

# War Zone Campaign Doctrine A Revisit

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## Introduction

The War Zone Campaign (WZC) doctrine<sup>1</sup> is a set of guidelines under which the People's Liberation Army intends to fight future wars which are likely to be



limited. Limited war as per Chinese analysts is a quick small scale Limited War Under Conditions of Informationalisation (LWUCI).”<sup>2</sup> It can also be interpreted as a term used to describe a region where a military campaign will be conducted as opposed to those practiced by the PLA during a limited war under a Joint Command Headquarters.

Characteristics include - a complex international environment thereby making prosecution more volatile and intense; emphasis on political/diplomatic objectives rather than purely military ones; limited objectives; intense preparation, since the window of opportunity will be very narrow; stress on centralised control, with a political settlement as the end-state; surgical strikes would comprise a major component of the action; and lastly, it would be expensive on account of costly high technology weapons employed.”<sup>3</sup>

The War Zone Campaign doctrine of the People’s Liberation Army has been the subject of considerable debate ever since it was first enunciated. No single interpretation has been able to clarify how exactly the WZC doctrine would unfold. New terminologies or their accepted translations have further raised questions of applicability, and modus operandi. Whether the WZC doctrine is practical or not, or just a philosophy, remains to be seen, as it has yet to be tested in battle. This revisit of the WZC doctrine offers another opinion / interpretation of its various facets, in an Indian context, as food for thought for experts on military matters to consider.

The doctrine has been in focus for more than a decade. A number of papers have been written on the WZC doctrine with varying interpretations. This article is an attempt to provide a view on the doctrine, from an Indian perspective. Since the WZC itself is already well known and researched, the doctrine itself is not being repeated but only commented upon.

## **Political Aim**

All wars are fought in pursuance of a political aim in keeping with Clausewitz’s dictum. Hence to say that the WZC doctrine seeks to achieve a political aim is being naïve and diverts attention from the real message. In all aspects of grand strategy, political purpose has always been dominant. There are two aspects in the WZC doctrine that need to be appreciated, namely:-

- **Teaching a Lesson**-This type of a political aim emerged only after the Sino-Indian conflict of 1962. China tried to repeat the same against Vietnam in 1979, but could not succeed in the same.

- **Extent of Military Victory**-In the past, to achieve desired political aims, a decisive military victory was essential. Destruction of the war-waging potential of the adversary or capture of economic heartland or capital was an obligatory military objective, requiring the mobilisation of the entire resources of a country. In the context of the WZC, however, this may not be a necessity. A relatively minor military victory even at the tactical level, with limited objectives and employment of limited forces, backed up by media hype, may suffice to convey the desired message(s) and achieve political aims.

**It is only against a secondary adversary that one can expect the concept of WZC being applied.**

### **Super Power or not a Super Power?**

Two opinions exist over whether the WZC is meant to be applied against a super power. The variation arises perhaps out of the wording of the translation "... is or will not be a super power" (War Zone Concept). Had it been translated as "... is (not) and will not be a super power," perhaps this confusion might have been avoided. How can one imagine a war against a super power when the whole country is not involved and 'at war'? It is only against a secondary adversary that one can expect the concept of WZC being applied. Any conflict with the USA, either directly or indirectly would per-force engage the resources of the entire nation and would thus be well beyond the scope of a war zone.

### **War Zone**

The term 'Limited War' is a familiar one. War can be limited in terms of time, force levels or geographical space/objectives. In its present form, the context of geographical space seems to be more applicable. Even in the Indian context, it is quite possible that only one Military Region (MR) is designated as suggested by the inter-Military Region boundaries, wherein the Ali Sub-Division, though part of the Xizang (Tibet) province is nevertheless, part of the Lanzhou Military Region. If need be, a number of provinces could be grouped together to form a War Zone, under the most suitable Military Region HQ. In the Indian context, depending upon the politico-military aim, only one of Chengdu/Lanzhou military regions could be activated and designated as a War Zone, rather than activating the whole of Southern borders in violation of basic principles of war like concentration of force and economy of effort. Other points worth noting are follows:

**WZC seeks to coerce smaller adversaries into acceding to China's demands through the threat of force or actual use of force.**

- **Sino-Vietnam War 1979**-The war was limited to the Sino-Vietnamese border with four Military Regions involved in operations, although the concept of WZC had not been articulated then.<sup>4</sup> The military objectives were also limited, keeping in mind the political aim of 'teaching Vietnam a lesson'. In the Indian context, a parallel could be Kargil 1999, wherein although Northern Command was entirely operational, the rest of the country was unaffected and continued with its

normal routine. There were almost no activities which were synonymous with a 'Nation' being at war, e.g. enforcing of 'blackouts' or invoking of the Union War Book.

- **Nanjing Military Region**-As according to some reports, in case of a conflict with Taiwan, the region could be designated as a War Zone.<sup>5</sup> Apart from the forces forming part of this MR it also envisages allotment of forces from other Military Regions. Hence there is no limitation in terms of force level, which will be dictated by the political aim to be achieved.<sup>6</sup>

## **Command and Control**

The doctrine envisages the establishment of a WZC Command HQ, which is superimposed on the existing Regional HQ, and would include a representative of the Central Military Commission. This will bring all resources, civil and military under a unified command.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to draw a parallel with India due to differing systems of governance. However, a rough example could be:-

- Declaring the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir or Arunachal Pradesh a War Zone, and placing it under President's Rule.
- Deputing the Rajya Raksha Mantri (RMM) as the representative of the Central Government to coordinate the activities of the Integrated War Zone HQ that would build up on HQ Northern Command/Eastern Command.
- Such an arrangement would place all civil and military resources in the State under one centralised authority. Similarly, the three armed forces would function directly under the RRM, who in turn could be reporting directly to the Cabinet Committee on Security.

## **Concept of Employment**

In essence, the WZC seeks to coerce smaller adversaries into acceding to China's demands through the threat of force or actual use of force, the latter in

a graduated manner, till its ends are met. There would be a well formulated exit strategy, which would allow for disengagement at an opportune moment. This could either be when the stated aims have been fully achieved or even earlier if the cost-benefit ratio starts becoming negative. Following are a few illustrations:

- **Manifestation** Occupation of certain un-held tract of land or high-value targets, through a pre-emptive strike, would expose the gaps in the adversary's defences. It would lay bare the attacked country's claims of being able to safeguard its sovereignty & territorial integrity, thus paving the way for coercive diplomacy since, "...[China believes that] preemptive strikes,...are a powerful tool to reduce political costs".<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that the scale of the military 'victory' is more in the mind of the political decision makers, and not so much of the commanders and troops on ground. In keeping with the political aim, forces necessary for its prosecution might be available within the region itself/adjacent region, thus precluding mass mobilisation.
- **Force Levels/Application** If the above stated scenario in undertaken as an assumption, then the quantum of forces to be applied could be relatively small, in keeping with the political aim. In the absence of significant mobilisation and attendant signatures, Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance capabilities acquire greater significance. Appreciation of Intent (of the adversary) and subsequent response (of the defender), thus become critical, with very little margin for error, for fear of escalating a possible critical situation. Responses will have to be carefully calibrated and caution would be exercised so as to ensure that an over-enthusiastic commander does not precipitate a conflagration.
- **Implications** It is in this context that the role and employment of Rapid Reaction Force (RRF)/Rapid Response Units (RRU) assumes significance, since they can be "deployed anywhere within China (less Tibet) without any significant mobilisation." RRUs within Tibet are available ab-initio for all eventualities. Moreover, RRFs, constitute an "indirect forward presence", a threat in being, which may prompt a knee-jerk reaction, thereby providing China a casus belli. In either case (pre-emptive or reactive), China would hope to be able to secure its military objectives and achieve its political aims at the lowest possible level of conflict.<sup>9</sup>

## **Pattern of Operations**

One of the considerations on which the WZC is based is to achieve the desired end-state with minimum effort and at the lowest level of the escalatory matrix /

operational continuum. This runs from the Domination-cum-Deterrence (DCD) phase to Gaining Initiative by Striking First (GISF), concluding in the Quick Battle Quick Resolution (QBQR) phase, through measured application of military force. Some salient points include:

- Each step of the matrix has its corresponding military component to prosecute that phase. Elite Forces Sharp Arms (EFSA) are available for the DCD phase, RRU/RRF for GISF phase, and regular division for the QBQR phase. Additional divisions as required would be mobilised as part of Trans Regional Support Operations (TRSO) which is also an integral part of WZC.
- The sequence of application of these forces should logically be in that stage itself, with a view to achieve the political aim in the fastest time frame and avoid further escalation. Apropos, if a significant criticality has to be created in pursuance of this aim, the tasks assigned to these forces have to be of sufficient magnitude to have an impact. Forces earmarked for the next phase would be close at hand as reserves, if transition to the next phase becomes inescapable.
- To suggest that EFSA units and RRF formations would be used for the first time during the QBQR stage or regular divisions in the DCD stage may not be as envisaged in the doctrine. The battle is more likely to progress in 'reverse linear order', with areas in depth being affected first, and progressively moving towards the 'front'. In the next war, the troops in the forward defended localities may well be in the safest position of all!
- One possible scenario could unfold with EFSA forces securing symbolic objectives (un-held / lightly held) in operational depth. Depending upon the reaction, RRUs/RRFs could build up and enlarge this foothold. To re-establish control over this area would imply eviction of the occupants through a deliberate counter offensive. Should such a counter offensive seem imminent, QBQR forces would posture along the border, tying down the front line troops nominally the first responders for evicting such incursions. This would then require mobilisation of additional forces from in depth with consequent delay, by which time the game may well be lost.

## **Prevailing Environment**

All of this has to be seen in the backdrop of the political and diplomatic environment prevailing in the adversarial country, wherein China will try and project a benign signature in keeping with the concept of "Internal Intensity and External Relaxation". One should be lulled into a false sense of security on account of any upswing in relations because that is precisely when the axe will fall. For example,

while negotiations are ongoing, simultaneous preparations to exercise a military option could also be underway. This would then be exercised at an opportune moment to tilt the scales of the negotiations by presenting a *fait accompli*, thus leading to a political settlement of the disputed issue on terms favourable to China.

## **Countering WZC?**

Due to the limitations of space, it would be difficult to undertake a comprehensive response to the question, which demands a paper in itself. Suffice to say that each stage of the WZC must be countered at that level itself, by forces specifically organised, equipped and tasked for that role. EFSA forces cannot be countered by regular divisions and vice-versa. While we may be prepared for the QBQR stage, present capability to thwart Chinese designs in the DCD and GISF stages are lacking, and that is precisely where the next war will be decided (Note (5) below refers). It is very unlikely that the next conflict will reach the stage of divisions slugging it out in 'set piece' battles of attrition, given the existing asymmetries that exist in other key areas between China and her likely adversaries, with the nuclear backdrop (with India) further precluding any prolonged conflict. That would be fighting the last war. In fact, it would be advantageous for smaller adversaries to draw out the conflict to the QBQR stage, nullifying China's superiority in the unconventional arena and raising the (political) costs of war to unacceptable levels. Therefore, force structuring should focus on reducing these inequalities through technological superiority with emphasis on quality rather than quantity.

## **Conclusion**

Numerous scenarios can be drawn for the application of the WZC doctrine. This article has attempted to present a different perspective on certain of the key elements of this doctrine. Suffice to say that the era of large scale and long drawn out mobilisations followed by protracted operations are over, with the law of diminishing returns coming into play. The last major conflict, the Sino-Vietnam war, involved some 30 divisions and lasted some three weeks; we are unlikely to witness anything similar in future. The next war will be radically different with force multipliers replacing brute force. We should always be prepared for the unforeseen and try to organise for the next war, how-so-ever that might unfold.

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## Notes

1. James Mulvenon and David M. Finkelstein (ed), *China's Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People's Liberation Army* available at <http://www.defensegroupinc.com/cira/pdf/doctrinebook.pdf>, accessed on 27 July 2012. Doctrine is the bridge between military theory and military practice. And in most militaries, doctrine exists at three levels—the strategic level of warfare, the operational level, and the tactical level. Doctrine is the “ways” in the “ends, ways, means” equation.
2. What is War Zone Concept?, *American Essays*, <http://www.americanessays.com/study-aids/free-essays/military/war-zone-concept.php>, accessed on 28 July 2012.
3. Ibid.
4. The four Military Regions were Kunming (since abolished), and Chengdu on the Western Front (11, 13, 14 Group Armies), and Wuhan (since abolished), and Guangzhou on the Eastern Front (41, 42, 43, 50, 54, 55 Group Armies) altogether comprising some 27 to 30 Divisions. Command vested with Kunming and Guangzhou MRs. There was no War Zone HQ as such.
5. Nanjing Military Region-Nanjing Military Area Command, *Global Security*, available at [www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/nanjing-mr.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/nanjing-mr.htm), accessed on July 25, 2012.
6. Ibid., During a major military campaign against Taiwan, the Nanjing MR would become part of the so-called “Nanjing War Zone,” which probably would include, at a minimum, the three Group Armies in the Nanjing MR, elements from Group Armies based in adjacent military regions (e.g., Guangzhou and Jinan MRs), as well as China's airborne and marine forces. Air assets would come primarily from the Nanjing MR augmented by mission-critical aircraft from other parts of China. The Navy would commit assets from both the East and South Sea Fleets, as well as mission-critical assets from the North Sea Fleet. Finally, all deployed SRBMs most likely would be available to the “war zone” commander.
7. Mandip Singh, *Integrated Joint Operations by the PLA: An Assessment*, *IDSAC Comment*, [http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/IntegratedJointOperationsbythePLA\\_msingh\\_111211](http://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/IntegratedJointOperationsbythePLA_msingh_111211), accessed on July 25, 2012. Military Regions (MRs) double up as War Zones in war. While the MR Commander is normally replaced, the staff may be replaced or augmented for the campaign. The War Zone Campaign (WZC) may be commanded by a member of the CMC. Campaigns are all joint service operations with regular units, local units, militia and civil assets placed at the disposal of the War Zone Commander. A WZC Commander is likely to be advised by the MR Commander(s), the MR Political Commissar, the MR AF Commander, MR PLAN Commander (where applicable), the MR Second Artillery Force (MR SAF) Commander and Deputy Commanders representing the General Staff Department, General Armament Department and the General Logistics Departments, besides the Commanders of the Group Armies placed under his command for the campaign.
8. James Mulvenon and David M. Finkelstein (ed), *China's Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of the Chinese People's Liberation Army*, pp. 50,51, available at <http://www.defensegroupinc.com/cira/pdf/doctrinebook.pdf>, accessed on 27 July 2012.
9. China's War Plan, *Features*, *Open Magazine*, <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/nation/china-s-war-plan>, accessed on July 25, 2012. Repeated violations of the Indo-Chinese

border lead to an escalation in the war of words, but India continues to believe that the Chinese are following their usual pattern of aggravation and conciliation. Rapid Reaction Forces, comprising 4 divisions stationed at Chengdu and Lanzhou after an overnight mobilization cross rapidly into Indian Territory in Arunachal Pradesh. Indian defences are caught unawares, but the Fifth Mountain Division in Tenga engages the invading forces. They find themselves badly outmatched, not only outnumbered but also out-equipped because the Chinese RRF also includes airborne assets. The Indian forces have no immediate airlift capacity to provide back up. Within the next 48 hours Arunachal is overrun. The other Indian divisions in the region need at least a week to reach the zone of conflict. By then, the Chinese have achieved their goal of winning a limited war.