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China's Newest Defense White Paper Suggests Fundamental Change in Perspective

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In 1998, the People's Republic of China (PRC) released its first defense white paper. Since then, every other year the PRC has released a new white paper discussing various aspects of Chinese defense issues. These papers provide an opportunity for the PRC to explain various aspects of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and Chinese security concepts and perspectives. In the new 2014 Chinese defense white paper, the Chinese appear to be signaling that a fundamental shift is underway in their security perspective, specifically that China assesses its security environment as increasingly threatening.

Previous White Papers

All previous white papers have generally held the same broad assessment of the international situation. The overall "tenor" or "theme" of the times remains one of peace and development (i.e., little prospect for war among the major powers or a nuclear conflict). Despite this, there remain "factors of instability," including unresolved borders, some degree of tension with neighbors, and the perennial concern about separatists, especially on Taiwan. Different specific concerns are aired in different years, including terrorism and concerns about South Asia. The past several white papers have implicitly accused

the United States of exacerbating regional instability. For example, the 2012 white paper notes:

Some country has strengthened its Asia-Pacific military alliances, expanded its military presence in the region, and frequently makes the situation there tenser. On the issues concerning China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, some neighboring countries are taking actions that complicate or exacerbate the situation, and Japan is making trouble over the issue of the Diaoyu Islands.¹

The 2014 White Paper

In the 2014 white paper, the threat assessment goes significantly further. It not only raises the usual concerns about the Korean Peninsula, Japan, and the United States, but states that "China faces a formidable task to maintain political security and social stability."²

The threat, moreover, explicitly stems not only from separatist forces in Xinjiang and Tibet, but also from the "anti-China forces [that] have never given up their attempt to instigate a 'color revolution' in this country."³ This is an enormously important statement, because the "color revolutions" toppled the governments where they occurred. Beijing, it seems, believes that it is facing efforts not only to fragment China, but also to actively dislodge the government, and the party, from power. In short, for the first time the authors of a defense white paper are suggesting *that the PRC, more specifically the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), confronts an existential threat*. A China that might suffer a "color revolution" is a China where the CCP might lose power.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4428>

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Active Defense

Against this backdrop, the rest of the white paper then discusses China's defense strategy, including the "Strategic Guideline of the Active Defense." While "active defense" has long been part of Chinese military strategy, rooted in the writings and decisions of Mao Zedong, this chapter is one of the more extended explanations of the concept.

As the white paper notes, although the active defense has been a staple of Chinese defense thinking since the Second World War and Mao Zedong, it has been modified over the intervening decades to accommodate advances in the technology of war and broader political, social, and economic changes. Thus, in 2004, the strategic guideline "was further substantiated, and the basic point for PMS [preparations for military struggle] was modified to winning local wars under conditions of informationization."⁴

In the 2014 white paper, the "strategic guideline" seems to have evolved further. Whereas in the 1990s and early 2000s there was established the "strategic guideline of the new period," this has now apparently become the "strategic guideline of active defense in the new situation (*xin xingshi xia jiji fangyu junshi zhanlue fangzhen*)."⁵ As one Chinese assessment noted, the "military strategic guideline of the active defense in the new situation" embodies three key points:

1. Adjusting the basis for preparations for military struggle. As the white paper notes, of particular importance is the need to prepare for maritime military conflict and to secure the ability to fight and win informationized local wars, while focusing on the ability to defend territorial sovereignty and national integrity.

2. Innovating new operational concepts. The PLA will develop its own doctrines, focused

on conducting unified (or integrated) operations, establishing information dominance, and undertaking systems-on-systems combat. This is especially important because the Chinese leadership sees itself under threat from multiple directions.

3. Improving the overall military strategic situation. Given China's geographic situation, the security threats it confronts, and the military's strategic missions, it is essential to engage in overall planning for national security. Of particular import are the outer space and cyberspace domains and the ability to preserve and defend overseas interests.⁶

These changes are primarily attributed to changes in the technology of modern warfare, especially the growing importance of information and information technology. Other PLA writings have noted that the rise of "informationized warfare" means that the beginning of modern wars is no longer marked by kinetic operations, but by political warfare efforts and intelligence collection.⁷

Yet the view that the PRC—and the CCP—now face an existential threat suggests the possibility that the "strategic guideline of the active defense under the new situation" might embody a much more fundamental change. From Mao to now, the concept of the active defense has emphasized assuming the strategic defensive, while securing the operational and tactical initiative, including preemptive actions at those levels if necessary. As Chinese writings have often noted, the "active defense" restricts the PRC to *reacting* to an adversary's actions. In other words, China will not strike first at the strategic level.

1. People's Republic of China, State Council Information Office, "The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces," April 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c_132312681.htm (accessed July 2, 2015).

2. People's Republic of China, State Council Information Office, "China's Military Strategy," May 2015, <http://news.usni.org/2015/05/26/document-chinas-military-strategy> (accessed July 2, 2015).

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. It is important to note that these minor changes of terminology often embody major changes in meaning.

6. China Newswet, "China Implements Military Strategy of Active Defense, Focuses on Maritime Military Preparations for Struggle," May 26, 2015, <http://news.workercn.cn/610/201505/26/150526102551092.shtml> (accessed July 2, 2015).

7. Yuejin Sung, *Command and Control Warfare* (Beijing: National Defense Industry Press, 2012), p. 57.

Reassessing Active Defense

However, more recent Chinese writings have suggested that a reassessment has been underway. For example, the most recent edition of the *PLA Encyclopedia* suggests that, if an adversary initiates offensive action, the PLA will undertake *strategic*, operational, and tactical actions, conditions permitting it to “gain mastery by striking first.”⁸

Similarly, General Chen Zhou, one of the key architects of the past several Chinese defense white papers, suggested in a discussion of the 2010 Chinese defense white paper that views are evolving. Chen emphasized that Chinese military thinking is grounded in a reactive mode and reiterates that the Chinese military remains committed to “gaining mastery by striking only after the enemy has struck.” However, he goes on to note that while the PLA will be strategically defensive, not only does this not preclude operational and tactical offensive actions, but the PLA has unified the concept of the strategic defense with the strategic counterattack and the strategic attack (*zhanlue fangyu yu zhanlue fangong he jingong de tongyi*).⁹

If the PRC believes that it now faces forces intent on toppling the CCP, it may conclude that it is already operating under conditions of the strategic defensive. Chinese actions in defense of its security, including activities in cyberspace, may therefore not violate the concept of “active defense” and may even be seen as wholly consistent *since China is already under threat*.

What the United States Should Do

In this situation, it is essential that the United States pursue a course of action that simultaneously makes clear that it is willing to cooperate with the PRC, in order to reassure Beijing, but that the U.S. will deny the PRC the ability to fight and win a conflict (including an informationized one) if Beijing chooses to pursue a military course of action. To this end, the United States should:

- **Strengthen economic cooperation and interaction.** As the two largest trading states, and each other’s largest trading partners, both countries

have a vested interest in preserving the peace and maintaining open trading links. The two states’ officials and bureaucracies responsible for commercial and financial activities should therefore maintain a dialogue. This was the original intention of the Strategic Economic Dialogue, before it morphed into the Strategic and Economic Dialogue. It may be time to revive the former, even as the latter becomes less and less relevant.

- **Maintain military-to-military dialogue with the PLA.** The two states need to have some channels of communications between the two sides, but it is vital that expectations be realistic. Due to its organizational structure, the PLA is unlikely to delegate authority to the point where local or even regional commanders would be the key decision makers in the event of a crisis. Just as important, the PLA must not operate under the mistaken belief that the United States is desperate for military-to-military contacts or that Beijing is doing the United States a favor in sustaining such contacts. At the same time, the United States should show that it respects the PLA as a counterpart. Therefore, the United States should strive to build bilateral ties with the PLA, whether through exchanges or even expanding bilateral joint exercises, but not necessarily incorporate the PRC into multilateral exercises such as RIMPAC.
- **Make the “Asia pivot” real.** Such efforts to maintain open dialogue with the PLA should not come at the expense of reassuring and supporting traditional allies and long-standing friends. Therefore, even as the U.S. strives to expand its military interactions with the PLA, it should maintain or expand its military exercises and deployments throughout the western Pacific and make clear that it will uphold freedom of navigation in the South China Sea. Similarly, the U.S. should improve the survivability of forward operating locations throughout the western Pacific, including on Guam and Okinawa and in the Japanese Home Islands, and help local allies to

8. People’s Republic of China, National Defense University, Research Department, *China Military Encyclopedia, Strategy* (Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Publishing House, 2007), p. 236.

9. Zhou Chen, “Adhering to the Defensive Defense Policy of Guaranteeing National Peace and Development—An Interpretation of China’s National Defense in 2010,” *China Military Science*, No. 3 (2011), p. 70.

increase their ability to defend themselves. This would include expanding arms sales to key players, such as the Philippines and Taiwan, as well as working with regional allies such as Japan and South Korea to help fulfill their defense needs. This will also mean allocating more resources to the Pacific, since ships and aircraft cannot be multiple places at the same time.

- **Recognize the long-term, multifaceted nature of the competition.** The PRC and the United States are not enemies. The two have too many overlapping economic, political, and diplomatic interests

to initiate a new Cold War. For example, both China and the United States have a common desire to see a stable Afghanistan. Over the long term, the two sides' interests may again largely converge, as they have in the past. But that will require a sustained level of interest and attention on the part of the United States to match that of the PRC.

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