

Reading China's Defence White Papers - Exorcising Bias, Foiling Disinformation

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Date: 26 August 2019

China remains an inexhaustible font of 'breaking news' in contemporary international politics. Reporting and analysing each document originating from Beijing is an exercise in perpetuity and there is a veritable race to put forth unique analyses of the 'fine-print' in the Chinese Communist Party's official propaganda and pronouncements. While ethnic conflicts, civil wars, and acts of terrorism engender the conviction that humanity's violent instincts have not receded in any significant measure, China's periodic posturing entices another part of our consciousness — one that harbours suspicion and engenders alarm and apprehension. Even as reportage about the death and destruction caused by conflicts between organised human interests brings sorrow, lament, and cynicism about the prospects of peace in our times, paying heed to China's pronouncements rests on the bottom-line that the calamity to end all calamities might well be the one involving this country, which incorporates within it, more than one-fifth of humanity and, as such, will assuredly impact everyone else's vital interests in drastic, albeit varying, proportions. It is important to register these cognitive factors that loom large in our analysis of China because of two primary reasons:

The first reason relates to China's opting to communicate its intentions to the world. The publication of China's White Papers in English or other foreign languages arises out of necessity and prudence, as without these English-language versions, the message being put out by Beijing (in Mandarin) is liable to be misunderstood or interpreted without context by foreign translators. However, in the particular case of Defence White Papers, these are also ready tools for disinformation, remoulding unfavourable perceptions, creating confusion, and proffering 'insights' to those on the outside, looking in. Of course, China is not alone in this and it would be hasty to attribute hostile intentions without first acknowledging that all nations, without exception, practice this craft. Not only does the Communist Party of China (CPC)

generate such documents in order to create a convincing portrayal of the Chinese government's stated goals, intentions, plans, capacities, and capabilities, but it also does so in order to erect an edifice (facade?) of the Chinese State that is palatable to outside observers. In other words, these documents use internationally comprehensible and conventionally accepted phraseology to make catchy references to the international system, inter-State power politics, China's national interests, sovereign rights, internal conflicts, security strategy, and so on. They carry recognisable encoded hints and suggestions that are 'meant' to be decoded and interpreted as originally intended.

For instance, consistent references have been made in all of China's Defence White Papers to US hegemony in the world; China's peaceful intentions and commitment to not seeking hegemony; and "active defence" as the "strategic guidance for China's national defence. This consistency does not, however, make for any real predictability in terms of China's behaviour. For instance, it would be foolish to extrapolate from the "active defence" doctrine to conclude that China would not attack an adversary pre-emptively, especially, if it makes strategic sense to future Chinese planners who will certainly have the tactical means available should they want to use them. The irony of China "*exercising its national sovereignty*" to militarise islands and reefs in the South China Sea and then promising to "*firmly uphold*" freedom-of-navigation, is not lost upon the international community.

The second reason why it is so important to pay attention to why and how we read Chinese official documents is that the analysts' own cognitive biases further exacerbate the problems, diminishing the accuracy of both, interpretation and prediction. For instance, an inordinate amount of attention is paid to the number of times a particular word, phrase or term occurs in a given White Paper, despite the fact that this does not really add value to analysis. For instance, "the US", "India", and "Pakistan" appear 24, 16, and 12 times in the 2019 White Paper. Knowing the history and the current state of China's relations with these countries, it would be patently wrong to use these numerical values as the basis upon which to rank their importance to China. Another hobbling factor is the 'framing effect', which results from the manner in which certain information is presented, either without context or in an unrelated context. This can cause or enable an analyst to ignore what has been omitted and over-emphasise such portions as are available and have been neatly, albeit incorrectly contextualised. This also causes one to erroneously miss connections between the presented information and its original context. For instance, the reference to the People's Liberation Army "*taking effective measures to create*

favourable conditions for the peaceful resolution of the Donglang (Doklam) standoff” has probably been inserted solely for consumption by Indian analysts. It is intended to be seen within India as a signal that the standoff is not over (at least as far as China is concerned) while simultaneously appearing to offer an olive branch against the backdrop of India’s ostensible “*re-calibration*” in its China-policy.

The foregoing arguments are neither intended to assert that China’s Defence White Papers are inconsequential documents nor that their truth-value is entirely questionable. They do, indeed, indicate China’s acknowledgment of the normative trend towards greater transparency in publishing, in howsoever limited extent, official doctrines on matters which could potentially escalate into conflicts. However, one must appreciate that for a political system which was extremely impenetrable until a decade ago, publishing comprehensive documents detailing the government’s outlook represents a very significant challenge. Beijing-based planners are hardly likely to be unaware that the outside world would, *per force*, be a major factor in China’s formulation of its strategic response to real or potential external challenges. As a consequence, it is extremely unlikely that the exercise of publication of these White Papers is being carried out without their having been vetted at the highest levels of Chinese government and approvals for their publication would have been accorded by the most powerful organs of the State.

This article seeks to provide a caution to Indian analysts and China-watchers by underscoring at least some of the several infirmities that currently dominate the strategic and analytical discourse, particularly in India. Succeeding Commentaries will highlight, in greater detail, specific issues in the 2019 Defence White Paper pertaining to China’s maritime interests and capabilities.

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