

Reading China's White Paper

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China's newly released Defence White Paper (WP) is nobody's idea of light reading. It is at least mercifully short, yet the propaganda content, combined with dense verbiage about war under "informationised conditions" and the "transformation of the generating mode of combat effectiveness" are enough to test even the most committed of China defence watchers. Nevertheless, when we consider what is in the document and what is left out, we learn a few things about how China sees itself and its place in the world.

Let's begin with the omissions. Notably, American defence expert James Acton has pointed out that the WP lacks a specific reference to China's policy of "no first use" of nuclear weapons, a promise that China would only use nuclear weapons if others used them against China first, and heretofore considered a central element of China's nuclear strategy. The significance of this omission is still being debated among experts, with some saying it might indicate a major change to Chinese nuclear doctrine, and others saying nothing has changed. The fact that there is now some ambiguity about this is itself damaging and potentially destabilising, and recent news suggests China has reinforced its no-first-use stance in Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty negotiations in Geneva. It is to be hoped that a clarifying statement will come from a more senior source within the Chinese leadership also.

The second notable omission is of any reference to the Communist Party. Unlike India and most Western countries, the ultimate authority over the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is not the state but the Party. The relationship between the PLA and the Party is a complex and sometimes delicate one, and Western experts have observed that, as the PLA has modernised and professionalised, it has taken on a reduced role in enforcing the Party's ideology and is less influential in policymaking. But the military remains a central element of Party control and it remains loyal to the Party.

As for the notable inclusions in the WP, let's begin with the fact that it was published at all. China deserves some credit for seemingly bending to constant international calls for greater military transparency by releasing a WP which gives us some new details about China's military forces. But although transparency can be reassuring, it has limits. For no matter how much China tells us about its military structure and how earnestly it reassures the world about its intentions, China's neighbours will rightly make their judgements based on its capabilities, not its stated beliefs. So the claims in the WP's introduction that China's defence policy is "defensive in nature" and that China "opposes hegemony" and "will not engage in military expansion" will reassure precisely no one in the region. Even if all those statements could be taken at face value, intentions can change quickly.

In this context, it is interesting to see the WP place such explicit emphasis on China's aircraft carrier programme, with a claim that China's first carrier, commissioned in late 2012, has had a "profound impact" on building a strong PLA Navy. Western experts have for many years stressed the importance of "anti-access" in China's maritime strategy; China's goal, it has been said, is not so much to build a navy that can control the Asia Pacific but to deny others (that is, the US) the ability to exert such control. Such a "denial" strategy tends to lead to the development of submarines and anti-ship missile forces. Large ocean-going surface ships are seen as redundant.

Yet the evidence of the last several years suggests China is having more success in building world-class surface vessels than submarines, where its indigenous designs continue to develop more slowly. The aircraft carrier is the most spectacular symbol of that trend. Altogether this suggests China has broader ambitions for its navy, and indeed another distinguishing feature of the WP is its global scope. The introductory comments about globalisation set the scene for a document which describes China's

role as a global citizen. Correspondingly, the PLA has roles that go well beyond defending the “motherland” and take in security and humanitarian tasks around the world.

Predictably, the WP describes this global role in the most benign terms, and to some degree, this is justified. China’s participation in tasks such as anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden should be welcomed. It denotes a rising power which believes it has a stake in defending global security norms. But China has national interests which do not always fit so seamlessly with those of other great countries, and the WP notes austerely that “the US is adjusting its Asia-Pacific strategy” and that “some country [sic] has strengthened its Asia-Pacific military alliances”. China has acknowledged America’s “pivot” (or “rebalance”) to the Asia Pacific, and is noting its concern.

This passing reference is the most explicit indication we get in the WP of the worrying security dynamic we now face in the region. It isn’t just China which, in its official pronouncements, makes earnest claims about its peaceful intentions. Every government does that. But even if we take such claims at face value, what cannot be dismissed is the impressive growth of China’s military capabilities. By size and capability alone, China’s armed forces have already changed the regional power balance and will inevitably make it difficult for the US to exercise the maritime predominance which it has enjoyed — and from which its friends and allies have benefited — for so long.

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