

The 2015 Chinese Defense White Paper on Strategy in Perspective: Maritime Missions Require a Change in the PLA Mindset

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Nearly 20 years ago in November 1995, the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China issued the first defense-related white paper on "Arms Control and Disarmament." In 1998, the first "defense white paper" was issued, called simply "China's National Defense." Subsequently, roughly every two years a new defense-related white paper has been issued. On May 26, 2015 the tenth defense-related white paper was released called "China's Military Strategy." [1]



Chinese Minister of Defense Chang Wanquan (Credit: Xinhua).

The series of white papers are official statements of Chinese government policy. They are written by a select group of individuals over many months' time and coordinated throughout the Chinese government. For the most part, they are explanatory documents providing additional detail to policies that have already been announced. The white papers are not the vehicle for releasing "new" policy, though "new" facts supporting existing policy may be revealed. No single white paper has contained "everything you need to know" about the Chinese armed forces; each one builds on information from previous white papers and official sources. What is "new" in any white paper generally depends on what the reader previously knew about the topic. The content of some white papers is better than others.

General Background on the White Papers

Each of the series of white papers usually has a description of the contemporary international situation as perceived from Beijing, including its assessment of the situation with Taiwan, and a recitation of the major elements of China's defense policy. Many readers dismiss the discussion of defense policy as "boilerplate" or "party line," until some specific phrase is not

repeated and then foreign works postulate such an omission indicates a major change in policy... until a Chinese official clarifies that no change has been made. [2]

To be sure, many official policy themes are repetitive, use stilted, Marxist language, and do not appear to reflect the realities of the latest crisis *du jour*, such as this passage from the 2015 report, "China will unswervingly follow the path of peaceful development, pursue an independent foreign policy of peace and a national defense policy that is defensive in nature, oppose hegemonism and power politics in all forms, and will never seek hegemony or expansion." Despite the desire to discover major changes announced in the white papers, the series of documents reveals a consistent official, declared policy that many foreign analysts find incompatible with some of China's actions.

The white papers generally end with a discussion of the Chinese military's interactions with foreign countries. In between, usually a few specific topics are explored in some detail, often adding new information to what had been found in previous reports. These topics have included descriptions of China's force structure, organization, doctrine and national defense mobilization system. Except for the 2013 and 2015 white papers, varying levels of information about the defense budget was included; however, the budget has not been discussed in the last two iterations because of a "thematic" approach—the 2013 version focused on missions for the armed forces and 2015 on strategy. Sometimes the white papers contain a level of minutia about subjects only serious analysts will appreciate. However, those expecting descriptions of China's latest weapons and details of its force structure will generally be disappointed.

Excerpts from the 1998 to 2013 White Papers

The following excerpts provide some idea of the highlights of the white papers from 1995 on. The 1995 white paper on "Arms Control and Disarmament" laid out basic defense policies and provided general descriptions of the size of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and its budget before addressing the various aspects of arms control. The 1998 white paper established the format to be followed roughly for a decade: the international security situation, defense policy, defense construction including budget issues, international security cooperation and arms control. It noted peace and development are "major themes of the present era," a theme that continues to the present. However, it noted factors of instability remain, including "the enlargement of military blocs and the strengthening of military alliances," though the United States was not mentioned specifically in this regard. The concepts of active defense and people's war were introduced and have been included consistently in subsequent white papers as the foundation of Chinese strategic military thought.

In 2000, some of the details from the 500,000-man force reduction beginning in 1997 were discussed. The national defense mobilization system was examined in detail in 2002 and in 2004. Furthermore, in 2004 described the "Revolution in Military Affairs [RMA] with Chinese Characteristics," and noted that priority of development has been "given to the Navy, Air Force and Second Artillery Force, and [to] strengthen [the PLA's] comprehensive deterrence and warfighting capabilities," confirming trends foreign analysts had been following for five years or

more. The 2006 white paper defined the PLA's "historic missions," provided considerable organizational and command structure information, and set a timeline for defense modernization stretching out to the mid-21st century, 2049.

Those topics were updated in 2008 with additional information provided on the logistics and armament systems. Unfortunately, information in the 2010 white paper moved the ball forward only slightly because of considerable repetition from prior reports. The two-year cycle was delayed until the issuance of the thematic 2013 white paper on the "Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces," which actually contained "new" facts on the composition of the PLA. It revealed for the first time the number of personnel in the Army's "18 combined corps, plus additional independent combined operational divisions (brigades)"—850,000. This number is not the total for the entire Army, however, which was not stated specifically. Also, the Navy was reported to have 235,000 personnel, considerably smaller than foreign estimates, while the Air Force was larger than expected at 398,000 officers and troops. Buried deep in the text was the statement, "China is a major maritime as well as land country."

The brief excerpts cannot do justice to the entirety of information found in the cumulative hundreds of pages found in all ten white papers. They were included, however, to set the stage for what is "new" in the 2015 white paper.

The 2015 White Paper

Despite the increased tensions in the Pacific region, the 2015 white paper reiterates the peace and development theme and assesses "In the foreseeable future, a world war is unlikely, and the international situation is expected to remain generally peaceful, " but "the world still faces both immediate and potential threats of local wars." Under these new circumstances, "the national security issues facing China encompass far more subjects, extend over a greater range, and cover a longer time span than at any time in the country's history." Therefore, without "a strong military, a country can be neither safe nor strong." A strong military is the basis for China's multi-dimensional strategic deterrence posture as well as necessary to carry out its warfighting and military operations other than war or non-traditional security tasks.

Complicating China's security environment are separatist forces for "Taiwan independence," "East Turkistan independence," and "Tibet independence." Competition is also found in the domain of space and cyberspace; specifically, "the first signs of weaponization of outer space have appeared" and "China will expedite the development of a cyber force." None of this should come as a surprise (see *China Brief*, April 16).

However, the main theme for the 2015 white paper is the "long-standing task for China to safeguard its maritime rights and interests." In particular, "the US carries on its 'rebalancing' strategy and enhances its military presence and its military alliances in this region. Japan is sparing no effort to dodge the post-war mechanism, overhauling its military and security policies." Additionally, "some of its offshore neighbors take provocative actions and reinforce their military presence on China's reefs and islands that they have illegally occupied. Some

external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs; a tiny few maintain constant close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China." Thus as an example of the evolution in China military strategy, this year a new "strategic task" has been added: "To safeguard the security of China's overseas interests." Currently, most foreign analysts assess China's overseas interests to include substantial maritime aspects, as previously inferred from the historic missions to safeguard China's national development and national interests.

In order to address the maritime challenge, the white paper makes a "new" statement that turns the PLA's traditional approach to operations and strategy on its head, or at least on its side: "The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests." As a result, the PLA Navy "will gradually shift its focus from 'offshore waters defense' to the combination of 'offshore waters defense' with 'open seas protection,'" an evolutionary development from what was announced in the 2006 white paper, the "Navy aims at gradual extension of the strategic depth for offshore defensive operations."

The white paper has thereby acknowledged the need to shift the balance in PLA thinking from ground operations to joint naval and aerospace operations—something that has been signaled for years (going back officially at least to 2004), but will require change in all aspects of future military modernization. The impact of this admission on the PLA as an institution cannot be understated. It will have effects on everything from force size, structure and composition to personnel policies, doctrine, training, logistics and equipment acquisition.

This development would appear to be directly related to the November 2013 announcement at the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Chinese Communist Party Central Committee "that joint operation command authority under the [Central Military Commission], and theater joint operation command system, will be improved" and decided to "optimize the size and structure of the army, adjust and improve the proportion between various troops, and reduce non-combat institutions and personnel." [3] Though no details of these changes have been announced publicly, we can expect them to be rolled out in the coming years and take several more years to implement and trouble shoot.

The rest of the 2015 white paper describes the various components of military modernization, all of which will be affected by these changes. The text provides a menu of items, each with a brief description of recent developments, that we should watch in the near future. These include topics such as

- Ideological and political work, including discipline and the fight against corruption
- Logistics modernization
- Advanced weaponry and equipment
- New-type military personnel
- Doctrine

- Strategic management, coordinated programming and planning
- Civil-military integration
- “Preparation for Military Struggle” and combat readiness
- Training
- Military operations other than war
- Security cooperation

Through an integrated program consisting of all these elements, the PLA seeks “to enhance [its] overall capabilities for deterrence and warfighting.” Results will not come overnight. Many changes will have major impact on long-standing “rice bowls” and institutional prerogatives. A careful reading of the white paper will see the word “gradual” is used multiple times. The changes envisioned, though still not revealed to the public, will take years and could result in the temporary loss of combat readiness as units and organization undergo transformation.

Conclusion

Those seeking to learn about the PLA should read it in conjunction with other reporting from official Chinese sources, which often provide more detail than the white papers. But readers must also be aware that some Chinese sources are more authoritative and reliable than others. **[4]** Many gaps in the white papers, especially about details of equipment and force structure, can be filled by the annual U.S. Department of Defense reports to Congress on the Chinese military and other U.S. government reports such as the recent Office of Naval Intelligence report on “The PLA Navy.” **[5]**

This year’s white paper does not provide specifics about the impending changes the PLA is soon to undertake. It does, however, provide a general outline of topics to monitor as the force undergoes a complex modernization and transformation. Based on the call for a greater maritime orientation in the force, we can expect to see reductions in the number of Army personnel and Army units in coming years, which will automatically raise the percentage of the other services’ personnel in the total force (currently Army and Second Artillery personnel make up over 70 percent of the 2.3 million active duty PLA, while the Navy consists of about 10 percent and the Air Force about 17 percent). A major question is whether the other services will be expanded by receiving some of the personnel billets from the reductions in the Army. Will more Navy admirals and Air Force generals be elevated to the Central Military Commission? Will Navy admirals and Air Force generals be tasked to command operations away from China’s shores? Will logistics forces be created or expanded to support extended operations outside of China? How will the PLA education system be adjusted to prepare officers and noncommissioned officers for the new tasks and mental outlook ahead?

The shift to a more maritime-oriented mindset and force structure is an evolutionary step necessitated by growth in all aspects of China’s comprehensive national power. However, the transition will not be easy or rapid for an organization that has been dominated by men in

green since 1927 and for a country with 14 land neighbors, four of them with nuclear weapons, that also faces the threat of terrorism and extremism on its borders.