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China's 2015 White Paper on 'Military Strategy': A Political and Strategic Message



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The Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (PRC) released a White Paper titled *China's Military Strategy* on May 26, 2015, in Beijing. While the first White Paper on "National Defence" was issued in 1998, this latest one is the first ever exclusively on China's "military strategy" – as the title suggests. Also available through China's Ministry of National Defence, the paper highlights today's "global trends toward multipolarity and economic globalisation", thereby making "countries increasingly bound together in a community of shared destiny". The attribution submits to the core assumption of liberal international theories, which posit that interdependence (more specifically, economic symbiosis) among states influences state behaviour, much in divergence to the realist paradigm.

While economic interaction appears the ideal driver for states to adopt cooperative frameworks, the pressing geo-strategic realities have always been the pivot that hold the potential to invade upon any/all realignments, and China's relationships with key Asian neighbours are testament to this submission.

Key Points

1. While the first White Paper on "National Defence" was issued in 1998, this latest one is the first ever, exclusively on China's "military strategy" .
2. Managing the growing Chinese power and influence and shaping China's strategic posture and policies would be critical for not only the Asia-Pacific security order, but the entire region *per se*.
3. The CCP and its centrality to the very existence of China's political structure has been accorded primacy throughout the paper.
4. It is not unknown that President Xi, who is also the Chairman of the CMC, has been visibly upset with the chain of command in the forces and has emphasised upon the need for "streamlining the operational headquarters of all PLA forces with revised protocols"
5. Xi has chosen to present diplomacy as a means of effectively applying China's power determinants to promote its overall influence in its periphery in support of a long-term strategic foreign policy agenda.
6. Given that the gambit of China's core interests also includes upholding state sovereignty, national security and reunification, both the East and South China Sea resultantly, fall under this bracket.

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China's 2015 White Paper ...

For that matter, managing the growing Chinese power and influence, and shaping China's strategic posture and policies would be critical for not only the Asia-Pacific security order, but the entire region *per se*. The most pertinent question is whether Beijing would reject this liberal regional order and seek to replace it with its own China-centric Asian order, stretching through the geographical limits of Asia's periphery? The internal discourse in the country seems to acknowledge that even the slightest acceptance of international intervention shall prove detrimental to China's claims that it contests with other countries in Asia.

There is recognition in the 2015 paper that "China's comprehensive national strength and core competitiveness are notably increasing" – in reference to the reverberations in the Asia-Pacific geo-strategic landscape, which appear to be centre-stage in China's overall strategic and tactical thinking and planning. By making a categorical mention of the United States' "rebalancing strategy" and "enhanced military presence and alliances in this region," coupled with "Japan sparing no effort to dodge the post-war mechanism, overhauling its military and security policies", China has only confirmed the Xi Jinping administration's indirect reference to "reclaiming lost historical Chinese territories", which has been reiterated at many Central Conferences of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Incidentally, the CCP and its centrality to the very existence of China's political structure has been accorded primacy throughout the paper, as when it repeatedly, and unambiguously states, "... the Chinese armed forces will unswervingly adhere to the principle of the CCP's absolute leadership, and work to build themselves into a people's military that follows the CCP's commands..." The paper goes to the extent of interlinking firm maintenance of "social stability", for it to remain a staunch force for "resolutely upholding the CCP's ruling position." The almost amalgamated connect between the

People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Party is Chinese military's core doctrinal principle – Mao Zedong's concept of "active defence" (*jiji fangyu*), sometimes also referred to as "offensive defence" (*gongshi fangyu*). This concept interestingly has been described as the "essence of the CCP's military strategic thought..." thereby seeking to suppress any/all speculation of a widening chasm between the CCP and the PLA.

Pushing for the PLA to strive for improving the Central Military Command (CMC) command organ and theatre-level command systems for joint operations, so as to "further optimise battlefield disposition and strengthen strategic prepositioning", the paper is ostensibly adhering to the internal discourse within the politico-military corridors of power in China. It is not unknown that President Xi, who is also the Chairman of the CMC, has been visibly upset with the chain of command in the forces and has emphasised upon the need for "streamlining the operational headquarters of all PLA forces with revised protocols," further stressing that "...the headquarters of all PLA forces should improve their combat readiness and sharpen their ability to win a regional war..."

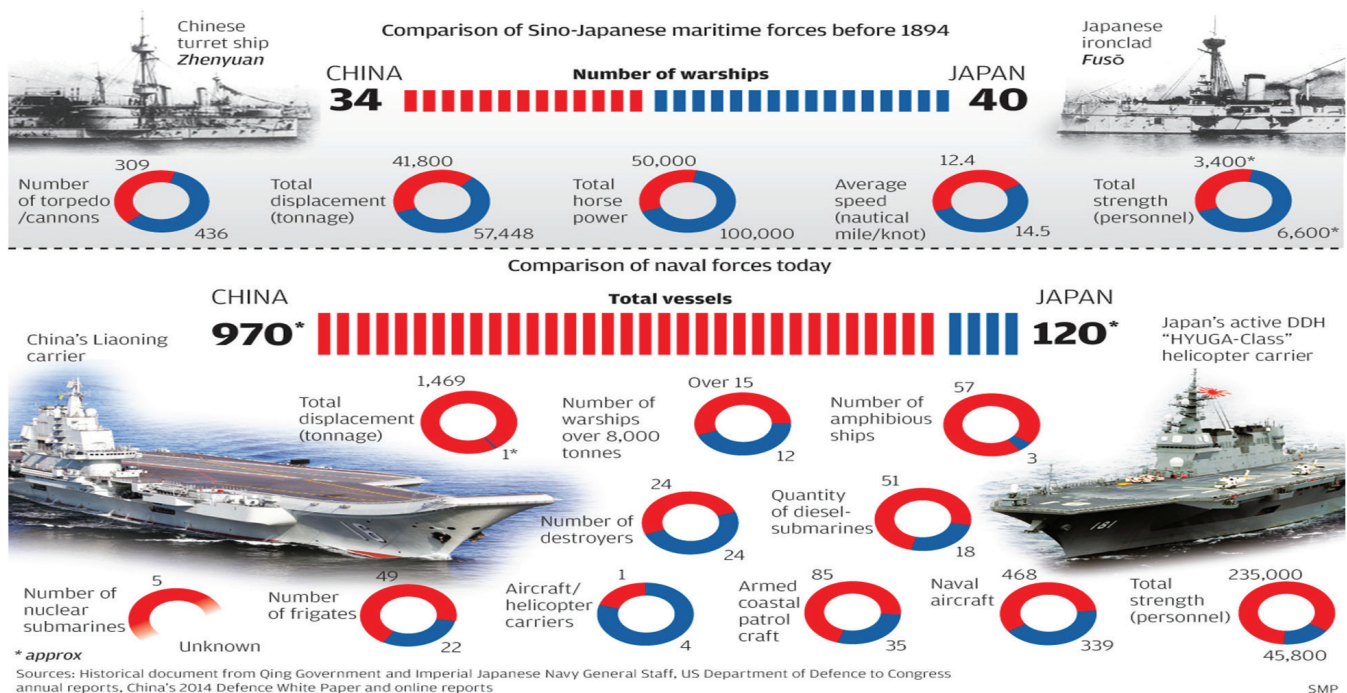
By reshuffling the top positions in the PLA and promoting Generals known to be close to him, the Nanjing Military Region (MR) – covering Shanghai, and the provinces of Fujian, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui and Jiangxi – has found favour with Xi, given that he too, has served in the past in Fujian, Zhejiang and Shanghai. Reportage emerging from Beijing suggested that Xi Jinping gave a dressing down to the top military brass at a closed-door meeting in September 2014 – in the presence of Fang Fenghui, Chief of the PLA's General Staff. Following the meeting, in an official release conveyed through the state-run Xinhua news agency, it was stated, "All PLA forces should follow the instructions of President Xi Jinping... and update their operations to meet new goals and missions set by the CMC..."

The White Paper consciously appears to outline the missions and strategic tasks of the PLA with the overall “national strategic goal” to accomplish building of a “moderately prosperous society in all respects by 2021” when the CCP celebrates its centenary, and further achieve the “Chinese Dream of achieving rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” as the set objective for 2049, when the People’s Republic of China reaches a centennial. This directly branches out of Xi’s larger vision, placing greater emphasis on military diplomacy as a part of China’s overall foreign policy strategy, which seeks to ensure stability along China’s periphery. When Xi Jinping addressed the fourth Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs in November 2014, he enunciated a robust and active security-oriented approach to Chinese foreign relations. Through the declassified version of the speech circulated later (holding back the actual text of Xi’s speech), it could be drawn that Xi advocated in favour of effective application of growing Chinese power and influence – much in concurrence to what the 2015 White Paper suggests as well. Xi has chosen to present

diplomacy as a means of effectively applying Chinese power determinants to promote overall influence in its periphery in support of a long-term strategic foreign policy agenda.¹ Thus, the Xi administration’s Periphery Diplomacy Initiative (*zhoubian*) suggests that important powers like Russia, Japan and India should become “supporters of China’s rise”. In a rather polemic statement, Yan Xuetong, at the Tsinghua University, claimed that those who are hostile to China, or oppose it, will be confronted with sustained periods of tough sanctions and isolation.

“Adherence to strategic defence and operational and tactical offence, employment of integrated combat forces ... information dominance, precision strikes and joint operations” as put forth in the White Paper, shall be critical for China’s armed forces to “create a favourable strategic posture... maintain strategic deterrence...” All these initiatives have emboldened Beijing to take far more assertive actions in the South and East China Seas and the paper makes it amply clear that the special focus area of the PLA in the coming future shall be the Navy in line with

Fig 1: China Caught Up



Source: South China Morning Post, July 27, 2014

... on ‘Military Strategy’

the strategic requirement of a gradual shift from “offshore waters defence” to a combination of this with “open seas protection.” Even as Taiwan, “Tibet independence”, and “separatist forces for East Turkistan independence” have become salient to the “core interests” claims, they have not remained limited to the same. Given that the gambit of China’s core interests also includes upholding state sovereignty, national security and reunification, both the East and South China Seas resultantly, fall under this bracket.

An additional curious sub-head in the White Paper is on “Preparation for Military Struggle – a basic military practice and important guarantee for safeguarding peace, containing crises and winning wars... to intensify which, China’s armed forces must meet the requirement of being capable of fighting and winning... to enhance their overall capabilities for deterrence and war-fighting.” This can be interpreted more in line with what the Chinese term as “...hotspot issues, such as ethnic, religious, border and territorial disputes... small-scale wars, conflicts that are recurrent in some regions...”

The entire discourse presented above only corroborates that China’s much-debated “peaceful rise” theory remains belligerent, primarily because the direction and future course of this rise continues to remain ambiguous. China’s strategic presence, its impact, and quest for seeking greater economic and military might within Asia have often injected a virulent debate. Showcasing its military prowess to the world, the Chinese armed forces are signalling that they have come a long way from being essentially the rustic and bucolic “Red Army” that waged a “People’s War” more than six decades ago. The robust military modernisation programme undertaken by the PLA is the primary foundation of deterrence to attain the objectives of China’s military strategy.² Today, the Chinese armed forces are not just preparing to fight wars in the future, but to deter or prevent their outbreak decisively by the possession of an adequate deterrent force, assuring credibility to cope with future small-scale, high-intensive regional combat and military operations³ – as sufficiently lucid by means of the latest White Paper on military strategy.

Notes

1. Xi Jinping’s Address to the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs which assessed Major-Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics, November 28–29, 2014, Beijing.
2. For more details see, Monika Chansoria, *China: Military Modernisation and Strategy* (New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2011).
3. Ibid.

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