



China's Maritime Security Strategy: An Assessment Of The White Paper On Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

In January 2017, China released its first ever White Paper on Asia-Pacific security cooperation, which sought to embolden Beijing's (littoral) leadership in the region. Highlighting maritime security in the Asia-Pacific as a regional hotspot, the policy paper called for the establishment of a favourable regional order by underlining the merits of cooperative security. Simultaneously, it also sought to entrench China's sovereign interests by displaying a 'reactive assertiveness' in the maritime domain. Referring to the South China Sea (SCS) dispute in particular, the paper declared that while China remained committed to upholding freedom of navigation in the SCS, it would also not shy away from making a "necessary response" to violation of its territorial integrity. Beijing's desire to enhance its economic and military influence in the maritime domain understandably has an effect on the security calculus of the Asia-Pacific. In response to China's growing military capabilities and assertiveness in international waters, other regional players have also been emboldened or forced to stake territorial claims in the interest of their sovereignty. The consequent insecurity, tension and power play is likely to have a destabilising effect on the region. It is in this context that this paper attempts to analyse China's maritime security strategy as outlined in the White Paper, on three counts: by analysing threat perceptions from the Chinese perspective, by outlining the need to build a comprehensive maritime security framework that addresses the interests of all stakeholders in the region and, finally, by analysing security implications for India.

Introduction

On January 11, 2017, the State Council of the People's Republic of China (PRC) published a White Paper outlining the country's policies on security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. Defining concepts of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security¹ from the Chinese perspective, the document recommended the establishment of a regional security framework by:

1. Promoting "common development", and laying a solid economic foundation;
2. Building partnerships and strengthening the region's political foundation;

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3. Strengthening existing regional multilateral mechanisms, along with a willingness to shoulder regional and global security responsibilities;
4. Promoting rule-setting, and improving institutional safeguards for peace and stability;
5. Intensifying military exchanges and cooperation;
6. Resolving differences and disputes, and maintaining a conducive environment for peace and stability.²

Staking a claim over the “advancement of regional prosperity” and security as *its own responsibility*, the White Paper essentially sought to embolden China’s position in the Asia-Pacific through a three-pronged strategy: first, by providing competitive alternatives to the US-led security architecture in the Asia-Pacific; second, by aiming to normalise US and other great power acceptance of the emerging regional order; and, third, by announcing the PRC’s intent to incentivise regional compliance through rewards and punishments.³

However, in the interest of striking a collaborative note, it also highlighted China’s commitment to the promotion of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific. The document urged other countries in the region to reject the Cold War mentality, respect others’ legitimate interests and concerns, and pursue positive interactions. An operative dictum of the paper in this regard is cooperation by member states in the maritime domain.

In recent years, the PRC’s policies on maritime cooperation have been premised on two key factors: (1) economic prosperity, as highlighted by President Xi Jinping at the Indonesian Parliament in October 2013, where he stated that Beijing was willing to enhance maritime cooperation with Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, and build a 21st-century Maritime Silk Road⁴; (2) the rejection of any external interference, as emphasised at the fourth summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in May 2014. Here, President Xi advocated a new security vision for Asia, where he stressed the role played by Asians themselves in building regional security.⁵

The White Paper conforms to both these themes by incorporating larger developments in economic globalisation, and calling for the establishment of a favourable regional order by underlining the merits of cooperative security. Arguing that economic and trade volumes of the Asia-Pacific accounts for 60% and half of the world’s total, respectively, the White Paper highlights how a convergence of commercial and security interests could work in the favour of all parties.

Despite the emphasis on maritime connectivity and cooperation, the White Paper also seeks to entrench China’s sovereign interests by displaying a ‘reactive assertiveness’⁶ in the maritime domain. Referring to the South China Sea (SCS) dispute in particular, the paper declares that while China remained committed to upholding freedom of navigation in the SCS, it would also not shy away from making a “necessary response” to violation of its territorial integrity.

Beijing’s desire to enhance its economic and military influence in the maritime domain understandably has serious implications for the Asia-Pacific. The prevailing regional configuration, while stable, faces the risk of a shift in the balance of power in favour of China. Increasing assertion from the PRC is likely to manifest in increased regional defense spending, and enhanced security commitments with external powers.⁷ Further, as China’s economic ascent facilitates growing military capabilities and assertiveness in international waters, other regional players are also experiencing their own

rise in nationalism and military capability, and have exhibited greater willingness to stake territorial claims.⁸ The consequent insecurity, tension and power play is likely to have a destabilising effect on the region. It is in this context that this paper attempts to analyse China's maritime security strategy as outlined in the White Paper, on three counts: first, by analysing threat perceptions from the Chinese perspective; second, by outlining the need to build a comprehensive maritime security framework that addresses the interests of all stakeholders in the region and, finally, by analysing security implications for India.

Maritime security as a “destabilising” factor

In 2004, US defence consultant Booz Allen Hamilton published a report titled *Energy Futures in Asia* analysing Chinese and Indian perspectives on energy security and vulnerabilities, and their impact on Asia. The report described how China was adopting a “string of pearls” strategy, by establishing military bases and diplomatic ties stretching from the Middle East to southern China, including a new naval base at the Pakistani port of Gwadar.⁹ Thirteen years later, this oft-cited strategy has had a significant impact on the security calculus of the Asia-Pacific region.

With the escalation of China's maritime leverage in the region, Beijing has indicated preparedness militarily, through the expansion and development of its navy, and diplomatically, by establishing political and commercial relationships. China's recent White Paper adds a third dimension – i.e. the strategic.

The document argues that the Asia-Pacific region is, for all intents and purposes, stable, with steady and relatively fast growth, growing regional and sub-regional cooperation in both economic and security areas and heightened connectivity-building. However, it recognises multiple destabilising factors, one of them being maritime territorial disputes.

“Destabilisation” essentially means undermining the power or control of an entity (generally a government or territory) and rendering it unsafe. However, when viewed from the Chinese perspective, the term primarily indicates “certain countries’ provocations of regional disputes for their selfish interests”.¹⁰ By equating regional disputes with instability, Beijing has indicated:

1. An expansion of its threat bracket, with the inclusion of non-traditional security threats in the maritime sphere;
2. The importance of developing a comprehensive regional framework to counter these threats;
3. A non-negotiable position on the protection of China's sovereign interests;
4. The threat of the use of force on encroachment of its territorial integrity;
5. The merits of solving disputes bilaterally, as opposed to internationalising them.

The following paragraphs attempt to examine these “destabilising” factors further.

Expanding the Threat Bracket: Non-Traditional Threats

Elaborating on its concept of “comprehensive security”, China has called for the upholding of security in both traditional and non-traditional fields.

Devoting considerable ink to non-traditional threats, the White Paper highlights that these security risks are on the rise in the Asia-Pacific region. They include damaged ecological environment in marine areas, natural disasters, and man-made ones like oil leaks and hazard chemicals. Further, instances of piracy, terrorism, smuggling and drug trafficking also pose a risk to maritime security in the region. While stating that the overall maritime situation was stable in the Asia-Pacific, China has argued that it was in the interest of all parties to maintain maritime peace, security, and freedom of navigation and overflight in the region.

In recent years, China has scaled up its operations in the non-traditional sphere. Since 2008, 25 batches of escort formations, including 78 naval vessels, 54 helicopters and over 21,000 officers and soldiers, have convoyed nearly 6300 ships from across the world to destinations safely. Altogether, 60 ships that got into difficulty have been assisted.¹¹ December 2016 also marked the completion of the 1000th escort mission by the People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLA-N; the exercise took place in the Gulf of Aden).¹² To further support its anti-piracy operations, China is also constructing its first overseas military base in Djibouti – just a few miles from Camp Lemonnier, one of the Pentagon's largest and most important foreign installations. According to the Chinese Defence Ministry, the support facility will be mainly used to provide rest and rehabilitation for the Chinese troops taking part in escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and waters off Somalia, United Nations (UN) peace-keeping and humanitarian rescue.¹³

In light of changing global realities, militarisation and distrust among countries no longer serve as the only determinants of security. The discourse on security now includes a wide-ranging array of environmental and ecological threats, natural disasters, drug and human trafficking, terrorism and many others. To address these new challenges, the White Paper has called for the enhancement of regional security governance, particularly in the maritime sphere, in a coordinated way. This translates into counter-operations and pre-emptive identification of new threats.

The following collaborative efforts by China with the ASEAN countries on non-traditional security threats reflect well on this cooperative agenda:

1. The Second Safe Mekong Joint Operation by China, Laos, Myanmar and Thailand reportedly resulted in the arrest of 10,000 suspects on drug-trafficking charges, and the resolution of over 9000 drug-related cases;¹⁴
2. To pre-empt natural disasters, China has also invested in the study of oceanography and maritime research. Prime examples include: the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the establishment of the China–Malaysia Joint Oceanographic Research Centre, construction of the China–Indonesia Centre for the Oceans and Climate, and the third China–Southeast Asian Countries Marine Research and Environmental Protection Cooperation Forum;¹⁵
3. To further concerted efforts on environmental protection, China and Thailand also conducted a scientific expedition in the Andaman Sea, and held the Fourth Joint Committee Meeting on Marine Cooperation.¹⁶

Building a Regional Security Framework

Such partnerships are characteristic of the “Regional Security Complex” theory advanced by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever in *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International*

Security in 2003.¹⁷ Simply put, the concept of regional security complexes covers how security is clustered in geographically shaped regions. Since security concerns do not travel well over distances, their occurrence is often concentrated in a single area. Consequently, the security of each actor in a region interacts with the security of the other actors, leading to an interdependence of security within the region.

Since 2014, official Chinese media has highlighted “partnerships” (*huoban guanxi*) as an important idea in the country’s foreign policy.¹⁸ Diplomatic officials regard a partnership as a flexible category of bilateral or multilateral relationship distinguished principally by cooperation between non-allied parties to achieve mutually profitable goals¹⁹ – in this case, addressing non-traditional security threats.

Through its White Paper, China has called for improving the regional security framework by upgrading existing mechanisms, equal participation, consensus, and being in sync with the region’s economic framework. This would involve “in-depth dialogue and communication to increase strategic mutual trust, reduce mutual misgivings, seek common ground while resolving differences and live in harmony with one another”.²⁰

A fundamental element in such a cooperative effort would be to address the needs of all parties in the region. The Asia-Pacific represents a diverse region with stark differences in country size, military capability and influential capacity. The White Paper only sharpens these dichotomies, instead of celebrating them. For instance, small- and medium-sized countries are asked to not take sides among disputing large countries. Clear behavioural guidelines are spelt out for relations with major powers in the region, with no ink devoted to the smaller countries.

Despite its rhetoric on collaboration, the White Paper therefore fundamentally asserts only Beijing’s leadership aspirations in the region, reflecting the Realist notions of self-help and self-interest. The emphasis on regional cooperation is further underscored by a non-negotiable position on China’s sovereignty, precluding any complete fulfilment of shared interests, and those of other countries. Understandably, then, there is equal scope for both cooperation and conflict in the region – a fact that Beijing has been cognisant of, and addressed in its White Paper by highlighting the mutual distrust between states.

Protection of Sovereign Interests over Cooperation

Assigning regional hotspots and sensitive issues the status of “leftovers” from the past, China has argued that mutual trust among countries in the Asia-Pacific region has often been undermined by history. Maritime disputes through centuries have prevented countries from seeking a common ground to resolve their differences, and hampered the practice of “peaceful coexistence” among/by member states. Arguing that regional development and cooperation cannot be held hostage to old problems, the White Paper recommends adherence to the tradition of mutual respect as a means of resolution. The document states that parties to maritime disputes (sovereign states) should “respect” historical facts and engage in direct consultation and negotiation. Such engagements further needed to be in accordance with international law, the foremost being the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

However, China’s maritime assertiveness lies in stark contrast to these recommendations. Consider the SCS dispute, for instance. In July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration, The Hague, delivered a sweeping rebuke on China’s behaviour in the SCS,

including its construction of artificial islands, and found that its expansive claim to sovereignty over the waters had no legal basis.²¹ The landmark case, brought by the Philippines, was seen as an important crossroads in China's rise as a global power, and there had been speculation that the tribunal could force Beijing to reconsider its assertive tactics in the region or risk being labelled an international outlaw.²² However, the Chinese Foreign Ministry strongly asserted Beijing's "territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests in the South China Sea", and argued that under no circumstances would these be impacted by the judgement. China further rejected the international ruling as "null and void" and devoid of any "binding force".²³

Further, in direct contravention of the tribunal's ruling, China has methodically begun to expand its regional military footprint in the region. Besides stepping up its fortification of military outposts in the Spratly Islands in open defiance of the tribunal's ruling, China has constructed reinforced aircraft hangars on Subi, Mischief and Fiery Cross reefs. These new facilities have potential military usage and expand the PLA's power-projection capability in the SCS.²⁴

The asymmetry of power (military and otherwise) between the two countries further makes it almost impossible for Philippines to hold China accountable to the judgement. Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte has already decided to avoid confrontation with China, and sees no need to press Beijing to abide by the July ruling. This is evident in Manila's decision to not include the SCS ruling in the agenda of the upcoming ASEAN summit in 2017, where it will occupy the president's chair. As the Philippine Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Enrique Manalo clarified, "The Hague ruling will not be on the agenda in the sense that it's already part of international law So we really can't discuss the ruling. It's there".²⁵

Perhaps recognising the dubiousness of its "cooperation" claims, then, the White Paper argues that China and the ASEAN countries stay in close communication and dialogue on the SCS issue. It argues that the two sides have strengthened pragmatic maritime cooperation, steadily advanced the consultations on the Code of Conduct (COC) in these waters and made positive progress.

However, by claiming "indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha islands and their adjacent waters", Beijing's vision of realising mutually beneficial outcomes through cooperation for mutual benefit, and upholding freedom of navigation and overflight, in the SCS appear to be unconvincing.²⁶

A similar hollowness is also reflected in issues concerning the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands and maritime demarcation in the East China Sea between China and Japan – the White Paper minces no words in claiming them to be part of China's territory. Despite several rounds of high-level consultations, the issue remains a deterrent to peace and stability in the region. While China claims that its sovereignty over the islands has a sufficient historical and legal basis, this understandably discounts counter-arguments from Tokyo.

The White Paper clearly states that "Pending a satisfactory solution to disputes, the parties concerned should engage in dialogue to promote cooperation, manage each situation appropriately and prevent conflicts from escalating, so as to jointly safeguard peace and stability in the region".²⁷ However, 35 paragraphs and 3884 words later, China also issues the threat of the use of force on any possible encroachment of its sovereign interests.

Retaliatory Response

To date, Beijing's security policies have been guided by its protection of "core national interests" that concern regime stability, sovereignty integrity and power rivalry/shift in Asia.²⁸ The term the Chinese use when talking with foreign officials, and in public pronouncements, is *hexin liyi*; traditionally, it has meant critical issues on which there is very little room, if any, for negotiation.²⁹ Until recent years, "core interests" were understood to refer only to Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang – specific sovereignty issues that China has always said are internal matters. But the term has expanded to now include the SCS and Diaoyu Islands.³⁰

Since its founding in 1949, Beijing has implemented a calculus of threat and retaliation signals by first deterring adversaries from taking actions contrary to Chinese interests by threatening the use of military force and, if deterrence fails, to explain and justify Beijing's resorting to military force.³¹ This policy is reflected in the White Paper, where China emphatically states that it is "forced to make necessary responses to the provocative actions which infringe on China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, and undermine peace and stability in the South China Sea".³²

This statement further corroborates two key articles included in China's National Security Law, Article 2, which defines national security as "the relative absence of international or domestic threats to the state's power to govern, sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity ... and other major national interests, and the ability to ensure a continued state of security";³³ and Article 11 which states that "the sovereignty and territorial integrity of China cannot be encroached upon or divided".³⁴

However, while China's military actions comply with its domestic law, they fail to follow a similar pattern when it comes to international law. Consider the following, for instance.

A satellite image of North Island in the Paracels group, taken on March 6, 2017, shows recent work undertaken by China, including land clearing and possible preparation for a harbour to support eventual military installations.³⁵ The pictures, provided by private satellite firm Planet Labs, follow reports in January 2017 showing work undertaken on nearby Tree Island and other features in the Paracels, which are also claimed by Vietnam and Taiwan.³⁶

Additionally, a Chinese aircraft and a US Navy patrol plane also risked a collision in February 2017 after they flew within 1000 feet of each other in the SCS in the vicinity of the Scarborough Shoal. While the US Navy was insistent in claiming that it was on a routine mission operating in accordance with international law, the incident raised concerns about increasing Chinese presence in the region.³⁷

From September 12 to 19, 2016, the Chinese and Russian navies conducted their largest ever bilateral combat exercises. "Joint Sea Exercise 2016" was noteworthy not just for its size, but also for its location: the SCS. The bilateral exercise took place during heightened tensions between China and its neighbours, as well as Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) powers, but there is a longer history. Since 2012, China and Russia have held annual naval exercises, including in the East China Sea (2014) and Mediterranean Sea (2015).³⁸

The above exercises only lend further credence to China's objective "of building a solid defense and strong armed forces that are commensurate with China's international

standing”³⁹ as enshrined in the White Paper. To further “support the deepening of national defence and military reforms”, China’s military budget for 2017 will increase by 7%, to 1.044 trillion yuan (US\$151.43 billion).⁴⁰

By simultaneously calling for mutual trust, and threatening the use of force in response to infringement of its sovereign rights, Beijing’s maritime policy serves multiple purposes: for domestic consumption; for deterring further moves by other disputants; and for maintaining space for negotiations in order to restore the status quo. However, this might escalate disputes either because reactive assertiveness becomes disproportional or because the opposing parties simply react with more determination.⁴¹

Emphasis on Bilateral Solutions as Opposed to Internationalisation

In recent years, the East and South China Seas have gone on to become the scene of escalating territorial disputes between China and its neighbours, including Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines. The tensions, shaped by China’s growing assertiveness, have fuelled concerns over armed conflict⁴² and the need for internationalisation. However, the PRC has been adamant in resolving these disputes bilaterally.

In November 2016, President Xi Jinping held separate meetings with the leaders of the Philippines and Vietnam, and stated that disputes over the SCS should be resolved bilaterally.⁴³ The White Paper only underscores this opposition to not involve other countries or other international organisations in maritime disputes. It states clearly, “No effort to internationalize and judicialize the South China Sea issue will be of any avail for its resolution; it will only make it harder to resolve the issue, and endanger regional peace and stability”.⁴⁴

Experts are of the opinion that China prefers a “divide and conquer” tactic over allowing its opponents to group together. Thus, supporting economic cooperation (as called for by President Xi in his bilateral meetings) while preventing the emergence of a unified bloc plays out rather well for Beijing. However, such a stance discounts the importance of multilateralism and confidence-building measures between parties. Though bilateral dispute resolution serves as an expedient and efficient mechanism, it also faces the risk of dominance by one claimant over another. To truly fulfil its leadership aspirations, it is imperative that Beijing factors in other voices in the region, and adopts a cooperative stance to guarantee regional peace and stability – such a vision would not only be democratic in the operational sense, but would also provide greater scope for India to realise its own leadership potential.

Implications for India

In consonance with India’s “Act East Policy” and the Indian Navy’s constant endeavour to enhance maritime security in the Indo-Pacific, the Indian Naval Ship (INS) *Airavat* participated in an ADMM Plus (ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting Plus) Exercise in May 2016. Conducted in Brunei and Singapore, the exercise focused on maritime security and counterterrorism, where the participation of INS *Airavat* helped enhance India’s interoperability with the participating navies, including the PLA-N.⁴⁵ While outlining China’s contribution to multilateral forums, the White Paper is quick to acknowledge this exercise as an important diplomatic and military milestone.

More importantly, it expresses China's desire to establish a closer relationship with India – New Delhi will be pleased to know that India has been accorded the status of a “major country” along with the US, Russia and Japan, who are, in turn, enjoined to “treat the strategic intentions of others in an objective and rational manner”.⁴⁶ The document further espouses the need for the two countries to forge a closer partnership by increasing cooperation (military and otherwise), clear communication and coordination on regional and international issues.

The White Paper mentions India 15 times – a record in all the White Papers issued by China so far.⁴⁷ However, India will need to be cautious on several fronts:

To begin with, Indian trade and economic imperatives in the Asia-Pacific are more pronounced than ever. Under the “Act East” policy, trade with ASEAN and the far-eastern Pacific is expanding significantly. With growing dependence on the Malacca Strait for the flow of goods and services, economics is increasingly a factor in India's Pacific policy.⁴⁸ The Indian ocean accounts for two thirds of the world's oil shipments, one third of the world's cargo movement and nearly half of the world's container traffic movement.⁴⁹ Territorial conflicts in the waters of Asia-Pacific threaten the future trajectory of India's economic development, creating an unacceptable impediment to regional trade and commerce.⁵⁰

Secondly, the sheer size and scope of the vast network of China's naval force complicates the battlespace.⁵¹ Beijing's increasing littoral presence in South Asia, its naval deployments in the Indian Ocean⁵² and its rapid military modernisation understandably raise concerns over China's preparation for a larger strategic thrust in the Indian Ocean. This further exposes countries like India to political dilemmas that will make them more cautious to act against China during a maritime crisis or naval war.⁵³

Third, by co-opting “confidence-building measures” such as multilateral exercises in patrolling and the creation of “military alert zones” in international waters, China is making it harder for India to thwart its wider strategy of extending control in the South and East China Seas.⁵⁴ This is creating a paradoxical situation, illustrating China's “passive assertiveness”. Very simply, it means that Beijing has adopted the guidelines of safe maritime behaviour to stop others from rolling back the extension of de facto authority that it gained through its earlier disregard of the same strictures.⁵⁵

Finally, China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) Initiative. President Xi Jinping has since 2013 been articulating the idea of a “21st century Maritime Silk Road” to revive economic connectivity between Pacific and Indian Oceans and to link China's coastline with South-east Asia, the Gulf and the eastern coast of Africa. He has also been proposing a “Silk Road Economic Belt”, reviving the ancient link between China and the Mediterranean through Central Asia. The two projects are now together called OBOR or the Belt–Road Initiative (BRI) and the Chinese government has been pulling out all the stops over the past few years to elicit support from other countries and make it a success. It is billed as Xi's dream project.⁵⁶

According to experts, OBOR projects, if pursued vigorously, will make a rising China indispensable in the calculations of any country in the region.⁵⁷ China's plan to expand its presence further in the Indian Ocean region and Central Asia, however, has caused discomfort in Delhi, which was already wary of China's “string of pearls” assets encircling India.⁵⁸ Delhi therefore views the OBOR initiative as one designed by Beijing in pursuit of its own strategic objectives, and not as an inclusive one because the opinions of other “interested or affected” countries had not been taken into account.⁵⁹ Further, it

also serves to undermine India's own initiative, Project Mausam, of reviving commercial and cultural linkages with the Indian Ocean region and beyond. It will therefore be in India's interests to promote an "equibalancing strategy" in the Asia-Pacific that not only keeps China's littoral presence in check, but also raises India's regional profile through multilateral cooperation.

Conclusion

At the 18th Communist Party Congress in November 2012, and the first plenary session of the 12th National People's Congress in March 2013, China sought to entrench its leadership ambitions by aspiring to become a "true maritime power". The concept was used to embolden China's political, ideological, and economic philosophy, in conjunction with other military, economic, and national-security goals, and, ultimately, to project a vision of future national greatness.⁶⁰ In less than half a decade, China has begun to realise this strategic objective by becoming a leading resident maritime power in terms of its fishing industry, the size of its merchant navy and Coast Guard, and its port infrastructure and shipbuilding industry, and has invested heavily in military modernisation.⁶¹

As it seeks to expand its maritime presence, China's increasing assertiveness has raised serious security concerns from countries such as Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines. The increased frequency of standoffs in the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands on China's eastern flank, to the long stretch of archipelagos in the SCS, has undermined peace and stability in the region. Unless managed wisely, these disputes could turn some of Asia's maritime regions from thriving trade channels into arenas of conflict.⁶²

China's recently released White Paper seeks to resolve these issues by outlining a larger role for the PLA in promoting stability, combating transnational threats, and intensifying military exchanges and cooperation to offer more guarantees for peace and stability. Ironically, the document only serves to underscore China's desire to become the primary security provider for the region, on its own terms and conditions.

Currently, the balance of power in Asia heavily favours China, as a consequence of its dramatic economic growth.⁶³ With the White Paper further issuing diktats of non-interference from external parties, and advocating the fierce protection of China's sovereign interests, it is unlikely that smaller states in the region will be able to counter China's assertiveness. The tyranny of their size, limited military capacity and geographical proximity to China would not allow them to do so either,⁶⁴ allowing the PRC to enforce its own version of the Monroe Doctrine in the Asia-Pacific region.

The six-fold regional policy framework outlined in the White Paper set about charting the future direction of this Chinese policy on regional security. The prioritising of these recommendations explains China's approach towards its core security concerns and interests – economic development leading the way, with multilateral dispute resolution taking a back seat. The imprint of the "United Front" policy of Mao from the time of Long March is strikingly evident in Chinese foreign policy, and more so in this White Paper, where China forms temporary partnerships until its purpose is served.

The language used in the White Paper follows the pattern of many official Chinese foreign ministry statements, with a broad sketch and resistance to specific recommendations in case China needs mid-course correction, due to drastic changes in the regional

security environment.⁶⁵ The words, however well intentioned, need to be supported with actions that address the concerns of all stakeholder countries in the region.

Notes

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