

2 months into Doklam standoff, assessing China's strength

China's great strength is part steel and part illusion. The dragon may indeed breathe fire — but it has enough teeth and claws missing to not want to fight.



IN FACT

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EXPRESS EDITORS INTERPRET

LOOSE-CANNON special forces officer Leng Feng emerges from his seaside retreat, to the applause of a grateful nation, when a cartel of arms dealers and mercenaries begin to lay waste an impoverished African country. Fighting to save aid workers and innocent civilians, he fights his way past the enemy with underwater kung-fu, evades an armed drone and destroys battle tanks. The plot of China's highest-grossing blockbuster, *Wolf Warrior II*, seems familiar, because it is: this is *Rambo* with Chinese characteristics.

Few in the audience today would recall Li Cunbao's 1982 novel, *Gaoshan xia de huahuan* ('Wreaths of flowers at the foot of the mountains'), which tells the story of the soldiers who fought China's last real war. The brave company commander at the centre of the story leaves his wife and baby a frock, used uniforms, and a debt of \$ 380 — 10 times his pay.

Even fewer would have seen *Tamen zheng nianqing* ('In their prime'), banned in 1986, a gritty anti-war film on soldiers holed

up in a limestone cave, and their desperate battle to survive.

The 12,192 soldiers killed in the China-Vietnam war, mainly the sons of poor peasant families, have no place in official Chinese history. The war revealed stark problems in China's military, though, many of which continue to haunt the People's Liberation Army.



For weeks now, China has been threatening India with terrible retribution for what it claims is trespass into its lair on the Doklam plateau. There are more than a few in India genuinely worried by the aggression — part of a pattern of intimidation that has forced Japan to scramble its fighters more often than at the height of the Cold War, and sent Vietnam into the arms of arch-enemy United States. Like so much to do with military power, China's great strength is part steel and part illusion. The dragon may indeed breathe fire — but it has enough teeth and claws missing to not want to fight.

When Beijing began to wake to modern warfare in the wake of the 1984-85 conflict, the PLA was a lumbering peasant army: its main tank was the 1950s-design T-55, the bloated 3.5 million-strong military lacked modern vehicles and arms, and the Air Force and Navy were barely capable of coastal defence.

The growth of the military budget — which, it bears mention, has consistently hovered around 2% of Gross Domestic Product, the global norm — has helped drag the PLA into the 20th century, but only just.

Paul Dibbs, an Australian defence expert, points out the country's state-of-the-art



President Xi Jinping inspects PLA troops on July 30. Since taking office in 2013, Xi has repeatedly urged the PLA to 'prepare for combat'. Xinhua via AP/File photo

Type 95 submarines will only be as stealthy as the 1980s Soviet titanium-hulled Akula-class. China's Dong Feng 21D anti-ship ballistic missile has yet to hit a target moving at realistic speeds. Large parts of the Air Force and Navy are still made up of obsolescent types.

For years, the most critical challenge before the PLA has been transforming itself into a modern force. Impressive pay, promotion and education reforms have been made, though competition from China's private sector has meant military service is far from

the first career choice for the country's brightest.

There are more than a few, moreover, who are sceptical of the combat qualities of this new cohort of PLA officers — products of China's one-child policy, which spawned a generation derisively referred to as "Little Emperors". PLA newspapers are replete with stories of new recruits using boarding-school tricks like spitting out red ink to avoid training.

"I'd hide under my blanket and cry every night," former cadet Sun Youpeng, who

joined the PLA after graduating from university at the age of 22, told Minnie Chan of the *South China Morning Post* in 2014.

Liu Mingfu, a scholar at China's National Defence University, estimated in a 2012 report that 70% of the PLA's troops were only sons — a number rising to 80% among combat troops. In a country with a growing cohort of aged people, with ancient cultural norms against sending only sons to war, the consequences could be significant, Liu noted.



President Xi Jinping, since he took office in 2013, has urged the PLA several times to "prepare for combat". PLA journals themselves, though, a RAND Corporation study for the United States Congress recorded in 2015, are "replete with references to problems in such areas as personnel, training, education, organisation, logistics and maintenance". Despite the battle against endemic corruption in the PLA, few believe it has been wiped out.

"Let our field armies touch the buttocks of a tiger," China's Paramount Leader Deng Xiaoping reportedly said as he ordered the military to action in 1984, hoping to blood his troops and demonstrate "our military is still good enough". The truth, however, was that Deng's own economic reforms had brought about a crisis in the PLA. Xiaoming Zhang's magisterial history of the China-Vietnam war notes that fewer soldiers joined the army during that decade than at any previous time — and were less than willing to die.

In some cases, the crisis of morale bred low farce: elements of the 67th Army, on

their way out of Laoshan, demanded \$ 1,500 from their 47th Army replacements for all intelligence on enemy positions and firepower. In another case, an armoured unit which did not receive care packages despatched its tanks to surround an infantry division headquarters and demand its share.

Like in India, there is no shortage of voices in China that appear not to see the distinction between strategic analysis and *Wolf Warrior II*: articles advocating short, sharp wars to settle the country's border conflicts are commonplace in the media.

For serious Chinese thinkers, though, that line of action comes with serious risks: failure to achieve a decisive victory would not only embarrass the PLA, but also dent the credibility of the political leadership and encourage Beijing's regional adversaries to engage in further acts of defiance. In the long term, China may indeed become a military adversary its regional adversaries will have to defer to — but that time is not now.

In 415 BC, Athenian hawks made the case for invading Sicily by insisting that "it has always been the law that the weaker should be subject to the stronger", an argument that will be familiar in Beijing today. On the disaster that followed this hubris, the historian Thucydides wrote: "Sicily would fear us most if we never went there at all." This, he explained, was because "that which is farthest off, and the reputation of which can least be tested, is the object of admiration".

For China's strategic community, these ought be words to ponder: in war, unlike films, the end of the story is impossible to script.