



# White paper on China's Military – Of Trapped Transitions and High Aspirations

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The Chinese government brought out its 10<sup>th</sup> Military White Paper on 24 July 2019. Though a White paper on defence used to be released every alternative year, this is the first time that there has been a long interlude after 2015. With an intention to explain their world view and its position in the 'New World Order,' China has laid out its practices and expounded on the defensive nature of its policies in the paper titled '*China's National Defense in the New Era*', which, however, makes an exception for *active defense* as and when the need arises. In the paper which is divided into six sections, China's position on international security situation, its defensive National defense policy in the New Era, its missions and tasks along with its need for reform are discussed in detail. The paper also justifies China's reasonable expenditure on defense purposes and how it is contributing to 'Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind.'

Maintaining its stance that "China will not attack unless it is attacked, but will surely

counterattack if attacked", it places emphasis on both containing and winning wars, and underscores the unity of strategic defense and offense at operational and tactical levels.<sup>1</sup> Emphasizing the idea that China's National defense is a responsibility of all Chinese people, it lays emphasis on 'people's war'. The White Paper outlines China's intention to achieve mechanization by 2020 and modernize national defense by 2035 and transform into a world-class force by the mid-21st century. This is an extension of PLA's "Strategic guidelines" under which nine different military strategies for China have been devised since 1949.<sup>2</sup> It maintains a heavy emphasis on outer-space and development of new technologies along with nuclear capability, and for the advancement of cyber sovereignty, information security and its usage in social security. The paper is more transparent as compared to previous years and gives sufficient information on regular exercises like the *Red Sword* and the *Heavenly Sword* and how China's armed forces are working toward resolution of

national territorial sovereignty and maritime rights under the national defense ministry, theatre commands and border troops.

The paper clearly states that China will never seek hegemony or expansion and is also opposed to the idea of spheres of influence while maintaining that the highest security risk for China is to fight the “Taiwan independence” and separatist forces in Tibet and “East Turkestan”. Besides reinstating the traditional goals of China’s national defense in the new era, it has maintained that the South China Sea islands and Diaoyu Islands are ‘inalienable parts of the Chinese territory’ suggesting a validation of its claims irrespective of international objections or an intent to intimidate its neighbours like Japan and Vietnam. It nonetheless, states that China wants to develop the South China Sea into a “sea of peace, friendship and cooperation” – a dream that looks too far-fetched.

There is huge emphasis on streamlining the chains of command and execution and assessment of force capabilities as well as reorganizing the National Defense University (NDU) and the National University of Defense Technology (NUDT) and the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS) through amendment in the Defense Laws. China claims it has played a constructive role in political settlement of regional hotspots such as the Korean peninsula issue, the Iranian nuclear issue and Syrian issue. And that it objects to arms race and strives to protect global strategic balance and stability. At

the same time, China has accused the US of provoking intensified competition in the defense realm amongst major countries as well as on issues such as arms sales to Taiwan, sanctions on the CMC Equipment Development Department and its leadership. On the other hand, the military relationship between China-Russia has continued on a sound basis resulting in seven rounds of strategic consultations since 2012. Meanwhile, China is strengthening military exchanges with developing countries like Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean through personnel training and providing assistance in military development. It is also maintaining active military relations with European countries.

A strategy to build a regional security Cooperation architecture is probed under visions like the SCO, Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the ADMM-Plus, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Shangri-La Dialogue, Jakarta International Defense Dialogue and Western Pacific Naval Symposium, China-ASEAN Maritime Exercises-2018 and the Beijing Xiangshan Forum. China’s efforts in counter-terrorism are highlighted through its initiation of the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) and the Great Wall International Forum on Counter-terrorism. Its positive role in the UN peace keeping and missionary activities is also highlighted with reference to the PLAN’s hospital ship *Ark Peace*.

The aspirations laid out in the paper, however, seem counter-intuitive as it rejects expansionism and hegemony. Towards the end of the Paper, it continues with the tradition of endorsing that the Chinese people continue to work under the guidance of their esteemed leadership, endorsing Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation and for the realization of which the Chinese military is an essential part. It is highly advantageous in terms of revealing facts which are often difficult to access and also shows the lack of any gaps in China's strategic thinking. As far as India is concerned, it presents an opportunity for the defense personnel to take cognizance of the numbers and intent behind the document and whether and how China will stick to its discourse on "peace." The paper reflects on a steady influence of the party leadership which gives China an upper hand to shape its civil-military relations by granting sufficient decision-making powers to senior officers who can adjust military strategy in response to changes in their state's security environment. The claims of declining defense expenditure might just be a sham to deceive the foreign audience as the defense expenditure on personnel training and sustainment as well as equipment has been growing steadily and thus reflects imprecision in their representation of statistics.

It is a skim review of the international strategic environment in the 'New Era' and misses out several important developments as far as the rise of Indian comprehensive national

power on the international stage is concerned and avoids any reference to the Indo-Pacific, sticking to the term Asia-Pacific instead. The paper tries to balance its domestic and international commitments and exhibits an adaptive potential. It does not seem to be alarmist in nature and tries to assuage the concerns of the international community but how far will China be able to deliver on its high assertions remains to be seen.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Full Text: China's National Defense in the New Era, The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, July 2019, © Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd., Beijing.

<sup>2</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, Active Defense China's Military Strategy since 1949, Princeton University Press, Oxford, 2019.