

Chapter 4: Keynote Speech
Can China Fight a War?
In Recent Years, the Government of the People's
Republic of China Has Repeatedly Threatened War.
But Could It Sustain a War?

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Preliminary note

What follows does not address the question of whether the Chinese government will decide to start a war, because the evidence of recent history is that leaders, democratically-elected as well as dictatorial, are apt to start wars only to discover that they should not have done so due to realities perfectly discernable beforehand, which they chose to ignore.

The question actually addressed is what would happen on China's home front if the People's Republic of China were to initiate combat operations on a scale sufficient to provoke sanctions equivalent to those imposed on the Russian Federation because of the Ukraine war, and which would entail a significant number of combat casualties.

A. By way of comparison: Russia's capability to sustain war

When the Russian Government invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, it did so with too few troops and without a war-winning plan, as it turned out. But Russia did have all the means necessary to wage war, successfully or otherwise. It could certainly do so *sustainably*, because Russia is self-sufficient for both food and fuel (oil, natural gas, coal), as well as for all war-relevant raw materials, or near enough.

Therefore, in regard to material requirements, Russia can continue to fight indefinitely in spite of the sanctions quickly imposed by the G-7 countries, and the additional sanctions and limitations that have been added until now.

It should be noted that the sanctions are not ineffectual.

In fact, the Russian economy as a whole was much more globalized than many in and out of Russia had believed. But the consequences have remained manageable even in the sector most severely affected: civil aviation.

Russian airlines are mostly equipped with leased Airbus and Boeing airliners and cargo aircraft.

Therefore, all international flights had to stop as soon as the G-7 sanctions were imposed. This was because the aircraft would be subject to immediate lessor retrieval if they landed outside the Russian sphere given that the SWIFT sanctions prohibit the monthly lease payments, triggering the expedited confiscation and recovery procedures of the Capetown convention.¹

That did not apply to internal flights within Russia, where the operation of Airbus and Boeing aircraft is only constrained by the need for replacement parts and aviation consumables such as brake pads, some producible locally given time, and others not.

But the almost immediate grounding of most of the fleet, with domestic travel mostly diverted to the railways, will enable essential and all very long-range flying to persist for a long time by resorting to cannibalization, once replacement part and consumable inventories run out (although parts such as brake pads are being smuggled successfully).

Similar remedies are available for most other non-replaceable imports, including contraband by shuttle traders in the case of high-value, low-weight items transportable as luggage, such as microprocessors and small electronic devices (Moscow is still connected to destinations around the world by numerous third-party carriers).

More sophisticated forms of covert commerce provide other necessities, such as spare parts for imported machinery.

In addition, overt commerce persists with, or via, neutrals including Turkey and India, and China as well as Cuba, North Korea, and Venezuela.

In addition to having its own food and fuel, and secret ways of by-passing import restrictions for small, portable essentials like microprocessors, Russia also has that most basic requirement of war: *expendable combat manpower*.

There are certain conditions on the supply. President Putin has not declared war nor mobilized the armed forces to send into action the army's regular combat formations with their quota of conscripts aged 18 to 21, no doubt to avert the mobilization of Russian mothers.

But there have not been any consequential political or popular reactions within Russia to the casualties of the professionals of the Air Assault Brigades, of the units

¹ The ["Capetown"] Convention on International Interests in Mobile Equipment of November 16, 2001, and Protocol on Matters Specific to [leased] Aircraft Equipment, which assures the expedited retrieval of aircraft if lease payments are delinquent-- regardless of the habitual pace of the local civil courts.

manned by contract soldiers, of the Donetsk and Luhansk troops, of the recently mobilized reservists, and the Wagner mercenaries, all of which have suffered 11,770 combat deaths between February 24, 2022 and the end of September 2022² according to the lowest possible estimate to be found on the internet (with more than twice that number more probable).

B. The People's Republic of China's capability to sustain war

Expendable Military Manpower

In Russia, the deaths of tens of thousands of soldiers have required no special mitigation efforts.

But in China, when three PLA soldiers and one officer were killed in a night brawl with Indian troops in Ladakh's Galwan valley on June 15-16, 2020, those four killed in action were of such great significance that their deaths were not announced until February 19, 2021,³ a delay of eight months. This was long enough to allow very elaborate material and media preparations to mitigate the repercussions of announcing four combat deaths.

On February 19, 2021, it was announced that the senior of the four, battalion commander Major Chen Hongjun (陈红军) had been posthumously decorated with the "July 1 Medal," the highest award given to Chinese Communist Party members, which can only be granted by the Party's General Secretary and State President, namely Xi Jinping himself.

Chen's pregnant widow, Xiao Jianwen, received assistance from the military affairs departments of two different provinces, Shaanxi and Gansu. Because she had a degree in music, she was appointed to a professorial position in the region's highest-ranking musical institution, the Xi'an Conservatory of Music (西安音乐学院). Officials also arranged the relocation to high-grade new housing of Xiao Jianwen and her infant son in Xi'an.⁴

Chen Xiangrong, the youngest PLA soldier killed was the beneficiary of a professional

² There is an official 5,937 KIA count for the regular armed forces for February 24 to September 21, 2022; 800-1,000 KIA estimated for Wagner mercenaries through November 4, 2022; and 3,833 KIA for the DPR and 1,000 KIA for the LPR through November 17. This puts the KIA total at 11,770; but the actual number could be twice that. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_Russo-Ukrainian_War.

³ Liu Xin, Guo Yuandan, Zhang Hui. "China unveils details of 4 PLA martyrs at Galwan Valley border clash for first time, reaffirming responsibility falls on India." *Global Times*, February 19, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1215914.shtml>.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chen_Hongjun

media presentation and photographic processing to make him appear downright pretty, thereby (reportedly) making him an instant youth hero.⁵

He was further remembered anew on his posthumous birthday.⁶

A somewhat older soldier, Xiao Siyuan was presented as an earnest defender “of every inch” of the motherland.

His mother echoed the patriotic sentiments of her only son, but did so over-enthusiastically. This provoked social media criticisms of her inadequate motherly feelings, which necessitated a further media intervention.⁷

The presentation of the fourth and final “martyr,” Wang Zuoran, was addressed to a more traditional audience. It emphasized the filial sentiments supposedly preserved in a pre-combat precautionary letter.

The letter was translated, all too idiomatically, for an American-slanted English-language readership as follows:

“Mom and dad, sorry to be an unfilial son. I am sorry that I might not be able to be there for you through the end.

If there is an afterlife [martyrs obviously benefit from a degree of ideological indulgence from the materialist Party], I wish I could be your son again and repay your love and care.”

By the time of Wang Zuoran’s official funeral, for which his parents had to express spontaneous grief preserved fresh over the intervening months, a permanent Wang Zuoran exhibit graced the local “Martyr’s Hall.”⁸

The above cannot prove but does strongly suggest that the Chinese government is responding to an intense sensitivity to casualties in Chinese society that is plainly absent in the Russian case.

Presumably, this is so because the Chinese population at large has a decidedly “post-heroic” attitude towards war and its casualties. The reasons may be more complex, but may simply reflect the nature of contemporary Chinese families, or more specifically

⁵ “Chinese youngsters flood social media to mourn border heroes who died in clash with India with surging patriotism.” *Global Times*, February 20, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1216001.shtml>.

⁶ “China-India border clash martyr remembered on his birthday.” <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1241125.shtml>

⁷ “Chinese netizens rush to defense of border Martyr’s mother following comments calling her ‘selfish’ and ‘thoughtless.’” *Global Times*, March 04, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1217353.shtml/>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uuq2xjaZ93k>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZci-wOjT9Q>; <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202104/1220153.shtml>

ethnically Han families, whose children of military age are very largely single children, the single vectors of two nuclear families whose members themselves have very few relatives.

The present writer's "Post-Heroic" thesis,⁹ which has generated something of a literature,¹⁰ was predicated precisely on the diminished and diminishing size of families in developed, and now also semi-developed, societies.

The implication was that the wars of the past with their high casualties were made possible by the availability of "spare" male children, whose non-return from war would still leave at least one male child but more often two to perpetuate the nuclear family, which itself had many relatives.

What can be said categorically is that if the PLA goes to war, it will be the first armed force in history to do so with personnel consisting very largely of single children.

Food

China is today by far the world's largest importer of animal feed (chiefly soya beans) and of human food (poultry including chicken offal, pork, beef, and dairy products), essentially because of its very limited supply of arable land. As of 2020, China had 0.08 hectares per capita of arable land, a very low number, even inferior to India's 0.12 hectares per capita.

That scarcity is not simply the result of China's very large population, but also of decades of policy failure. When Stalin launched his Five Year Plans centered on heavy industry, the additional cost of locating much of it far to the east of Moscow in the Ural mountains and Kazakhstan (especially under the Second Five Year plan 1933-1937) was redeemed when the German advance overrun many of the historic industrial areas.

By contrast, when Deng Xiaoping, his colleagues, and successors launched China on its path of export-driven industrialization and concomitant urbanization, no attempt was made to locate factories and housing in the non-arable lands that account for much of China's total territory, including in zones quite close to ports and otherwise quite accessible, and not just the Tibetan plateau or Xinjiang's deserts. Instead, housing and industry spread across arable lands.

This policy error was supposedly corrected by new regulations that imposed

⁹ Edward N. Luttwak. "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare." *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 1995.

¹⁰ Some listed in Kristian Frisk. "Post-Heroic Warfare Revisited: Meaning and Legitimation of Military Losses." *British Sociological Association*. January 24, 2017. SAGE publication <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0038038516680313>

increasingly strict controls.¹¹

But a great deal of additional farmland was lost to industrialization and urbanization even after the imposition of supposedly strict controls. In the 2019 year-end survey, total arable land was counted as 1.28 million square km (490,000 square mi), 6% less than a decade earlier in 2009.¹²

It seems that while the central authorities ordered local authorities to preserve arable land for agriculture, they failed to supply them with alternative funding for their projects that required capital in excess of their revenues, which were therefore funded by land sales.

In spite of continuing technological advances in agriculture, the acute shortage of arable land sets definite limits that defeat government attempts to increase the production of specific, high priority crops.

For example, at the outset of a major drive to increase soya bean production by 40% from 16.4 million tons to 23 million tons by 2025,¹³ in order to reduce the current reliance on imports for 85% of supplies, actual soybean output instead fell by 16% in 2021. This was simply because farmers allocated more land to more profitable crops, chiefly maize (corn), leaving that much less for soya beans.

One reason why the authorities are so focused on soya beans is simply because China depends on them more than any other feed imports to produce pork, poultry and eggs, mutton, beef, and dairy products, with the amount imported, 96,516,785 metric tons in 2021, itself constituting the largest type of freight on the world's oceans other than iron ore and petroleum.

But another reason for the authorities' concern is the origin of the soya beans. They are mostly shipped from just four sources: the Pacific ports of the United States and Canada from which no shipments would arrive if G-7 sanctions were imposed, and the Atlantic ports of Brazil and Argentina, which are an ocean too far from the Chinese point of view.

Moreover, most of the other animal feeds imported (9.4 million tons of sorghum and 28 million tons of maize (corn) in 2021) also comes from the same four countries,

¹¹ Minghao Li, Wendong Zhang, and Dermot J. Hayes. *Can China's Rural Land Policy Reforms Solve its Farmland Dilemma?* CARD Iowa State University Agricultural Policy Review, Winter 2018 APR, https://www.card.iastate.edu/ag_policy_review/article/?a=78.

¹² <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-total-arable-land-shrinks-nearly-6-2009-2019-survey-2021-08>.

¹³ Susan Reidy. "Chinaplan to produce 40% more soybeans in five years." WorldGrain.com, January 13, 2022, <https://www.world-grain.com/articles/16343-china-plans-to-produce-40-more-soybeans-in-five-years>.

which in addition supply most of the imported animal proteins (pork, poultry and parts, mutton, beef, and dairy products) for which China is also the world's largest importer.

The PRC's published "food security" goals include the domestic sourcing of 95% of its pork, 100% of its poultry (and eggs), mutton, and beef, and 70% of dairy products. These are all feasible goals *if animal feed continues to arrive*—except in the case of dairy products as the 70% domestic sourcing goal cannot be attained unless imports are limited by quotas to 30% of total demand, because many Chinese buyers refuse to purchase domestic dairy products if imports are available, even at much higher prices.

As for the *political* importance of food and feed imports, the recorded public reactions in Shanghai to the 2022 food-supply restrictions caused by the Covid-19 movement restrictions, are very revealing.

—The *facts* are that Shanghai's locked-down population was supplied with more and better food than urban Chinese had under Mao when Beijing's population (I lived there in August-September 1976) survived on rice, wheat, sorghum, some green vegetables, and very small amounts of pork and chicken (less than one chicken per family per week). Eggs were a real luxury, and cabbage was eagerly bought to be dried as winter food on balconies everywhere. People were thin, but there was no starvation.

—Yet in 2022, Shanghai's locked-down population reacted bitterly to their far superior food supply, with some protesting that they were "starving." This was not actually a great exaggeration because many Chinese have evolved *physiologically* since becoming habitual protein-eaters. They are bigger and taller, and males especially are significantly heavier. They need more food, and especially protein, as well as dairy products that did not exist in 1976.

(Also, government-stored frozen pork delivered to locked down Shanghai inhabitants provoked very negative reactions as being "tasteless.")

An altogether different indicator of the *political* importance of food and feed imports is that the PRC authorities support private, or ostensibly private, companies that acquire land by lease or even purchase in some cases to produce soya beans and other agricultural products in locations outside the borders of the PRC but *accessible overland*, in the Russian Federation, Laos, Nepal, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, all countries unlikely to adhere to any sanctions regime.

None of those sources promise to supply large quantities, but evidently whatever is

produced is valued as “sanction-proof.”

Finally, it is worth noting that in both Argentina and Brazil, the authorities have examined their options in the event of G-7 sanctions that would limit or stop their exports of soya, other feeds, and meat to China.

In both countries, it is anticipated that there will be no supply to China (across the US-Navy controlled Atlantic, around South Africa, across the Indian Ocean, or through the Straits of Malacca), but there is an expectation of G-7 purchases of their produce for distribution to food-deficit countries.

In other words, Xi Jinping has made important speeches about “food security,” but he has not been able to assure it beyond a large reserve of rice and wheat that may be enough for two years of consumption, as well as several months of frozen pork.

Aside from cereals and the frozen pork, it would be back to the late-Mao diet, which may indeed be a semi-starvation diet for the new generation of protein-fed Chinese.

Oil and LNG

China is the world’s largest consumer of crude oil, in the amount last registered at 12,791,553 barrels a day, and is also the largest LNG importer, as noted below.

But China’s dependence on imported hydrocarbons is not comparable to its dependence on imported proteins because of three different considerations:

- domestic oil production (at 4,905,071 barrels a day in 2022) supplies almost 38% of current domestic oil demand;
- imports from Russia (also via a Kazakhstan pipeline) continue to increase;
- export industries account for a substantial part of total oil and gas demand, and their requirements would decline very sharply under a G-7 sanctions regime.

China was the world’s fourth-largest producer of natural gas in 2021 (after the United States, Russia, and Iran), but it was also the world’s third-largest consumer (after the United States and Russia), so that in 2021 it imported 10.5 billion cubic feet per day of LNG, with a lesser amount of pipeline gas from Russia, Kazakhstan, and also Myanmar.

Natural gas demand for electrical generation has been increasing as coal-fired generation declines (the many new coal-fired power stations still coming on line replace decrepit older plants), but again a significant portion of that demand is generated by

export industries.

Conclusion

China's dependence on imported energy is not of decisive importance. On the other hand, China's dependence on imported protein would cause increasing deprivation after three or four months, and its lack of expendable male children is irremediable.

As noted at the start, the fact that China is not capable of sustained warfare without drastic consequences does not guarantee that its leader will not start a war.

But it is unlikely that China's leader would enjoy Putin's immunity from significant opposition if he were to start a war. This is so because such a war would trigger G-7 sanctions that would gradually but relentlessly diminish China's food supply, while incurring casualties in numbers that will not be limited to just four or five, and might start at 1,000 on the first day and reach 4,000 the next day with ship sinkings.