

# White Paper on “China’s National Defence in 2008”: An Analysis

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A White Paper on “China’s National Defence in 2008” was released by the Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China on January 20, 2009. This is China’s sixth White Paper on “National Defence” since the first, which was released in 1998. China commenced publication of this paper to convince the world about its “peaceful rise” and to dispel the largely held world view that all its defence modernisation plans were quite opaque and shrouded in secrecy. The paper rebuts most of the issues raised in the United States (US) Department of Defence (DoD) report on “The Military Power of the People’s Republic of China”, released on March 3, 2008. Describing the US report as “overstated”, China systematically seeks to underplay the leapfrogging capabilities of its armed forces, better known as the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), by means of this White Paper.

The White Paper of 2008 does not differ in any significant manner from the earlier papers, as China has all along maintained the theme that it does not seek to threaten or destabilise any country or region, no matter how developed it becomes. Some of the highlights of the White Paper are:

- China advocates the settlement of international disputes by peaceful means. It opposes aggression, expansion and the enlargement of military alliances.

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- China would stick to the road of peaceful development, pursue an opening-up strategy for mutual benefit, and promote the building of a harmonious world with enduring peace.
- China’s overall national strength has increased substantially and its capability for safeguarding national security has been further enhanced. The country’s security situation has improved steadily.
- China is still confronted with long-term, complicated, and diverse security threats and challenges. The internal security threats include separatist movements that are working for the “Tibetan independence”, “Taiwanese independence”, and “East Turkistan independence”.
- Global power play is undergoing profound realignment as major powers step-up their efforts to cooperate with each other and new groups of developing powers emerge. As the common security interests of countries have increased, the chances of large-scale wars appear low in the medium- to long-term.
- The arms race in some regions is heating up and it is possible that military strength may increasingly influence international diplomacy. This poses grave challenges to the international arms control and non-proliferation regimes.
- US has continued to maintain its strategic focus in the Asia-Pacific region by consolidating its military alliances with Japan and South Korea, selling arms to Taiwan and enhancing its military capabilities through re-deployment of its forces.
- China considers “informationisation”<sup>1</sup> (sic) as a “strategic priority” for its armed force’s modernisation efforts, and endeavours to build integrated, technologically advanced and efficient armed forces.
- The PLA ground forces (Army) have progressively graduated to the concept of trans-regional mobility as opposed to static deployments hitherto, wherein a formation remained deployed in a single military region forever. The operational formations have been downsized and have become more multi-functional. The integration of Army aviation force, conversion of infantry to light mechanised infantry, and creation of information counter-measure force have provided additional flexibility and accorded varied options to the Army.
- The PLA Navy, too, has been striving to comprehensively improve its capabilities of integrated offshore operations, strategic deterrence and counter-attacks. It plans to gradually develop its capabilities for conducting operations in distant waters and countering non-traditional security threats. The Navy

endeavours to build new types of submarines, destroyers, frigates and aircraft, as well as upgrade weaponry and equipment, and maintain its operational profile with second generation equipment as the ‘core’ and third generation equipment as the “mainstay”.

- The PLA Air Force is speeding its transition from territorial air defence to both offensive and defensive operations, for which it aims to increase its capabilities for carrying out reconnaissance and early warning, air strikes, air and missile defence, and strategic power projection. It plans to achieve this aim with a force consisting of third generation aircraft and ground-to-air missiles as the “mainstay”, and modified second-generation aircraft and ground-to-air missiles as the “supplement”.
- China has reiterated that it will not be the first to use nuclear weapons and will not use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear weapon states or in the nuclear-weapon-free zones. However, if China faces a nuclear threat, the nuclear missile units of the Second Artillery Force will go into a state of alert, and prepare for a nuclear counter-attack. In accordance with “no first use” doctrine and to avoid unauthorised and accidental launches, it has kept the command authority of the Second Artillery Force as highly centralised.

A comparison of China’s White Paper vis-à-vis US DoD report by the author brings out the differing positions of the two countries. In the author’s view, the American report is indicative of the fact that the US fails to understand the Chinese intentions for its military modernisation. It suspects the Chinese intentions despite their claims of “peaceful rise”. Some of the widest differences between the two reports are highlighted in Table 1.

Many issues have emerged from an analysis of the Chinese White Paper. China has maintained opacity about its military capabilities by totally excluding specific details about its armed forces. The sections covering the four arms of PLA maintain the common theme of “structure, organisation and general force building” to meet the requirement of “informationised” warfare and steps being taken to enable its forces to conduct “offensive defence operations”.

In the 2006 White Paper on national defence, China laid down a three-step strategy for progressing with the modernisation of PLA – lay a solid foundation by 2010, make major progress by 2020 and, basically, reach the goal of building its armed

Table 1. Comparison of US DoD 2008 report and China's White Paper of 2008

Issue/Point	US DoD 2008 report	Chinese White Paper of 2008
PLA modernisation	The PLA is pursuing comprehensive transformation from an army designed for protracted wars of attrition on its territory, to one capable of winning short duration, high intensity conflicts along its periphery against high-tech adversaries.	China aims at a military strategy of active defence. It adheres to the principle of defensive operations, but seeks to strike back only after the enemy has initiated an attack. It aims at winning local wars under conditions of informationisation.
Chinese defence budget	China's total military related expenditure in 2007 could be between US\$ 97 to 139 billion. A large part of the budget is dedicated to hardware procurement and production, especially new generation of survivable nuclear missiles, SSNs and SSBNs, aircraft and advanced weapon systems.	Defence budget growth has remained lower than the GDP growth rate; it remains well below 2 per cent of GDP (US\$ 45 billion in 2007). A major part of defence expenditure has been used to increase the salaries and benefits of servicemen and compensating for inflation.
Taiwan	China's near-term focus is on preparing for contingency in the Taiwan Strait. It had deployed 990-1,070 short range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) opposite Taiwan.	In peacetime, Chinese missiles are not directed or targetted toward any specific country.
Employment of PLA	In addition to focussing on the Taiwan contingency, China is also developing capabilities for use in other contingencies such as conflict over resources or disputed territories.	PLA seeks to carry out counter-terrorism activities, maintaining stability (within its territories and in the region surrounding it), emergency rescue and international peacekeeping tasks. It considers military operations other than war an important form of applying military force.

forces, which would be capable of winning informationised wars by mid-21<sup>st</sup> century. The 2008 White Paper clearly lays down the focus of "major progress by 2020" in the second stage towards "mechanisation and informationisation".

The term “military operations other than war (MOOTW)” has been used for the first time, as China feels assured of its increasing military strength and feels confident about operating at locations away from its territory. A case in point is the deployment of PLA Navy ships in the Indian Ocean off Somalia in 2009 for anti-piracy duties.

The dramatic increase in Chinese defence spending over the past 30 years is striking. The first decade saw an average 3.5 per cent rise in the defence budget. In the second decade, the figure rose to an average increase of 14.5 per cent, and to 15.9 per cent in the last decade. China, of course, maintains that its defence budget grew slower than its GDP growth rate and is only 1.38 per cent of GDP. Though China justifies its soaring military expenditure on account of the increase in military manpower costs and runaway inflation, it is more realistic to assume that the increase in Chinese defence budget in recent years is due to qualitative changes in inventory made under the country's shifting military strategy.

The White Paper does not give any indication of its defence spending figures for the coming year. Though it is expected to follow the recent trend of double digit increase, the slowdown in the Chinese economy, with consequential effect on its GDP, may hold some surprises in store. China had announced an increase of nearly 18 per cent in its military budget of US\$ 57.2 billion in 2008. The fiscal support compulsions for the ongoing modernisation drive in PLA will not permit a drastic reduction in growth figures. It is likely that the defence budget for 2009 will grow by 10-12 per cent.

The transparency factor appears to have increased a little. However, there is nothing new in the White Paper, which is not available in the open realm. While the US DoD report emphasises that the international community has limited knowledge of Chinese motivations, decision-making and key capabilities of PLA, China has claimed that it will persist in taking the road of peaceful development, and that it will never seek hegemony or engage in military expansion now, or in the future. But this does not amount to a rational explanation and does nothing to reassure the world at large and its neighbouring countries in particular.

The Chinese claim of providing disclosures in the “United Nations (UN) Instrument for Reporting Military Expenditure” and “UN Register of Conventional Arms” is not convincing enough. While the Chinese military expenditure disclosures for the year 2007 have not yet been released by the UN, the 2006 disclosures only mention that the total defence expenditure of RMB 297.238 billion was distributed in the ratio of 33.99, 32.66 and 33.35 per cent under the heads of personnel, training and maintenance

and equipment, respectively, for its active and reserve forces. There is no reason to believe that the 2007 disclosure would be any different with regard to increase in transparency. The disclosures in the UN Register of Conventional Arms are also sketchy. The details for 1996-2005 have not been disclosed under the pretext of Chinese Government's protest against the US supply of arms to Taiwan (without naming the US in the White Paper). Such insufficient details serve no purpose and reinforce the global belief about lack of transparency.

India, the largest neighbour of China, does not find any mention in the strategic calculus for a rethink of its military strategy. The White Paper does mention that separatist forces working for "Tibetan independence," amongst others, pose threats to China's unity and security. India, in fact, figures only in two places, wherein the commencement of strategic dialogue and conduct of two joint military exercises has been mentioned in the section covering "International Security Cooperation."

China voices its unequivocal commitment to consolidating and strengthening the existing international arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation mechanisms, advocates peaceful use of space, opposes the introduction of weapons and an arms race in outer space. Yet, it is seen to be doing exactly the opposite of what it professes. China has successfully conducted manned spacecraft missions and has developed the missile technology necessary to shoot down satellites in orbit. It continues launching its own navigation satellites, which are crucial to guiding these and other ballistic and cruise missiles. Paradoxically, China's aspirations are, thus, more transparent by extrapolation from empirical facts.

Even though China has reiterated its "no first use of nuclear weapons" doctrine, the mere mention of its nuclear missile forces' intention to "go into a state of alert, and get ready for a nuclear counter-attack to deter the enemy from using nuclear weapons against China," creates room for ambiguities and renders the issue open to various interpretations. The co-location of nuclear and conventional missile launch units in the Second Artillery Force would always be viewed with uncertainty by its adversaries and other countries in the neighbourhood. This issue becomes all the more complicated in the case of India as it possesses nuclear weapons, but remains a non-signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). This leaves India's status "unclear" in the Chinese viewpoint.

Currently, China sources a major portion of its oil, necessary to support its economic growth, from Africa and the Middle East. Its oil supply route virtually forms a chain right through the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea, across the Malacca Strait.

China's economic interests have expanded on a worldwide scale. The PLA Navy's deployment of missile destroyers in the waters off the Somalian coast is not a short-term measure for dealing with pirates, but a way to establish the foundations for developing the capabilities for defence of its sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean region by maintaining a permanent naval presence, much to India's discomfort.

The White Paper of 2008 clearly indicates that China is now thinking much beyond Taiwan. This is manifest in increased PLA Navy activities in East and South China seas, increasing the number of forays in the mid-Pacific till the second island chain, sailing its warships right across the Tsugaru Straits between the two Japanese islands, conducting bilateral/multilateral naval exercises and anti-piracy patrols in the Indian Ocean, to name a few maritime activities. The increased confidence level of PLA ships while interacting with US warships at sea in the Pacific Ocean speaks a lot about China's changed "force projection" mindset.

Thus, China's goal no longer appears to be merely the preservation of its land, territorial waters and airspace. It now also aims at safeguarding its national interests, which are spread across the globe. The acknowledgement of its plans to operate at a great distance from its shores further confirms this new focus. The oft-reported "programme for constructing aircraft carriers", as yet officially not acknowledged by China, would naturally form an important instrument of PLA Navy's "force projection" endeavour.

It may be inferred that China actually seeks to develop its force projection capabilities to advance an expanded level of political objectives. Hence, it is in the process of acquiring the ability to use military power, especially maritime power, as a potent and versatile instrument of armed diplomacy and statecraft to support its foreign affairs policies. This would ensure the dual purpose of guarding against perceived vulnerabilities and also bestow on it the great power status of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that it seeks.

The harder task, however, for China would be to convince the world that it plans to achieve its objective of becoming a great power through military modernisation as part of its "peaceful rise", a contradicting stance that it has been vociferously propagating.

### Note

1. The term informationisation refers to the integration of all communication, radar, nuclear, C4ISR, space and satellite systems with strategic and tactical command platforms to achieve net-centric joint warfare capability.