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CHINA'S WHITE PAPER ON MILITARY STRATEGY

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Introduction

On 26 May 15, Chinese Ministry of National Defense released a White paper on China's Military Strategyⁱ. The paper is aimed at making an attempt to outline the new defense policies and highlight its aspirations in a transparent manner. China has been publishing such papers in the past, every two years or so, though on different themes to make public their capabilities and intentions. The last White Paper by the China's State Council was published in 2013 giving details of the Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces.

Besides discussing other areas of importance, the paper dwells upon the following major issues in a very systematic manner:

- Views of the Chinese Leadership
- Emerging Security Scenario in the Asia Pacific Region
- New Requirements for Innovative Development of Military Strategy
- Concept of Active Defense
- Shift in Focus for PLA in line with the Strategic Requirements
- Critical Security Domains
- Military Relations and Confidence Building Measures (CBMs)



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Security Scenario

While describing the security situation, the paper brings out the changes taking place in the international arena and goes on to say that the forces for the world peace are on the rise and a world war is unlikely in the foreseeable future. But it also admits that the threat of local wars remains on the horizon. The Chinese leadership agrees to the fact that the strategic centre of gravity is shifting to the Asia Pacific region, and US & Japan are engaged in making their presence felt in the region. In context of the South China Sea, the Paper briefly talks about 'illegal occupations' and interference by extra regional powers in their affairs. On the Taiwan issue, not much disclosure has been made except that the cross-Taiwan Strait relations have improved in the recent times. China admits that the separatists' forces for Tibet independence have also been creating challenges for their national security and social stability.

Strategic Tasks & Missions

The document lays down certain new national security requirements, strategic tasks & missions for the purpose of innovative development of China's military strategy. These are: safeguarding the changing national security and strategic interests, worldwide Revolutions in Military Affairs (RMA) and the country's deepening reform. The Paper clearly states the military missions and tasks to meet these requirements. These include; adopting favorable strategic posture, innovate operational thoughts, seizing the military initiative, participate in security cooperation and following the path of civil-military integration. It goes on to say that the armed forces have to actively take part in country's stability, economic development and uphold the socialist system with Chinese characteristics.



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Active Defence

**“We will not attack unless we are attacked,
but will surely counterattack if attacked”ⁱⁱ**

The focus of this Paper and the military strategic guideline is an old concept in new form: the concept of Active Defence, which has been summarized above. The Chinese leadership wants the world to know that they will strictly follow the principle of self defense and will not indulge in any pre-emptive attack. Does that mean China will stop issuing warnings to ships of neighboring countries & US surveillance aircraft, and just hold ground in the affairs of South China Sea, till any offensive act is committed against them?

Winning localized wars using the information warfare tools remains an important task in Preparation for Military Struggle (PMS) of China. The Chinese leadership feels that in pursuit of following the concept of active defense the armed forces will have to modify their doctrines and optimize the military strategic layout. The good old principles of flexibility, mobility and self-dependence will assume greater importance in future wars with information dominance. Even the new security domains of outer and cyber space will be appropriately dealt with. In order to protect China's overseas interests, the new strategy lays stress on expanding military relations with major powers and neighboring countries.

Force Building

The Pentagon report to the US Congress, of April 2015, says that China is developing a robust Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) punch that includes short, medium and intercontinental-range ballistic missiles, anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM), destroyers with cruise missiles, and nuclear-armed submarines. The DF-21D ASBM is capable of hitting an aircraft carrier within 900 nautical miles of the Chinese coastlineⁱⁱⁱ. Although no specific details of military modernization of this kind have been



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included in the current document, the White Paper highlights the critical areas of focus of PLA armed forces.

The Paper indicates that due importance has been given to the aspect of building a modern military capable of implementing China's strategic guidelines. To achieve its objectives, the PLA Army will focus on constituting small modular combat units capable of joint operations and trans-theatre mobility. On the other hand, the PLA Air Force will augment its capabilities to shift their focus from territorial defense to both offence and defense. The Second Artillery Force is planned to sharpen its teeth by laying emphasis on nuclear counter attack, strategic deterrence and precision strikes aided by the advancement in the field of information warfare. In addition, particular emphasis is also being laid on augmenting the strategic deterrence capability of the PLA Navy.

Critical Security Domains

For the first time, in a white paper, the Ministry of National Defense of the PRC has identified four critical security domains for sustainable development of China. These are: nuclear force, outer space, cyber space and the maritime force. China has once again emphasized the policy of 'No First Use' of its nuclear weapons. The paper indicates that the time has come to confront the threats from new domains of outer and cyber space. It says that suitable force levels and infrastructure will be created to ensure national security.

A major thrust is being given to the affairs of China's maritime security. The paper acknowledges that due importance was not given to this aspect in the past. In order to protect its maritime domain, SLOCs and the overseas interests, China needs to develop a modern maritime military force. In a major move in this direction, the PLA Navy whose primary focus so far was limited to the 'offshore waters' will shift its attention to both the 'offshore' and 'open seas'. In other words, the China will gradually extend its reach to include 'the far seas', along with the protection of 'near seas'. Development of various ports in the Indian Ocean region as part of their concept of 'String of Pearls' will also play a big role in supporting this endeavor. The modernization of PLA Navy and increased radius of operations will ultimately help its Navy to become a true blue water force. No doubt, the



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PLA Navy's contribution in the evacuation efforts during the recent Yemen crisis could be taken as an example of their increasing reach and participation in international maritime cooperation.

Whilst following the policy of active defense, the PLA Navy is expected to remain at the high state of readiness and maintain regular combat patrols in the relevant sea areas (read East and South China Seas). It is strongly felt that by designating maritime security as a critical domain, China has accorded highest priority to the aspect of safeguarding territorial integrity and maritime interests in the East and South China Seas.

Military Relations & Cooperation

The Paper indicates towards increased efforts on China's part towards improving military to military relations with Russia, USA and neighboring Asia Pacific countries. The relations between militaries will be aimed at improving CBM mechanism, developing collective security frameworks and participation in multilateral dialogues. In context with the USA, just few months ago, the two militaries established new dialogue channels and signed two historic Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) on confidence-building measures to improve transparency and reduce risk.^{iv} Given the deteriorating situation in South China Sea and the promulgated policy of active defense, it will be interesting to see as to how long the new relationship mechanism will sustain.

Conclusion

This White Paper is sixth in the series of such papers published by the PRC since 1998. Other countries including the US, Britain, France and Russia have also made such papers public for the world to understand their military mind. It is clear that the document is meant to give an appropriate signal to the world about China's military posture, strategic direction and future line of thinking. China's actual posture — the hardware it is procuring or building, the way it is deploying forces, and its behavior — is consistent with the paper's assertive tone and substance, with a clear Chinese emphasis on blue-water capability and maritime struggle.^v



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Although, no mention about India has been made in the Paper, it is obvious that the new maritime strategy of the PRC and the growing role & modernization of PLA Navy will be a subject of many discussions in near future. The Indian Naval Chief, while expressing his views on the Paper, said that: “Such vision documents were there for every navy and it is natural for any navy to have its plans which cover a spectrum of their entire operations”^{vi}. With the change in the concept of operation of PLA Navy, it will not be odd to discover more Chinese ships and even nuclear submarines in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). In any case, PLA Navy’s activities in the Indian neighborhood are always under strict watch as an important element of maintaining Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). But on the South China Sea front, it will be interesting to watch the new developments and execution of the concept of “Active Defense” during unpleasant situations erupting at sea between Chinese and US forces.

(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])

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ⁱ China’s Military Strategy, Ministry of National Defense PRC, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/>, May 2015.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2015** http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2015_China_Military_Power_Report.pdf, 07 Apr 2015.

^{iv} Ibid

^v Shashank Joshi, Royal United Services Institute, London, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/in-china-defence-strategy-the-silent-message/#sthash.z9UNXbDk.dpuf>, 01 Jun 15

^{vi} India Today, <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/navy-chief-downplays-china-white-paper-on-defence/1/440777.html>, 28 May 2015.