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The Limits of Transparency: China Releases 2010 Defense White Paper

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On March 31, the Chinese Ministry of Defense released the 2010 edition of *China's National Defense*.¹ As Chinese officials have emphasized, the biennial Chinese defense white paper is intended to serve as a mark of China's steadily growing transparency in military affairs. It provides an inside look at China's military establishment, including its national defense strategy, the missions of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and such aspects as Chinese mobilization planning and arms control policies.

But Chinese transparency has its limits. For those who hope to learn details on some of the most controversial and worrying developments in China's military modernization—the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile system that threatens U.S. aircraft carriers or the new J-20 stealth fighter—the new white paper will prove disappointing.

Nonetheless, a careful examination of the document provides some indications of Chinese thinking on key international security issues—even as it also raises questions.

Ground, Air, and Naval Modernization. According to the new white paper, key tasks for the PLA in the coming year include:

- Supporting “national economic and social development”;
- Defending Chinese land and maritime territories and supporting Chinese security interests in outer space and cyberspace; and
- Helping to maintain world peace and stability.

These tasks closely mirror the “new historic missions” of the PLA as outlined by Hu Jintao in 2004. The duty of supporting and preserving the Chinese Communist Party is not explicitly mentioned as part of national defense policy. But the paper notes that new PLA regulations on political work expressly stipulate that the political work of the PLA must guarantee—politically, ideologically, and organizationally—the nature of the people's army under the absolute leadership of the Party.

In support of these missions, the paper provides explicit official overviews of Chinese military modernization efforts. As the paper notes, the PLA is focusing on transforming itself from focusing on quantity, scale, and manpower to quality, efficiency, and technology. This rejects the old image of a PLA that relied on mass and numbers to overwhelm an opponent; tomorrow's PLA will be fielding high-tech weapons and be a smarter, more agile opponent. In this regard, as the paper notes, the PLA is emphasizing “informationization”—the integration of information systems into combat, combat support, and combat service support functions across all the services.

The paper also provides some glimpses into key areas of development within each of the ser-

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vices. The Chinese intend to expand the capabilities of combat engineers and army aviation, put more emphasis on “distant waters”—which likely equates with blue-water naval operations—and expand air defense roles from the defense of Beijing to establishing air superiority over the coasts and borders, including in the electromagnetic realm.

The paper explicitly acknowledges that the Second Artillery is responsible for both nuclear and conventional missiles. It also notes that the Second Artillery, like the navy, will enhance its strategic deterrent missions, signaling growing emphasis on its nuclear roles. There is also a reference to Second Artillery “defensive operations,” which may be an allusion to an interest in ballistic missile defense capabilities. (One Chinese exo-atmospheric test in 2010 was described at the time as an anti-missile interception.)

For the three services (ground, air, and navy), there are also repeated references to the growing importance of “military operations other than war.” This includes disaster relief efforts as well as activities such as anti-piracy patrols.

Other Security Issues. Chinese military modernization is not simply a matter of improved weapons or even command and control systems, however. Much of this year’s defense white paper is devoted to Chinese efforts at fostering joint operational capabilities, improving training and recruitment, and expanding Chinese logistical capabilities. These essential elements of modern warfare require not only advanced weapons but competent people proficient in their use and a logistical supply system capable of sustaining operations at the high expenditure rates typical of modern warfare. The future wars of the PLA will not be lost for want of rounds or lack of trained personnel or units.

In addition to broadcasting China’s growing military capabilities, this year’s defense white paper also serves as an instrument of strategic communications. An especially striking element is the proferring of confidence-building measures to Taiwan. Even as the paper condemns pro-independence elements on Taiwan as “the biggest obstacle and

threat to the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations,” it also makes the suggestion that “the two sides should take a positive attitude toward the future.” The paper proposes not only political but military discussions and “a military security mechanism of mutual trust.” It goes on to state that the two sides should “strive to create favorable conditions to gradually resolve, through consultation on an equal footing, both issues inherited from the past and new ones that emerge in the development of cross-Strait relations.”

Lest one become too optimistic, however, the paper goes on to note that such consultations should be held “on the basis of upholding the one-China principle”—something to which Taiwan cannot agree. Indeed, perhaps recognizing this, the subsequent recital of military modernization capabilities is justified by the need to “oppose and contain the separatist forces,” which are always listed as those supporting Taiwan, East Turkistan, and Tibetan independence.

The white paper remains studiously silent on other key issues, however. While reiterating claims to sovereignty over Taiwan, Xinjiang, and Tibet, the paper makes no specific mention of the South China Sea. And there are only very brief mentions of cyberspace (which is distinguished from “electromagnetic space”) or outer space—although the authors *specifically* note that China will not allow itself to become dependent on space-based systems.

Recommendations. For American policymakers, this edition of the Chinese defense white paper should reinforce certain longstanding lessons and recommendations:

- **Recognize that the Chinese military will be increasingly capable.** The Chinese white paper makes clear that the PLA will be continuing its modernization efforts. Indeed, the authors appear unaware that defense spending would again increase by double digits in 2011, focusing instead on the reduced rate of increase in 2010. The U.S. military, if it intends to remain a factor in the western Pacific, cannot afford to fall behind. This means that the Pentagon

1. Xinhuanet, “Full Text: China’s National Defense in 2010,” March 31, 2011, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-03/31/c_13806851.htm (April 7, 2011).

and Congress should hold the line on budget cuts and fully fund the U.S. Navy's shipbuilding needs.

- **Do not waver on longstanding U.S. policies.** The white paper reiterates Chinese policy positions on opposing Taiwan independence and asserting China's peaceful nature. American policymakers should be as steadfast in supporting American interests. As Taiwan's capabilities decline, providing Taiwan the wherewithal for self-defense by authorizing the F-16A/B upgrades and selling the F-16C/D replacement aircraft and other defensive equipment it has requested becomes ever more urgent. Policymakers should focus on what the PRC does as well as what it says.
- **Recognize the very different view of transparency.** Inevitably, some will hold up the white paper as an example of growing transparency on the part of the Chinese leadership. The comments of Chinese senior colonel Chen Zhou, a key contributor to the Chinese defense white paper,

should disabuse this notion. He states, in a press conference regarding the 2011 edition, that it is an error to believe that transparency is a precursor to mutual military trust. Rather, "in order to achieve mutual trust, it is first necessary to constantly expand mutual interests and respect each other's strategic interests."² The 2011 white paper would seem to make clear that there is no such convergence, in the Chinese view, between the U.S. and the PRC at this time.

Useful Nonetheless. The 2010 *China's National Defense* is not a glossy publication with Chinese photographs of new weapon systems or diagrams of how they function. Instead, it is a policy document that lays out China's national defense strategy and, as important, how Chinese leaders envision their military and security roles. And in this context, it is useful.

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2. Luo Zheng, "An Explication of the White Paper 'China's National Defense in 2010'—A Firm Strength for Maintaining World Peace," *PLA Daily*, April 1, 2011, at http://www.mod.gov.cn/gflt/2011-04/01/content_4235395.htm (April 6, 2011).