



IRSEM

INSTITUT DE RECHERCHE STRATÉGIQUE
DE L'ÉCOLE MILITAIRE

26 July 2019

RESEARCH PAPER – No. 76

CHINA'S 2019 DEFENSE WHITE PAPER: A FLAWED COMMUNICATION EFFORT

Paul CHARON

Head of the "Intelligence and Strategic Foresight" programme at IRSEM

Carine MONTEIRO DA SILVA

Research Assistant

ABSTRACT

On July 24th, 2019, China published its tenth Defense White Paper. Far from announcing an evolution of the Chinese military strategy, "China's National Defense in the New Era" (新时代的中国国防) has two core functions: taking steps toward increased transparency by explaining how China perceives its regional and global environment; and halting the spread of the Chinese threat theory that fuels an increasingly virulent opposition towards China. However, China is struggling to convince on these two points: questionable interpretation of international tensions and partial analysis of the implications, lack of recognition of substantive problems, half-hearted transparency incapable of responding to the concerns of Beijing's interlocutors. A critical reading of this document makes it possible to identify the main perceptions of the ruling elite.

CONTENT

Introduction	2
The World According to China	3
A Vigorous Reminder of the Chinese Strategic Defense Principles	5
Defend and Influence	6
Discrediting the China Threat Theory	7
Conclusion	8



DISCLAIMER: One of IRSEM's missions is to contribute to public debate on issues relating to defence and security. The views expressed in IRSEM's publications are the authors' alone and are in no way representative of an official Ministry for Armed Forces stance.

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese white papers rarely aim to announce an innovation or a decisive reorganization of the country's defense strategy. Rather, they are communication instruments that attempt to forge or at least influence the perceptions of outside observers. These documents, however, open the door slightly to the dominant paradigms and perceptions of the Chinese ruling elite, which are of considerable interest to specialists and decision makers.

The 2019 edition, published on Wednesday, July 24th, and titled "*China's National Defense in the New Era*" (新时代的中国国防),¹ does not stray from this tradition. The text, for which we offer an interpretation, bears no announcement, or strategic developments, but offers a glimpse into Beijing's perceptions, concerns and ambitions, which is already significant for a system as opaque as that of the People's Republic of China.²

The length of the document (27,000 characters compared to 9,000 in the previous one from 2015)³, stresses in itself its importance and China's desire to "explain"⁴ itself. The Defense White Paper is divided into six chapters covering successively the international security situation, defense policy, missions entrusted to the armed forces, reforms, defense expenditure, as well as China's contributions to global security.

As communication tools, the defense white papers owe much to the internal and international political contexts that see them come into being. The newly published document falls within a complex environment, poorly managed by Beijing, which is characterized by the rapid spread of a "new cold war" paradigm, opposing China and the United States,⁵ renewed tensions in the South China Sea⁶ and demonstrations in Hong-Kong which weaken the subtle Chinese system and whose consequences are being felt in the Taiwanese presidential election campaign.

The Defense White Paper is therefore Beijing's answer to an environment deemed ductile, unstable and resistant to control. China intends to be more transparent,⁷ clarify its approach to the international context and counter the Chinese threat rhetoric. Though this document only partially fulfills this task, it does however expose, once again, Beijing's ambition to produce a positive narrative of the Chinese presence around the world capable of annihilating any alternative narrative.

1. Available here in Chinese: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-07/24/c_1124792450.htm and here in English: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm

2. Other analyses of the Defense White Paper are available: Anthony H. Cordesman, "[China's New 2019 Defense White Paper. An Open Strategic Challenge to the United States, But One Which Does Not Have to Lead to Conflict](#)," CSIS, July 24, 2019; for a more technical approach see: Elsa B. Kania, "[Innovation in the New Era of Chinese Military Power. What to make of the new Chinese defense white paper, the first since 2015](#)," *The Diplomat*, July 25, 2019; a concise analysis: Dennis J. Blasko, "[China's head-spinning defence white paper](#)," Lowy Institute, July 25, 2019; and in French: Antoine Bondaz, "[Rassurer le monde et lutter contre le séparatisme, quelques éléments d'analyse du nouveau livre blanc sur la défense chinoise](#)," *Note de la FRS*, No. 13/2019, July 24, 2019.

3. Available here: http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm

4. With all the nuances that the term entails.

5. See Martin Wolf, "The looming 100-year China-US conflict," *Financial Times*, June 4, 2019.

6. James Pearson, Khanh Vu, "Vietnam, China embroiled in South China Sea standoff," Reuters, July 17, 2019.

7. "[White paper gives transparent, comprehensive picture of China's national defense in new era: experts](#)," Xinhua, July 25, 2019.

This research paper proposes four analytical approaches: it offers an interpretation of China's view of the world and its immediate environment, as well as an overview of the People's Republic of China's principles of defense presented in the Paper; furthermore, it tackles the question of the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) missions, before discussing the attempts to control the narrative on China.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO CHINA

The primary benefit of the Defense White Paper is that it offers an interpretation by China of its international and regional environment.

China considers that the world is in the throes of profound and unprecedented changes: the international strategic landscape is being shaped by a protean process of globalization, multi-polarization and cultural diversification, in which new technologies play an amplifying role. Furthermore, while strategic competition between powers⁸ has grown and the signs of an arms race are now tangible, the risk of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the rise of extremism, of terrorism, as well as non-traditional threats are still present.

While the United States criticizes China for adopting an aggressive stance, Beijing responds by accusing Washington of being responsible for increasing international competition and jeopardizing global stability.⁹ Moreover, China blames the United States for adopting unilateral policies (单边主义政策), and presents itself, on the contrary, as a champion of multilateralism. China underlines the increase in the American defense budget, seeking to demonstrate that its own is reasonable and justified. Finally, it points out Washington's efforts to develop its nuclear, spatial, cyber and ballistic capacities, whilst omitting its own efforts in this regard.

The White Paper also fails to mention Russian influence and destabilization operations, presenting Moscow as a reliable and robust strategic partner with whom Beijing can cooperate in multiple fields and contribute to global peace. The most recent events relevantly highlight this statement as the day before the Paper was published, four Russian and Chinese military planes carried out the first joint Sino-Russian patrol off the coasts of Japan and South Korea, even penetrating the latter's airspace.¹⁰

China still sees the American air defense system (THAAD), located in South Korea to protect populations from potential North Korean attacks, as a threat. Beijing accuses the United States of using Pyongyang as pretense to install an apparatus aimed at China.

Furthermore, the Defense White Paper identifies several international issues threatening global stability, such as persistent tensions between India and Pakistan, the difficult

8. The Paper cites NATO, Russia, the European Union, Japan, and Australia.

9. "The US has adjusted its national security and defense strategies and adopted unilateral policies. It has provoked and intensified competition among major countries [...] and undermined global strategic stability" - 美国调整国家安全战略和国防战略，奉行单边主义政策，挑起和加剧大国竞争，[...] 损害全球战略稳定。

10. Thomas Grove, Andrew Jeong, "Russia-China Air Patrol Draws Fire from South Korean Jets," *Wall Street Journal*, July 23, 2019.

reconstruction of Afghanistan, or the Syrian, Iranian, and North Korean issues in which Beijing believes it is playing a “constructive” role (建设性参与).

The security situation in the Asia-Pacific region is, according to the 2019 Defense White Paper, “broadly stable”, including in the South China Sea. Not only does China not reference the numerous subjects of tension in the region, it prefers to evoke the emergence of a “community with a shared future for mankind” (命运共同体) in people’s minds. This is all the more surprising given that the Paper contradictorily mentions the Korean peninsula as an area of obvious tension. The text thus places more emphasis on the progress made by regional security organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), or the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM-plus) to highlight the construction of an Asian security architecture, with China leading the way. This editorial choice singularly weakens the point and it would probably have been preferable for China to take this opportunity to explain its intentions and policy in the region, in particular in the South China Sea.

Amongst the security risks and the challenges that China faces, the Defense White Paper touches upon the territorial order: Taiwan, Tibet, East Turkestan, the various territories along its land and maritime borders, but also the protection of its foreign interests. The document uncompromisingly asserts Chinese sovereignty on all these territories, using an even more assertive tone than in 2015. Indeed, China affirms in the 2019 version that it still has the firm resolution and capacity to guarantee the integrity and sovereignty of its territory, it indicates, alluding to Taiwan, that it cannot renounce the use of force, and reserves the right to take all necessary measures. Furthermore, this intimidation addressed to all independentist or dissenting movements, does not fail to recall the situation in Hong Kong.

Finally, the White Paper stresses the importance of innovation (创新) and the impact of disruptive technologies (高技术). After all, it is the first time the concept of “intelligent warfare” (智能化战争) is mentioned in a White Paper, alongside the existing concept of “informationized warfare”¹¹ (信息化战争). The intensification of military competition is also spreading to the spatial and cyber fields. They are referred to respectively as a “critical domain” (制高点), in terms of strategic international competition, and a “key area” (关键领域) for national security. China’s armed forces must therefore protect the country’s interests in these fields, adopt state-of-the-art technology and pursue the military revolution with “Chinese characteristics”. These comments shine light on the massive Chinese investments in artificial intelligence, quantum computing or nanotechnology, and the decision to impose a policy of civilian-military fusion forcing private companies to cooperate with the defense sector, whenever it is justified by the issues at hand.

11. “Intelligent warfare” is a new form of conflict in which the use of emerging technology, such as artificial intelligence, is supposed to compensate for the American military advantage and guarantees victory. Cf. Elsa B. Kania, “[Chinese Military Innovation in Artificial Intelligence](#),” Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on Trade, Technology, and Military-Civil Fusion, Center for a New American Security, June 7, 2019.

A VIGOROUS REMINDER OF THE CHINESE STRATEGIC DEFENSE PRINCIPLES

Unsurprisingly, the primary aim (根本目标) of the Chinese defense is to guarantee sovereignty, security, and Chinese development interests. With 22,000 km of land borders and 18,000 km of maritime borders, China needs its armed forces to protect itself against both external and internal threats. The goal is to be able to insure internal stability, peace at the borders, and eliminate Chinese vulnerabilities in new fields such as space, electromagnetic and cyber.

China considers that its rejection of hegemony, expansionism, and the establishment of spheres of influence (坚持永不称霸、永不扩张、永不谋求势力范围) constitutes the distinctive feature (鲜明特征) of its defense policy, as if this statement was of a performative nature. Nevertheless, it properly illustrates China's fierce desire to present itself to the world as an emerging peaceful power, as opposed to the United States.

The path forward (发展路径) is now that of a powerful army with Chinese characteristics (坚持走中国特色强军之路). Indeed, China wants to build an army suited to the new forms of conflict, including "intelligent warfare". To reach this goal, the Defense White Paper sets three strategic goals:

- Widespread mechanization by 2020,
- Modernization of thought, structures, personnel and weaponry by 2035,
- Complete transformation into a world class army by 2050.

Finally, China considers that it is at the service of the construction of a community with a shared future (服务构建人类命运共同体). By this, China means to describe its action as contributing positively to the world order through the promotion of a "win-win" form of cooperation, its participation in peacekeeping missions, or its efforts in disarmament and non-proliferation. Thus, China perceives and presents itself as a benevolent actor destined to play a major, if leading role, in the promotion of world peace.

Regarding nuclear doctrine, the Defense White Paper does not introduce any new elements. The wording is classic, with certain expressions dating back to 1964, when China conducted its first nuclear test. Beijing claims that it has always maintained a no first use policy of its nuclear forces, and that it will never use, or threaten to use, its nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states or nuclear-weapon-free zones. China says that it supports the complete destruction of nuclear weapon, affirms that it refuses to engage in an arms race, and claims to maintain its arsenal at a minimal level in the pursuit of an exclusively defensive policy.

Though the Defense White Paper points out that the country's nuclear capacities are a guarantor of sovereignty and national security, it gives no additional indications regarding the modernization of the nuclear arsenal. Nonetheless, it is known that China has initiated a modernization process, in particular through the building of a SSBN (Sub-Surface ballistic Nuclear) Type 096 (Tang-class) and of its JL-3 ballistic missile, with an estimated range of 10,000 km, placing the United States within the reach of a submarine operating in Chinese waters.

DEFEND AND INFLUENCE

The purpose of the Defense White Paper is to elucidate the role and missions entrusted to the armed forces. There are five branches within the People's Liberation Army (PLA): the Army, the Air Force, the Navy, the Rocket Force,¹² and the Strategic Support Force, to which one must add the People's Liberation Army Joint Logistic Support Force and the People's Armed Police (PAP). The 2019 Defense White Paper reiterates that the primary mission of these forces is to maintain and solidify the power of the CCP (Chinese Communist Party),¹³ and subsequently to ensure sovereignty and territorial integrity, to protect against exogenous and endogenous threats,¹⁴ to protect Chinese interests abroad and contribute to world peace, enabling the promotion of a better image of China.

With the launch of its "global connectivity" project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China places increasing importance on securing its interests abroad, which include the security of diplomatic staff, expatriate populations, businesses, investment, infrastructure, and energy supply. China's first "logistical support" base (保障基地) was inaugurated in Djibouti in 2017. It is clear that China's aim is to establish a network of bases abroad; however, questions surrounding the location and the entry into service of future locations remain unanswered.¹⁵ Such bases are essential to support the growth and rise of Chinese forces. Beijing argues that this also benefits other countries in the region as the presence of Chinese armed forces in Djibouti contributes to securing maritime communication lines, and the protection of local populations and foreign nationals if an evacuation were to be necessary. This framing, which ignores the strategic aspect of the base and its role in intelligence gathering,¹⁶ is purely intended to reinforce the narrative that presents China as an actor in global security.

China's armed forces are also being asked to become more involved in combating non-traditional threats. According to the White Paper, this includes threats to cybersecurity and biosecurity, piracy, natural disasters, epidemics, as well as terrorism and all forms of extremism. China praises its efforts in these fields, underlining its regular deployment of troops to humanitarian missions. It also congratulates its armed police, the PAP, for helping the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region dismantle close to 1,600 terrorist organizations and arrest close to 13,000 terrorists since 2014. China therefore believes that its armed forces work towards securing "the public's right to live and work in peace". Obviously, China does not say a word about its forced sinicization policy directed against

12. This branch of the PLA is in charge of nuclear and conventional missiles, created in 2016 from the former Second Artillery Corps. Cf. Anthony H. Cordesman, "[The PLA Rocket Force: Evolving Beyond the Second Artillery Corps \(SAC\) and Nuclear Dimension](#)," CSIS, October 13, 2016; Bates Gill and Adam Ni, "[The People's Liberation Army Rocket Force: reshaping China's approach to strategic deterrence](#)," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 2, p. 160-180, 2019.

13. Keeping the CCP in power is frequently brought up, for example in the national Security Law of 2015: 中华人民共和国国家安全法, http://www.gov.cn/c16762/2015-07/01/content_2893902.htm

14. This passage echoes the Defense ministry spokesperson's – the Senior colonel Wu Qian – mention of a possible Army intervention in Hong Kong.

15. Recent rumors allude to a naval base project in Cambodia; Gwadar, in Pakistan, is also regularly mentioned. Cf. John Reed, "China construction points to military foothold in Cambodia," *Financial Times*, July 25, 2019.

16. Erica Downs, Jeffrey Becker and Patrick de Gategn, "[China's Military Support Facility in Djibouti: The Economic and Security Dimensions of China's First Overseas Base](#)," CNA, July 2017.

Uyghur populations and other minorities in the province, which it disguises as a deradicalization policy. This extremely violent policy has led more than a million Uyghurs to internment camps.¹⁷

DISCREDITING THE CHINA THREAT THEORY

Whilst presenting the United States as an international troublemaker, China sees itself as a major player in global security and therefore intends to debunk the China threat theory. China is seizing the opportunity of the publication of the Defense White Paper, the first since the modernization and professionalization reforms of the armed forces were launched in 2015, to assess them. It recalls in particular the creation of five theater commands replacing the seven military regions and the reorganization of the five organs of the Central Military Commission (CMC) into fifteen more modest departments.¹⁸ This inventory falls within a general pedagogical effort to “objectively explain” (全面客观介绍说明) Chinese defense.

Often criticized for its lack of transparency regarding its defense budget, China has decided to regain control of the narrative of its defense spending and prove that it is not only a reasonable amount but that it is justified by genuine threats. On the contrary, the American expenses demonstrate that the United States has an aggressive policy. The Defense White Paper includes two tables in its annexes which present the evolution of Chinese defense expenditure from 2012 to 2017 and their functional distribution between 2010 and 2017.

China obviously presents the comparisons that suit it, for example by emphasizing that its defense spending as a share of GDP fell from 5.43% of GDP in 1979 to 1.26% in 2017. This decrease is deceptive as China’s GDP has grown exceptionally over the last forty years.¹⁹ Therefore, the presentation of these expenses does not resemble a true exercise in transparency but rather a sophisticated argument seeking to minimize the weight of costs, reassure neighboring countries, and shift attention towards the United States.

China fights not only to prove that it is not a threat, but also to present itself as a leader in global and regional security. As previously mentioned, it insists on its increasingly active role in the production of international public goods, its participation in complex negotiations (Iran, Syria, Korean peninsula), or as a contributor to the construction of the regional security architecture. China fills its rhetoric with positive expressions such as “win-win cooperation” (合作共赢), “mutual trust” (互信), a Chinese dream “closely connected to the dreams of peoples around the world” (中国人民的梦想与世界人民的梦想息息相通), or even a “community with a shared future”. All while promoting the image of a State that

17. Joanne Smith Finley, “[Securitization, insecurity and conflict in contemporary Xinjiang: has PRC counter-terrorism evolved into state terror?](#),” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2019.

18. Juliette Genevaz, “La réforme de l’Armée populaire de libération, au cœur de la rénovation de l’État chinois,” *Note de recherche stratégique*, No. 29, IRSEM, August 16, 2016.

19. 5.43% of the GDP in 1979 represents 8.915 billion, whereas 1.26% of the GDP in 2017 brings the defense budget to over 154 billion.

cares for its population but also for foreigners, this speech aims to support the hypothesis of American hubris and isolation.

Since the end of the 1990s, China has implemented a public diplomacy that is nothing more than another form of engineering of consent on an international scale. This diplomacy rests on several pillars: the instrumentalization of classical culture (Confucius, Chinese medicine), the construction of an image of power (technological and architectural achievements), a humanitarian policy (the role of the hospital ship *Peace Ark* sent to the scene of natural disasters to rescue victims), the promotion of the Chinese language, the support of the creation of worldwide media channels tasked with giving a Chinese take on current events (CGTN, Xinhua, CRI, and China Daily) and support for the export of popular cultural products (cinema, literature, music). This policy of foreign seduction is even more crucial to Beijing as the National Security Law of 2015 mentions the field of ideas as a significant matter for the country's security and the stability of the regime. Despite the efforts made, the results are modest, and China remains relatively poorly ranked in terms of soft power.²⁰ Chinese leaders are struggling to understand that the American soft power, to which they compare themselves, does not rely only on state public diplomacy but on a comprehensive policy that includes civil society actors.²¹

CONCLUSION

Far from being a vain and meaningless exercise, the publication of this relatively lengthy Defense White Paper is intended to increase the transparency of China's defense policy. In that respect, it sets China in an international standardization process. However, this endeavor remains largely unfinished as disguised rhetoric and mystification, remain omnipresent, without mentioning the obscure writing mechanisms. Finally, as Denis Blasko observed,²² the Defense White Paper reveals the gap between China's representation of its own actions and the impressions that it creates abroad.

(English translation by Faye Groleau and Trevor Steele)

20. China was ranked 27th power out of 30 in 2018. Cf. Jonathan McClory (dir.), [The Soft Power 30. A Global Ranking of Soft Power 2018](#), USC Center on Public Diplomacy, Portland Pr Limited, 2018.

21. Maud Quessard, *Stratégies d'influence et guerres de l'information : Propagande et diplomatie publique des États-Unis depuis la guerre froide*, PUR, 2019.

22. Dennis J. Blasko, "[China's head-spinning defence white paper](#)," Lowy Institute, July 25, 2019.

Paul Charon is Deputy Director of the “Strategic Thinking” research area at the Institute for Strategic Research (IRSEM) and responsible for the “Intelligence and Strategic Foresight” programme. He holds a PhD in Political studies from the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS, Paris), an MBA (HEC), and degrees in Chinese Studies (Université Paris Diderot and Beijing Language and Culture University, BLCU) and Law (Université Panthéon-Assas). Before joining IRSEM, he worked for more than ten years as an intelligence analyst and then as a strategic foresight advisor at the Ministry of the Armed Forces. He was also an Associate Researcher at the Franco-Chinese Antenna in Humanities and Social Sciences at Qinghua University in Beijing. His research focuses on China (intelligence agencies, information warfare), intelligence analysis and anticipating strategic surprises techniques. He is an Associate Professor at Sciences Po, and at Panthéon-Assas University.

Contact: paul.charon@irsem.fr

Carine Monteiro Da Silva holds a master’s degree in International Security from Sciences Po’s Paris School of International Affairs (PSIA). She is a research assistant at the IRSEM.

Contact: carine.monteirodasilva@irsem.fr