In this unique study of military behavior, Andrew Scobell examines China’s use of force abroad – as in Korea (1950), Vietnam (1979), and the Taiwan Strait (1995–6) – and domestically, as during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s and in the 1989 military crackdown in Tiananmen Square. Debunking the myth that China has become increasingly belligerent in recent years because of the growing influence of bellicose soldiers, Scobell concludes that China’s strategic culture has remained unchanged for decades and that soldiers, while hawkish, are not responsible for Beijing’s assertive behavior. Nevertheless, the author uncovers the existence of a “Cult of Defense” in Chinese strategic culture, which, paradoxically, disposes Chinese leaders to rationalize the use of military force as defensive no matter what the actual circumstances. The author warns that this “Cult of Defense,” combined with changes in the People’s Liberation Army’s doctrine and capabilities over the past two decades, suggests that China’s twenty-first-century leaders may use military force more readily than their predecessors.

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China’s Use of Military Force

Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March

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U.S. Army War College

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Preface

As the world steps gingerly into the twenty-first century, perhaps the greatest question mark is what kind of global citizen the People’s Republic of China will turn out to be. It became fashionable during the 1990s to speak of a “China Threat.” Does China pose a threat to its neighbors? Will China be cooperative or confrontational? Will China be a catalyst for peace or conflict? The subject of China’s use of force is a basic and important dimension in attempting to address the larger question.

This is not the first book to examine multiple cases of China’s use of force. Excellent studies by Jonathan Adelman and Chih-Yu Shih (Symbolic War), Melvin Gurtov and Byung-Moo Hwang (China under Threat), Gerald Segal (Defending China), and Allen Whiting (The Chinese Calculus of Deterrence) provide a wealth of data and insights. Yet, as China moves beyond what is often described as the “reform era,” there seems a pressing need for a fresh and comprehensive examination of the subject. This study considers the employment of military power both outside China’s borders and within; it analyzes the use of force across three eras: under Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Jiang Zemin. Using the frameworks of strategic and civil-military culture, I seek both a better understanding of China’s use of force to date and a better guide to anticipate the circumstances under which China may be likely to use force in the future.

The Great Wall is undoubtedly the most famous man-made structure in China. It is also, with the possible exception of the giant panda, the one symbol people around the world most closely associate with China. Construction of the Great Wall is widely believed to have been begun by Qin Shihuang, the emperor who first unified China in 221 B.C. For China, it is a symbol of a strong, wealthy, and united country, one with clearly demarcated and well-defended national borders. For the Chinese, the Great Wall also represents continuity between contemporary and ancient China – an unbroken historic link going back thousands of...
years. The Chinese are justifiably proud of this massive fortification, and its imagery is widely used in contemporary China. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) is often referred to as China’s “Great Wall of Steel.” Indeed, this was the phrase used by Deng to praise the commanders of the Beijing Martial Law troops at a meeting five days after the 1989 Tiananmen massacre. The Great Wall also symbolizes an enduring Chinese strategic culture that is pacifist and defensive-minded.

Historians and communist leaders alike often single out the Long March as a landmark event in twentieth century China. It ensured the survival and rejuvenation of the communist movement in the 1930s. The Long March also marked the emergence of the most important leader of the movement, Mao Zedong – the most powerful and influential figure in modern China. It is seen as symbolic of the sustained guerilla conflict that ensured the survival of the Chinese communist movement in the mid-1930s. Moreover, the expedition has taken on epic proportions in China, and participants took on the status of living legends. For decades, the Long March was de rigueur for entry into top leadership positions in the party and army, and was adopted as the label for an entire generation of leaders. The Long March can also serve as the moniker of a civil-military configuration where the distinction between soldiers and civilians is blurred and difficult to discern.

To interpret China’s domestic and international behavior in the twenty-first century, observers need to look beyond the mythology associated with the Great Wall and the Long March. This book attempts to do so and thus provide a better understanding of how China uses force.

This book is a radically reoriented version of a doctoral dissertation on civil-military relations begun under the tutelage of Richard Betts and Andrew Nathan. The genesis of this project in its earliest incarnation owes much to the encouragement and support of these two accomplished scholars and mentors. I also appreciate the comments and suggestions of the other members of my dissertation committee: Randle Edwards, Samuel Kim, and Madeleine Zelin. Actually, it was Sam Kim who first suggested the rubric of strategic culture to me. I am also grateful to my tongxue at Columbia University in our dissertation writing group: Michael Chambers, Hsu Szu-chien, and Brian Murray, all of whom provided trenchant criticism and steadfast moral support.

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Of course, none of these individuals or organizations bears any responsibility for any errors or omissions in this work. Moreover, the views expressed in this book are solely those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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China’s Use of Military Force
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