

# China's Military Strategy: Will the Rise of China be Peaceful?

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## Introduction

On May 27, 2015 Xinhua announced the publication of its Ninth White Paper on National Defence. Since 1998, every two years or so, the State Council (the Chinese Cabinet) releases a White Paper (WP) on defence; 'over the years, each of them has distinctive characteristics', noted the news agency. The theme of the latest edition, titled 'China's Military Strategy', is 'active defence'. It should be mentioned that the new WP is the shortest, with 9,000 **Chinese characters** only.<sup>1</sup>

China Military Online, a website affiliated to the PLA, explained: "This is the first time that the Chinese government published a WP specialised in China's military strategy. The WP systematically expounded on the Chinese military's missions and strategic tasks in the new era, pointed out that the basic point in making preparation for military struggle (PMS) shall be focussed on winning local wars in conditions of modern technology, and highlighted maritime military struggle and maritime PMS."<sup>2</sup>

The PLA website acknowledges that the WPs never earlier mentioned that "PLA Navy (PLAN) shall be in line with the strategic requirement of offshore waters defence and open seas protection". Open sea protection has been an addition compared to the previous WPs, similarly, "the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) shall be in line with the strategic requirement of building air-space capabilities and conducting offensive and defensive operations."<sup>3</sup>

As importantly, it says "the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned," while China should expedite the development of a cyber force. Mao's old view of 'an Army of peasants' is dead and gone. In the years to come, the Chinese Navy and the Air Force are bound to take a more preponderant place in Beijing's defence strategy.

There is certainly a lot for India to learn from these 'strategic' statements; in fact, it is not a phenomenon restricted to the Middle Kingdom, it is a planetary evolution.

## The Evolution of the White Papers

Let us have a look at the earlier eight WPs.<sup>4</sup> Released in July 1998, the first WP was entitled 'China's National Defence'. Xinhua explained that it "created the first complete and systemic framework on national defence that was consistent with not only the international practices, but also the Chinese characteristics. For the first time, China systematically expounded on its defence policies and explicitly expressed its new outlook on security."

Two years later, the second WP pointed out a 'serious security situation' in the world; it emphasised that in the present world "factors that may cause instability and uncertainty have markedly increased and the world is far from peaceful". It further stressed that China always prioritised safeguarding its sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity and safety. It also dealt at length with the Taiwan issue, stating that "creating splittism [between the Mainland and the Island] means giving up peace across the Taiwan Straits".

In December 2002, another WP on 'China's National Defence' was released. It brought out five national 'core' interests "as the fundamental basis for defence policy and systematically expounded on the military strategy and guideline in the new era." The composition of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Chinese People's Armed Police Force (PAPF) and the Chinese militia was for the first time revealed. The 2004 WP developed the idea of 'dual historical missions of mechanisation and informatisation'. One chapter dealt with the concept of revolution in military affairs (RMA) ...with Chinese characteristics. The public was informed about the decision of Beijing (or the Central Military Commission) to promote 'informatisation' and to 'reduce the military staffs by 200,000'. That was an important reorientation.

Two years later, the 2006 WP dealt with the 'critical period of multi-polarisation' and spoke of the concept of national security strategy. A special chapter dealt with the Chinese PAPF and provided information about border defence and coastal defence. It was a time when Zhou Yongkang, the 'security czar' was all-powerful and the PAPF was given a larger budget than the PLA. The 2008 WP on China's National Defence provided a strategic blueprint for national defence development and talked about the basic mission of China's strategic missile troops and the specific tasks of its nuclear missile forces.

The 2010 WP introduced the military security mechanism of mutual trust across the Taiwan Straits and comprehensively expounded on the diversified employment of China's armed forces in peacetime. It mentioned the military modernisation drive and spoke of China's efforts to establish a joint operation system; it also pointed out the development of a military legal system and elaborated on the objectives and principles of building military 'mutual trust under new circumstances', by giving an all-round introduction to what China had done to promote military mutual trust in recent years (for example humanitarian or UN-mandated missions).

The 2013 WP had a different title; it was called 'Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces'. According to China Military Online, the 2013 paper "illustrated the principles for diversified employment of China's armed forces and officially publicised the designations of the 18 Group Armies in the PLA Army." It provided information on the size of the PLA Army's operational troops, the PLAN, the PLAAF as well as the types of missiles equipping the Second Artillery Force (SAF). According to Beijing, the objective was to make China's armed forces more transparent.

There is definitively an effort at transparency, though there is still a gap between the 'theory' professed in the WPs and the ground scenario on China's extended frontiers (on land, in space and on seas). We shall come to this later.

## The 2015 White Paper

As mentioned earlier, the latest WP is titled China's Military Strategy. Xinhua, quoting Chinese analysts, says that the WP attaches more significance to maritime interests and marine power in open seas 'amid increasing reported maritime threats'. There is a clear evolution, not to say revolution, giving prominence to the seas and the Navy, over the ground forces and the PLAAF. According to a press release of the Ministry of National Defence (MND), it is the first WP 'on strategic defence and operation and tactical offence'. It reiterated the principle of 'active defence', which means that 'China will not attack unless under attack itself'. The WP states that a world war is unlikely in the foreseeable future and China remains in a period of strategic opportunities for development.

However, China's maritime rights and interests are strongly highlighted: "Some of [China's] offshore neighbours take provocative actions and reinforce their military presence on China's reefs and islands that they have illegally occupied." Beijing warned "some external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs [and] a tiny few maintain constant, close-in-air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China."<sup>5</sup> The WP admitted that China generally enjoys a favourable environment for development, but external challenges were increasing; and though only briefly mentioned, Beijing also admits the existence of several internal threats. The WP spoke of many multiple and complex security risks, "leaving China an arduous task to safeguard its national unification, territorial integrity and development interests."

In Beijing's eyes, the 'bad guy', of course, remained Washington; Beijing does not appreciate the US 'rebalancing' strategy' and its 'enhanced' military presence in the region. Then, there is Japan, Mao would have probably called Tokyo, a US lackey; the WP affirmed that Japan is "sparing no effort to dodge the post-war mechanism, overhauling its military and security policies."

As a result of these threats, Beijing believes that China now "faces a long-standing task to safeguard its maritime rights and interests."<sup>6</sup> Other nations certainly do not share the same perception about peace and stability in the region; this does not bother Beijing as the WP affirmed. Then, the WP listed the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia as being 'shrouded in instability and uncertainty'; but perhaps more importantly for Beijing, the 'Taiwan independence separatist forces' were termed by Beijing as the biggest threat to the peaceful development of cross-Straits relations.

That is not all, and here come the 'internal' threats: "Separatist forces for 'East Turkistan independence' [Xinjiang] and 'Tibet independence' have inflicted serious damage, particularly with escalating violent terrorist activities by 'East Turkistan independence' forces." Beijing should seriously consider this particular menace at a time when China is financing the Pakistan Economic Corridor. It is also an open admission that Beijing is more bothered by a 'terrorist' Xinjiang than a non-violent 'Tibet'.

One of the WP's conclusions was that "China's national security is more vulnerable to international and regional turmoil, terrorism, piracy, serious natural disasters and epidemics, and the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication."<sup>7</sup> In the years to come, this will practically translate in an important enhancement of the capacity of the PLAN. The future belongs to those who will control the Sea, believes China.

Has the message been received in Delhi?

### **Some Comments on the WP**

According to some Chinese analysts quoted by the nationalist Global Times, the new WP contrasted with others, including the 2013 version, which had only mentioned that 'some neighbouring countries' were making moves which 'complicated' the situation. At that time, Japan was singled out for 'making trouble' over the Diaoyu Islands in East China Sea.

The US is now the main villain as China wanted "to mark out its bottom line regarding its maritime rights and interests as the country needs enhanced capabilities to protect its increasing number of overseas interests." In the past, WPs used to focus more on the ground forces instead of the Navy; it has resulted in 'a lack of maritime technology and experience' for China, believe those who drafted the WP.

The most important information contained in the WP was the confirmation that the PLAN is 'gradually' shifting its focus from 'offshore waters defence' to a combined strategy of 'offshore waters defence and open seas protection'. Wen Bing, an associate research fellow at the Academy of Military Sciences (AMS), who participated in previous WP compilations, told The Global Times "It is also a win-win when our protective measures can safeguard regional stability. It should be noted that China always abides by the law and respects the safety concerns of countries involved. ... According to international conventions, we often protect our overseas interests through cooperation."<sup>8</sup> One could call it 'regional stability' with Chinese characteristics.

Soon after the release of the WP, Real Admiral Guan Youfei, director of the Foreign Affairs Office (FAO) briefed more than 80 foreign military attachés based in Beijing. He explained that the WP expounded the missions and strategic tasks of the Chinese Armed Forces in the new historical period and interpreted the strategic guidelines of 'active defence'. He spoke of the Chinese Armed Forces' steadfast determination and strong will to safeguard national sovereignty, security and development interests, as well as regional and world peace.<sup>9</sup>

### **Four Critical Security Domains**

Interestingly, the WP speaks of four 'critical security domains':-

- (a) Oceans - Shifting focus to the combined one of "offshore waters defence and open seas protection."
- (b) Outer space - Opposing an arms race in outer space while vowing to secure its space assets.
- (c) Cyberspace - Expediting the cyber force development to tackle "grave security threats" within the digital

realm.

(d) Nuclear force - Stating China will never enter into a nuclear arms race.<sup>10</sup>

It is a qualitative shift as the ground forces and the PLAAF are not even mentioned.

## A Historical Background of the PLAN

The WP gives an historical background on the PLAN: “The Chinese Navy kept troops close to land from the 1950s to the end of the 1970s under the strategy of inshore defence. Since the 1980s, the navy has realised a strategic transformation to offshore defensive operations.” Today, says the WP, the Navy will continue “to perform regular combat readiness patrols and maintain a military presence in relevant sea areas” while the Chinese armed forces: “will also strengthen international security cooperation in areas considered especially important to China’s overseas interests.”

In a recently-published paper, the US Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) argued that since 2009, the PLAN “has made significant strides in operationalising as well as modernising its force. Although the PLAN’s primary focus remains in the East Asia region, where China faces multiple disputes over the sovereignty of various maritime features and associated maritime rights, in recent years, the PLAN has increased its focus on developing blue-water naval capabilities. Over the long term, Beijing aspires to sustain naval missions far from China’s shores.”<sup>11</sup>

The 2015 WP definitively marks a trend in this direction. As we shall see, it translated in reclaiming reefs in the South China Sea and continuously building new infrastructures.

In a chapter on the Evolution of a (Chinese) Naval Strategy, the ONI paper explained that the launching of the Liaoning, the country’s first aircraft carrier was a turning point “although Liaoning remains several years from becoming fully operational, and even then will offer relatively limited combat capability.” The ONI affirmed: “China’s leaders have embraced the idea that maritime power is essential to achieving great power status. Since the 1980s, China’s naval strategy has evolved from a limited, coastal orientation, to one that is mission-focussed and becoming increasingly unconstrained by geography.”<sup>12</sup>

It mentioned China’s shifting threat perceptions and growing economic interests which “have catalysed a major shift in strategic orientation and the perceived utility of naval forces.” Today, Chinese naval strategists have expanded “the bounds of China’s maritime capabilities and defences beyond coastal waters.” Since 1987, PLAN has a strategy referred to as ‘offshore defence’, which focusses on regional goals and deterring a modern adversary from intervening in a regional conflict.

Offshore defence is usually associated with operations in the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea—China’s Near Seas.

The ‘Joint Sea-2015’ drills between China and Russia should be seen in this light. Held between May 11 and 21, 2015 in the Mediterranean Sea, it involved nine surface ships from both navies. Geng Yansheng, the spokesman for the Chinese Defence Ministry explained that the exercises “will deepen friendly and pragmatic cooperation between China and Russia, and boost response operation capabilities in the event of security threats at sea.”

Peaceful or not, it is a fact that the PLAN is spreading further and further from its bases.

## Some Other Points

**China promises not to join nuclear arms race.** China reiterates it will never enter into a nuclear arms race with any other country. It promises to keep its nuclear capability at the minimum level required for maintaining its national security. The PLA will however “optimise its nuclear force structure, improve strategic early warning, command and control, missile penetration, rapid reaction, survivability and protection.”<sup>13</sup> China will also deter others from using nuclear weapons against China, says the WP. There is nothing new on the above.

**Cyber security.** As we have seen, Beijing considers cyberspace as ‘grave security threats within the digital realm’; therefore, according to Xinhua, China will speed up the development of a cyber force. The WP noted: “International strategic competition in cyberspace has become increasingly fiercer and quite a few countries have developed their cyber military forces.” It further points out that China is one of the major victims of hacker attacks: “China will enhance its capabilities of cyberspace situation awareness, cyber defence, support for the country’s endeavours in cyberspace and participation in international cyber cooperation, so as to stem major cyber crises, ensure national network and information security, and maintain national security and social stability.”<sup>14</sup>

**No Naval Bases.** Quite surprising, at least seen from an Indian perspective, the Defence Ministry spokesperson Yang Yujun asserted that China has not built any military bases overseas, as China ‘seeks no hegemony or military expansion’.<sup>15</sup> All the more astonishing as a few days earlier, it was reported that China was negotiating a military base in the strategic port of Djibouti. Djibouti President Ismail Omar Guelleh openly stated: “Discussions are ongoing”.

Already last year, Geng Yansheng, the Chinese Defence spokesman, defended a Chinese submarine’s docking at Colombo port and calling ‘utterly groundless’ reports that China was setting up 18 naval bases in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Myanmar and several other nations in the western and southern Indian Ocean. He was commenting on an article in a Namibian newspaper<sup>16</sup>, citing a report which had appeared on the Internet in China; Geng said: “The report also exaggerated and twisted the content of that commentary. Therefore the report is utterly groundless”.

They may not be called ‘bases’ in Putonghua, but they are ‘bases’ in English.

## The Other Side of the Coin: Chinese Aggressive Posture in the South China Sea

During the recently-held Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, the US Defence Secretary Ashton Carter, in his keynote address, affirmed that the US would continue to fly, sail, and operate in the region wherever international law allows. Carter also demanded “an immediate and lasting halt to land reclamation by all claimants” in the South China Sea.

The latest move by China was to build man-made islands in the South China Sea to impose its sovereignty over the area. The American Admiral Harry Harris called this a ‘great wall of sand’ in strategically important waterways. Steve Tsang explains in The Guardian: “The Chinese are dredging the seabed to transform a few reefs and rocks in the Spratly group of islands and atolls – which they claim – into man-made islands with a runway that can support military flights. This has caused great concern among their neighbours. The Chinese government rejects international criticisms, asserts its sovereign right to build on the islands, and demands that American naval surveillance aircraft overflying the new islands leave the Chinese air control zone immediately. There are also reports that China has begun to put heavy weapons on one of them.”<sup>17</sup> China immediately dismissed the US views as ‘incomplete and lacking of jurisprudential evidence’.

Rear Admiral Guan Youfei, director of Foreign Affairs Office of China’s National Defence Ministry, told the Shangri-La Dialogue: “Freedom of navigation should be for the benefits of economic development, rather than sending military aircraft and vessels everywhere”. He justified the lighthouses built by Beijing on Huayang and Chigua Reefs (also known as Cuarteron and Johnson South Reefs). These sites have recently witnessed massive reclamation work: it was just ‘to improve navigation safety in the South China Sea’. Guan added: “China has been exercising restraint on the South China Sea issue and the United States should treat the South China Sea issue in a more objective way.”<sup>18</sup>

Observers believe that Beijing will use the reef reclamation as bases in order to extend its naval reach. A few days before the ‘dialogue’, a US spy plane flew over a disputed region, taking the fever to a scale higher. As the P-8A Poseidon aircraft went over the islands, the Chinese navy sent eight warnings before the plane flew away. The US announced that it had decided to publicise the incident “to raise awareness of China’s massive land reclamation activities in the disputed waters.”

Beijing’s answer came a few days later: “it would not tolerate any party violating its overseas interests and would expand its naval power as part of a military strategy that aims to extend its offshore reach.”<sup>19</sup>

These few incidents show that though the China speaks of its peaceful rise in the WP, it is not always the case on the ground (or more correctly on the Seas). There is however no doubt that the publication of the new WP marks a change in Beijing’s strategy and in the future, the PLAN is bound to play a more preponderant place in China’s defence strategy.

## **The Chinese Navy**

How does this manifest on the Seas? During a two-day conference held by the US Naval War College’s China Maritime Studies Institute in Newport, Rhode Island, James Fanell, the former director of the US Pacific Fleet’s intelligence and information, declared that China will soon have some 415 warships including four aircraft carriers and 100 submarines. This was reported by the Defence News.

A Taiwan publication Want ChinaTimes says: “A lot of the anti-ship missiles equipped by the Chinese warships or submarines have ranges far in excess of similar missiles in service with the US Navy. With such a large number of long-range surface-to-surface missiles in hand, the PLA Navy is altering politics and strategies throughout the Asian theater.”<sup>20</sup>

The already-quoted report of the US ONI confirms: “During 2014 alone, more than 60 naval ships and craft were laid down, launched, or commissioned, with a similar number expected through the end of 2015. Major qualitative improvements are occurring within naval aviation and the submarine force, which are increasingly capable of striking targets hundreds of miles from the Chinese mainland. Although the PLAN faces capability gaps in some key areas, it is emerging as a well-equipped and competent force.”<sup>21</sup>

It is a fact that India can’t ignore.

## **Some Conclusions**

Though the new Chinese ‘transparency’ is welcome, the situation on the ground is quite different from what it is professed in the WP, whether one looks at the situation in the South China Sea or on the LAC with India, in the high Himalayas.

Beijing believes that ‘nobody can tell China what to do’. The South China Morning Post noted: “Beijing has hit back at the US criticism of its land reclamation operations around the Nansha Islands in the South China Sea, saying, “No one has the right to instruct China on what to do.”<sup>22</sup> The China Daily quotes a Chinese ‘expert’ who warned: “Washington is playing with fire as it has adopted an increasingly high profile over the South China Sea situation in recent months.”.

Beijing does not seem to be in a mood to relent on any front. A few days ago, it turned down the Indian proposal to clarify the Line of Actual Control (LAC), a move which seems most reasonable and logical.

At the same time, it is clear that, on the seas, India can’t match China’s fast paced development of its Navy, whether it is in terms of speed and quantity, but a smaller, disciplined and well-equipped Indian naval force could be a deterrent factor. The Indian Government probably realises that it can’t stop the rise of the Middle Kingdom, neither on land, nor on seas, but in the years to come, a professional and well-trained Indian Navy could indeed ‘balance’ the fast growing Chinese Navy and its expanding aspirations beyond its shores.

## **Endnotes**

- 1 The full text of the 2015 White Paper (China's Military Strategy') is available on different Chinese official websites; for example, China Daily, May 26, 2015; see: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content\\_20820628.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/26/content_20820628.htm)
- 2 Overview of all China's white papers on national defence, China Military Online, May 27, 2015; see: [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2015-05/27/content\\_4587121.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2015-05/27/content_4587121.htm)
- 3 See reference for note 1.
- 4 Overview of all China's white papers on national defence, China Military Online, May 27, 2015; see: [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2015-05/27/content\\_4587121.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/TopNews/2015-05/27/content_4587121.htm)
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Op.Cit 1.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Defence Ministry briefs foreign military attaches on white paper, China Military Online, May 27, 2015; see: [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2015-05/27/content\\_4587116.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2015-05/27/content_4587116.htm)
- 10 MoD unveils military strategy, op.cit.
- 11 The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century, Office of Naval Intelligence, April 10, 2015; see: [www.oni.navy.mil/.../china.../2015\\_PLA\\_NAVY\\_PUB\\_Interactive.pdf](http://www.oni.navy.mil/.../china.../2015_PLA_NAVY_PUB_Interactive.pdf).
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 China promises not to join nuclear arms race, Xinhua, May 26, 2015; see: [news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-05/26/c\\_134271147.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-05/26/c_134271147.htm)
- 14 China to speed up building a cyber force, english.news.cn, May 26, 2105; see: [http://english.gov.cn/news/top\\_news/2015/05/26/content\\_281475115069380.htm](http://english.gov.cn/news/top_news/2015/05/26/content_281475115069380.htm)
- 15 China hasn't any overseas military bases: Spokesperson, Xinhua, May 26, 2015; see: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/923615.shtml>
- 16 China Mulls Building Naval Base in Namibia, Namibian Times Says, Bloomberg, November 27, 2014; see: <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-11-27/china-mulls-building-naval-base-in-namibia-namibian-times-says>
- 17 China cares little for other countries' territorial claims, The Guardian, May 30, 2015; see: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2015/may/30/beijing-policy-south-china-sea>
- 18 China dismisses U.S. views on South China Sea as incomplete, lack of jurisprudential evidence, Xinhua, May 30, 2015; see: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-05/30/c\\_134283714.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-05/30/c_134283714.htm)
- 19 China's foothold in South China Sea: analysts reveal endgame to Beijing's reclamation efforts, South China Morning Post, May 30, 2015; see: <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1813082/chinas-foothold-troubled-waters?page=all>
- 20 PLA Navy will have 415 warships in near future: US expert, WantChinaTimes, May 26, 2015; see: <http://www.wantchinatimes.com/news-subclass-cnt.aspx?id=20150526000161&cid=1101>
- 21 The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century, op. cit.
- 22 No one tells us what to do, Beijing says, China Daily, May 29, 2105; see: [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/29/content\\_20851774.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-05/29/content_20851774.htm)

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