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Highlights from China’s New Defense White Paper, “China’s Military Strategy”

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Introduction

On May 26th, the Chinese government released its 10th defense white paper (DWP),¹ entitled “China’s Military Strategy.”* DWPs—China’s most authoritative statements on national security—are published by the State Council Information Office and approved by the Central Military Commission, Ministry of National Defense, and State Council. Beijing primarily uses these documents as a public relations tool to help ease deepening international concern over China’s military modernization and answer calls for greater transparency. The new DWP tracks closely with the 2012 DWP and contains no major revelations about China’s military strategy or modernization; however, it includes some new guidance and emphasizes or clarifies certain aspects of its existing strategy, providing insights into China’s perceptions of its own security and its evolving defense priorities. Select key features of the new DWP are highlighted below.

Emphasis on the Maritime Domain

The DWP decisively elevates the maritime domain in China’s strategic thinking, asserting that “the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned.” In articulating “enhance[d] military strategic guidance” for its long-held concept of “active defense,”[†] the DWP emphasizes “highlighting maritime military struggle,” signaling that China recognizes its most urgent threats emanate from offshore and anticipates its most likely conflict scenarios will take place at sea.

The DWP notes the need for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy to transition from a primarily coastal force to a force that is capable of playing a global role. In an evolution from past DWPs, which have emphasized offshore defense as the primary focus of the PLA Navy, the new DWP notes that “the PLA Navy will gradually shift its focus from ‘offshore waters defense’ to the combination of ‘offshore waters defense’ with ‘open seas protection.’” This priority shift is reflected in the PLA Navy’s recent acquisitions, training, and operations (e.g., China’s first aircraft carrier and farther, longer-endurance patrols by PLA Navy surface ships and submarines).

* The majority of China’s defense white papers, which are released every other year, have been titled “China’s National Defense.” The 2012 white paper (released in 2013) was titled “The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces,” and the 1995 white paper was titled “China: Arms Control and Disarmament.”

[†] The DWP clarifies and augments China’s “active defense” concept, noting that the “new historical period” requires China to make adjustments to “enhance military strategy guidance” and “innovate basic operational doctrines.” According to the DWP, “the strategic concepts of active defense” are “adherence to the unity of strategic defense and operational and tactical offense; adherence to the principles of defense, self-defense and post-emptive strike; and adherence to the stance that ‘we will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked.’”

The DWP addresses China’s maritime territorial disputes, noting, “On the issues concerning China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, some of its offshore neighbors take provocative actions and reinforce their military presence on China’s reefs and islands that they have illegally occupied.” The DWP does not directly address how China will respond to perceived affronts to its sovereignty in the maritime realm. Elsewhere in the text, however, it assures the reader that China will “strike a balance between rights protection and stability maintenance” and strive to “prevent crises.” The DWP leaves the context for this statement somewhat ambiguous, but if taken to refer to China’s maritime disputes, it suggests China’s often-conflicting objectives of protecting territorial sovereignty and maintaining peaceful relations with other claimants are elastic, and that China will employ a flexible approach to its disputes rather than pursue the consolidation of its perceived rights and claims at any cost. Inherent in this suggestion is that costs may be imposed such that China will calculate it is not in its interest to escalate into conflict in order to safeguard its rights and interests.

The “New Situation” and “New Requirements” of China’s Security Environment

As in previous DWPs, the new DWP illustrates China’s “national security situation.” It hews closely—almost exactly—to the 2012 DWP’s description: China’s security outlook is favorable but faces localized threats. China assesses the world is becoming a more, not less, peaceful place, and that risks of large-scale war are declining. On the other hand, the potential for localized wars and “hotspot issues, such as ethnic, religious, border, and territorial disputes” is growing. Nontraditional threats of terrorism, piracy, natural disasters, and epidemics are also growing, according to the most recent DWPs.² The new DWP refers to this complex security environment as “the new situation,”^{*} and articulates several “new requirements” for China to accomplish its missions and strategic tasks in light of the complexities of the “new situation.”[†] It also makes the oft-cited point that China is experiencing “an important period of strategic opportunity” during which it can prepare itself to address these threats and enable China to realize “the Chinese Dream of great national rejuvenation.”

The DWP’s emphasis on a complex security environment with multiple traditional, nontraditional, external, and internal threats reflects China’s perception of its own vulnerability as its interests and equities become more globalized, and the consequent expansion of its military missions with an emphasis on safeguarding territorial integrity, projecting power, protecting Chinese citizens and commercial entities overseas, and securing an optimal environment for continued economic growth and the sustainability of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule.

The “New Commanding Heights” of Space and Cyberspace

The DWP asserts that “space and cyberspace have become the new commanding heights in strategic competition,”[‡] and that China will seek to achieve sufficient defense capabilities in both realms so as to protect its economic and

^{*} The 2012 DWP introduces the term “new situation,” but mentions it only once. By contrast, the new DWP uses “new situation” (and its variants “new circumstances” and “new historical period”) 15 times.

[†] These “new requirements” necessitate China’s armed forces to “work harder to create a favorable strategic posture,” “provide a solid security guarantee for the country’s peaceful development,” “constantly innovate strategic guidance and operational thoughts so as to ensure the capabilities of fighting and winning,” “pay close attention to the challenges in new security domains,” “seize the strategic initiative in military competition,” “actively participate in both regional and international security cooperation and effectively secure China’s overseas interests,” and “continue to follow the path of civil-military integration, actively participate in the country’s economic and social construction, and firmly maintain social stability, so as to remain a staunch force for upholding the Chinese Communist Party’s ruling position.”

[‡] This in part echoes a 2009 interview with then-PLA Air Force Commander General Xu Qiliang, in which he said that “the domain of space and air have become the new commanding height for international strategic competition.” Kevin Pollpeter, “The PLAAF and the Integration of Air and Space Power,” in Richard P. Hallion et. al, eds., *The Chinese Air Force: Evolving Concepts, Roles, and Capabilities*, National Defense University Press, 2012, 165.

strategic interests. The DWP positions China as a purely defensive actor in both realms, noting that China opposes “the weaponization of and arms race in outer space” and is “one of the major victims of hacker attacks...confronted with grave threats to its cyber infrastructure.” China’s reliance on space and cyberspace will continue to grow as the PLA’s most sophisticated long-range weapons—which will require unimpeded access to these domains for C4ISR* and targeting—come online.³

Military Professionalism, Ideological Discipline, and Civil-Military Integration

China’s DWPs, in addition to providing regular updates on core topics (like military modernization, international security cooperation, and China’s security environment), call out specific issues or themes in each iteration.[†] One such theme in the new DWP concerns the PLA’s human capital and organizational management. “Ideological and political building” is identified as the PLA’s highest priority, and the DWP calls on the armed forces to “perfect the system for military human resources” by instilling strict discipline, modernizing force management, and reforming military education, training, and recruitment, among other things. The DWP emphasizes the importance of the CCP’s “absolute leadership over the military” on several occasions. An entire section of the DWP is devoted to “in-depth development of civil-military integration,” which emphasizes the need for a more unified, coordinated, and streamlined mechanism for defense policymaking by China’s civilian and military leadership. Notably, the DWP announces that the PLA will “set up a system and a working mechanism for overall and coordinated programming and planning.” This, among other indications, suggests that the Xi Jinping government seeks to centralize and tightly control national security decision making in China.[‡]

Readiness and the “Preparation for Military Struggle”

In a section called “Preparation for Military Struggle,” the DWP emphasizes another key theme of the Xi Administration: the need for China to prepare to fight and win wars by training in “realistic conditions.” The DWP notes that the PLA will begin to “intensify training” in complex environments and scenarios and establish a “training supervision and inspection system, so as to incorporate real-combat requirements into training.” This points to a key weakness of the PLA: its lack of combat experience.[§]

* C4ISR stands for command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

[†] For example, past DWPs have included special sections on “the military legal system,” “science, technology, and industry for defense,” “supporting national economic and social development,” “national defense reserve buildup,” and so on. It is unclear how or why these “special topics” are selected, but their inclusion suggests they are of particular importance to China’s top leaders.

[‡] President Xi appears intent on streamlining and centralizing China’s security policymaking apparatus and solidifying his personal role at the apex of that apparatus. In late 2013, China established a Central National Security Commission “to perfect national security systems and strategies in order to ensure national security,” with President Xi at the head of the organization. President Xi has also involved himself more deeply in military affairs than his predecessors Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, heading up an ambitious anticorruption campaign in the military and pursuing reinvigorated security reform under the banner of achieving the “dream of a strong military.” Tom Mitchell and Gabriel Wildau, “Xi Jinping’s Anti-Corruption Purge Takes Aim at China’s Military,” *Financial Times*, March 3, 2015. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/09eae174-c154-11e4-88ca-00144feab7de.html#axzz3bXa69Ivy>; Kevin McCauley, “Xi’s Military Reform Plan: Acceleration Construction of a Strong PLA,” *Jamestown Foundation China Brief*, December 5, 2014. http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43159&cHash=e40b590ae2ec22c12eb3fb5674fcb476#.VWiDUM9Vhkk; U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, *2014 Annual Report to Congress*, November 2014, 231-233; Yun Sun, “China’s New ‘State Security Committee.’ Questions Ahead,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies Pacific Forum*, November 4, 2013; and Daniel M. Hartnett, “Army Day Coverage Stresses Winning Battles with ‘Dream of a Strong Military,’” *Jamestown Foundation China Brief*, August 23, 2013. http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41300&no_cache=1#.VWiFKs9Vhkk.

[§] For a discussion of the PLA’s lack of combat experience and other key weaknesses, see Michael S. Chase et. al, “China’s Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA),” *Rand Corporation for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 2015, 48-52. http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR800/RR893/RAND_RR893.pdf.

Endnotes

- ¹ China's State Council Information Office, *China's Military Strategy*, May 2015. <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2014.htm>.
- ² China's State Council Information Office, *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces*, April 2013. <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/2012.htm>.
- ³ Kevin Pollpeter et. al, "China Dream, Space Dream: China's Progress in Space Technologies and Implications for the United States," *University of California, San Diego Institute on Global Conflict and Cooperation for the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, March 2, 2015, 7-8. http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/China%20Dream%20Space%20Dream_Report.pdf.

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