at www.andrewerickson.com