

The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces: An Indian Perspective

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Introduction

The importance of Defence White Papers lies in providing a broad understanding of a country's politico-military direction, together with the broad direction and plans for modernisation of its armed forces. In China's case, the aspects include an understanding of the Chinese political leadership's thinking on the emerging security environment, the political and security challenges that emanate with anticipated areas of conflict; and, above all, the envisaged role of the armed forces in dealing with them.

Therefore, regular production of Defence White Papers is an exercise in strategic communication aimed at the internal and external audience. It is to exhibit high levels of military transparency but, more importantly, to convince the world about the strides China is taking in the transformation and modernisation of its armed forces. Thereby, highlighting, the growing capacity, credibility and technological prowess of the Chinese armed forces to deal with the challenges and internally reassure both the Party organs and people about the credibility of the armed forces to ensure territorial integrity, national sovereignty, and protect core national interests.

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This year's Defence White Paper is interestingly titled "Diversified Employment of Chinese Armed Forces", highlighting the multiple roles that the Chinese armed forces play in overall national development and security. The White Paper does not fight shy of conveying the propensities of power projection through enhanced military capabilities. For the first time, the paper provides insights into the shape and size of China's armed forces, in particular, the role of the Second Artillery Forces (SAF). Importantly, it highlights the role of hard power in terms of "military prowess" in providing security guarantees and strategic support for national development.

This article looks upon the underlying nuances covered in this year's White Paper, being the first since the changes in the Chinese political leadership in China, and how it will impact the future security discourse. Secondly, and importantly, the commentary also analyses the implications for India.

Security Environment

The White Paper acknowledges the profound implications of the US' rebalancing strategy in the Asia-Pacific that is resulting in a complex security environment, particularly as the US expands its military presence and rebuilds its alliance system. This is outlined in the comment that some countries have strengthened Asia-Pacific military alliances, expanded their military presence in the region, and frequently make the situation there more tense. While the Chinese appear to be sanguine about these developments, there is an underlying concern about their impact on Chinese ambitions and interests..

While concentrating on the US and Japan, the White Paper has not included the South China Sea and the littoral countries as an area of concern, thus, for the time being, downplaying the issue and possibly setting priorities for, settling/the importance of, the issues. The paper, nonetheless, says that the "Taiwan independence" issue remains a core

issue, in particular the concerns about the threat of the separatist forces and their activities to the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations. The paper also singles out Japan for vitiating the maritime environment with its stand on the Senkaku Island issue.

Interestingly, the border issue with India does not find mention in the paper. This is in contrast to articulations made in earlier papers. For instance, the White Paper of 2006 talked of having settled border disputes with 11 out of 13 countries. This formulation implied that India and Bhutan were being unreasonable. In his “Five Point Proposal” for improving Sino-Indian ties, made in mid-March this year, President Xi Jinping had observed, “The border question is a complex issue left from history and solving the issue won’t be easy.” There is no doubt that the “boundary issue” remains central to the future of India–China relations and a central concern for India. The fragility of the boundary issue is highlighted by the ongoing People’s Liberation Army’s (PLA) intrusion into the sensitive area at Daulat Beg Oldi in Ladakh, exacerbating tensions and the continuing faceoff. Similarly, there are reports of tensions in the South China Sea where China has recently used force, and its standoff with Japan continues. China, backed by its growing military power, is attempting to coerce its neighbours and could escalate tensions, leading to dangerous escalations. It is in the above construct that the remark “we will not attack unless we are attacked; but we will surely counterattack if attacked” is significant.

Another glaring omission is of the current shenanigans of North Korea which are complicating the security situation in East Asia. In its 2006 White Paper, China had commented on the North Korean nuclear tests and had observed somewhat cryptically, “The DPRK has launched missile tests and conducted a nuclear test. Thus, the situation on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia has become more complex and challenging.” Even in its 2008 White Paper, China had lauded itself by stating, “The Six-Party Talks on the Korean nuclear issue have scored

successive achievements, and the tension in Northeast Asia is much released.”

Development of Chinese Armed Forces

The paper outlines the military strategy of active defence: to guard against, and resist, aggression, contain separatist forces, safeguard border, coastal and territorial air security, and protect national maritime rights and interests, and national security interests in outer space and cyber space. It reiterates the PLA’s doctrine of “local wars under the conditions of informationization”, intensifying integration and joint employment of different Services and arms, and enhancing war-fighting capabilities based on information systems.

Reading between the lines, it appears that there is an attempt to strengthen the role of the Chinese Central Military Commission (CMC) in shaping the politico–military discourse; in this regard, the creation of the Department of Strategic Planning is significant, implying harmonising of political and military objectives in shaping national security. The Chinese White Papers routinely highlight clichés related to strategies and the tactics of people’s war, advancing integrated civilian-military development, and enhancing the quality of national defence mobilisation and reserve force building. The doctrine of winning local wars under informationised conditions was mentioned in detail in the 2004 White Paper and subsequent papers wherein considerable details had been given as to how the PLA intends to proceed on the issue of military modernisation in a step-by-step process. It appears that this has now been doctrinally accepted by the Chinese armed forces, together with the concept of “active defence”. It needs to be noted that while China purports *active defence* as a “defensive military strategy”, it needs to be noted that it is proactive in nature. Essentially implying that China can initiate hostilities on the mere perception of the intent of the adversary which the Chinese leadership may perceive as detrimental to its interests.

For the first time, the PLA has given out the structure of its armed forces. It is a different matter that much of it was already available in the open domain, however, what has been revealed by the PLA varies only in a limited sense from the estimates made by analysts and researchers. Structurally, the PLAA (PLA Army) is aiming to create small, modular and multi-functional organisations with a conceptual shift from “theatre defence” to “trans-theatre mobility”. Implying thereby growing focus on rapid mobilisation, rapid deployment and quick launch in what in Indian parlance can be referred to as the ‘cold start’ doctrinal thinking. Infrastructural development, enhanced Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR) and space-based systems are seen to enhance these capabilities.

The paper states that the PLAA mobile operational units include 18 combined corps, plus additional independent combined operational divisions (brigades), often referred to as rapid reaction forces or task oriented “battle groups”. The combined strength of the PLAA has been placed as 850,000. The combined corps, composed of divisions and brigades, are respectively under the seven Military Area Commands (MACs): Shenyang (16th, 39th and 40th Combined Corps), Beijing (27th, 38th and 65th Combined Corps), Lanzhou (21st and 47th Combined Corps), Jinan (20th, 26th and 54th Combined Corps), Nanjing (1st, 12th and 31st Combined Corps), Guangzhou (41st and 42nd Combined Corps) and Chengdu (13th and 14th Combined Corps). The creation of four “strategic zones” (northern, eastern, western and southern), supplanted upon seven MACs, as part of overall rationalisation of the armed forces structure, as some reports in the Chinese media suggested, however, does not find mention. Notably, of the 18 combined corps, only four are deployed in MACs opposite India: Chengdu and Lanzhou. Thus, for any India specific contingencies, China will be forced to undertake large scale trans-theatre force mobilisation, together with build-up of logistics

capabilities. Such moves will, no doubt, leave large footprints, making its enhanced Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) capability by India a strategic necessity.

The modernisation and growing role of the PLA Navy (PLAN) is of particular interest. The paper highlights the efforts being made to develop naval capabilities. It mentions PLAN training for combined task forces composed of new types of destroyers, frigates, ocean-going replenishment ships and shipborne helicopters in what it terms as complex battlefield environments. The paper also highlights training for “remote early warning (space-based systems), comprehensive control, open sea interception, long-range raids, anti-submarine warfare and vessel protection at distant sea”. It is obvious that the PLAN is preparing itself for what it calls “distant sea operations”, highlighting that since 2007, the PLAN has conducted training in the distant sea waters of the Western Pacific involving over 90 ships.

Given the above focus, China could be expected to be more assertive in safeguarding its perceived maritime interests and incrementally enhance its influence in the Indian Ocean, with growing focus on the security of sea lines of communication, and force projection. This, by implication, means that China will seek and develop Rest and Recuperation (R&R) facilities which, could, over time be upgraded into bases in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) littoral. India cannot remain impervious to these developments and would need to take steps to keep Chinese activities under surveillance and continually weigh its own strategic options.

The paper, alluding to tensions in the South China Sea, highlights organisation of coastal forces to carry out live force-on-force training for air defence, anti-submarine, anti-mine, anti-terrorism, anti-piracy, coastal defence, and island and reef sabotage raids, etc. The Chinese propensities at escalating tensions were on full display in March 2013. In a commentary, noted China specialist Andrew Erickson highlighted in *The Wall Street Journal*, “four foreign policy fumbles” in March 2013 that

led to escalation of tensions in the South China Sea; these include two incidents of firing by Chinese marine surveillance vessels on Vietnamese fishing vessels and manoeuvres by four vessels of the PLAN flotilla near the Paracels, at a place called “James Shoal”, 80 km from Malaysia. The fourth incident pertained to loading up of crude from China in violation of the current embargoes on Iran.

So far as the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) is concerned, the paper mentions that the PLAAF now has a total strength of 398,000 officers and men, and an air command in each of the seven MACs. The focus of PLAAF modernisation is on developing and improving early warning command and communication networks, to raise strategic early warning, and for deterrence and long distance strike capabilities. It is also developing a range of new generation fighters, ground-to-air missiles and radar systems. For the strategic intervention role, it has a one airborne corps with adequate strategic lift capability. The PLAAF appears to be developing strong operational capabilities underscored by upgradation of air defence networks, and developing a number of airfields in Tibet and adjoining Lanzhou and Chengdu MACs, strengthening its air defence cover. In addition, the PLAAF could, in the next couple of years, develop credible interventionist capabilities, with formations like the 15 Airborne Corps providing it the desired strategic airlift capabilities.

The White Paper bills the “PLA’s Second Artillery Force (PLASAF) as the core force for China’s strategic deterrence”. Comprising both nuclear and conventional missile forces and operational support units, it is primarily responsible for ensuring the functional efficacy of the Chinese strategic deterrence, and preventing coercion. According to the paper, the Second Artillery Force (SAF) is striving for “enhancing the safety, reliability and effectiveness of its missiles, improving its force structure of both nuclear and conventional missiles, strengthening its rapid reaction, effective penetration, precision strike, damage infliction, protection and survivability capabilities”. The SAF is responsible for war planning and

training based on the assumption that China will absorb the first nuclear strike and use its nuclear forces only to retaliate. Its strategic forces are complemented by a large conventional missile force capable of precision attacks based on well developed space-based ISR systems which further enhance the credibility of its no-first-use pledge. *The Science of the Second Artillery Campaign* explicitly highlights the interface between nuclear and conventional missile forces by underscoring that “during future joint combat operations, the Second Artillery will not merely act as the main force in providing nuclear deterrence and nuclear counter-strike power, but will also act as the *backbone force in conventional firepower assaults*”.

The current political leadership has been paying particular attention to the SAF. After having taken over as Chairman of the Central Military Commission in November 2012, Xi Jinping visited the Second Artillery Force and observed that “the artillery force is the core strength of China’s strategic deterrence, the strategic support for the country’s status as a major power, and an important cornerstone safeguarding national security”. Many advanced versions of ballistic and cruise missiles are being fielded with appropriate integration with C4ISR assets which are both ground and space-based. The PLA carried out the second anti-ballistic missile test in January this year, indicating that it is moving towards acquiring a ballistic missile defence capability. Although this is primarily aimed at degrading the American strategic capabilities, it would no doubt also impact the value and worth of India’s nuclear deterrent.

The paper also gives insights into China’s nuclear posture though to a very limited degree. It states, “If China comes under a nuclear threat, the nuclear missile force will act upon the orders of the CMC, go into a higher level of readiness, and get ready for a nuclear counterattack to deter the enemy from using nuclear weapons against China. If China comes under a nuclear attack, the nuclear missile force of the PLASAF will use nuclear missiles to launch a resolute counterattack, either independently or together with the nuclear forces of other services”.

The Chinese government insists that modernisation of its nuclear forces is only to maintain a reliable second-strike retaliatory capability. The focus, therefore, is to ensure that the “nuclear deterrent” is “safe, reliable, and credible” under “any” circumstance and China is capable of effective counter-attack in self-defence; an interesting perspective, however, is the debate on the nature of response—proportional or massive.

The conventional missile force is able to shift instantly from peacetime to war-time readiness, and conduct conventional medium- and long-range precision strikes. By inference, it means that China will employ precision nuclear strikes as part of its conventional war-fighting doctrine and is unlikely to resort to first use. If we were to take the No First Use (NFU) declaratory doctrine of China at face value, as also that of India, this would essentially mean that nuclear weapons as tools of deterrence are outside the equation of any conventional conflict scenario. Given the growing state of conventional asymmetry, the Chinese, with their superior conventional and missile force, will always be at an advantage, and force decisions on their terms in a limited conflict scenario, putting India at a disadvantage. Following from the above, the manner in which Indian strategic deterrence in a scenario of growing conventional asymmetry would play out requires deeper analysis in India.

The paper also describes the role of the People's Armed Police Force (PAPF) which is a paramilitary force meant for internal security duties and to assist the PLA in war-time. Some of its main tasks include performing guard duties, dealing with emergencies, combating terrorism and participating in, and supporting, national economic development. It is also employed for national development tasks and is composed of some special forces assigned for various miscellaneous civil and military tasks. Possibly, the Chinese troops which have been sent to Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (POK) for so-called development activities are from the PAPF.

An aspect that has been emphasised in the 2013 White Paper is the PLA's role in aid of the people and national development so that

the PLA can be truly seen as a peoples' army. Since 2004, this role of the PLA is being increasingly stressed upon. The paper says, "The Constitution and relevant laws entrust China's armed forces with the important tasks of safeguarding the peaceful labour of the Chinese people, taking part in national development and serving the people wholeheartedly". During the Chinese Communist Party's (CPC's) 18th Congress conclave in November, 2012, the Party leadership had emphasised, "We must unwaveringly adhere to the principle of the Party's absolute leadership over the armed forces and continue to educate them in the system of theories of socialism with Chinese characteristics". In the paper, the PLA is being portrayed as the people's and not the Party's army.

Defence Expenditure

Notably, the most important thing missing in the White Paper is any mention of the defence expenditure which has been invariably mentioned in all the White Papers issued so far. China's defence expenditure, according to the 2006 Paper was US \$36 billion; this year, the budget, according to figures released in the 12th National People's Conference in early March was estimated to be between US \$115 to 117 billion, more than three times the size of the 2006 figure. Last year, the defence budget was around \$107 billion. However, according to a US Defence Intelligence Agency report of April 17, 2013, China has spent as much as \$215 billion on military related services and goods, in contrast to last year's official budget of \$107 billion. One of the major factors contributing to the rise in the defence expenditure in the Asia-Pacific is the double digit growth in the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) defence budget from 1990 to 2013, even as China's neighbours remain wary of its growing military might and enlargement of its 'core interests'.

Conclusion

A major conclusion to be drawn is that China is building all round military capabilities to emerge as the dominant military power in Asia, with the ability to challenge even the US in its core areas of interest. The manner of its engagement in international peace-keeping and anti-piracy operations highlights its global ambitions and its image as a responsible stakeholder.

So far as India is concerned, it is quite evident that military asymmetry with China will increase and, if not addressed, would become unbridgeable. India has to accelerate its military modernisation which has been stymied due to politico-bureaucratic inertia, inadequate and outdated systems and processes. The long-term integrated perspective plans of the armed forces remain an amalgamation of individual respective perspective plans since there is no shared vision among the Services in the absence of a coherent national security policy and military strategy. Though the inadequacies and gaps in our military capabilities are well known, sufficient efforts have not been put in to fill these. We need to improve our ground holding capabilities, C4ISR capabilities, accretion of space assets, missile warfare capabilities, long range precision capabilities, besides infrastructure development in the border regions. Further, China, through its various manoeuvres, has been aspiring to dominate the IOR which is critical to Indian security; this challenge needs to be met both through diplomacy and modernisation of our maritime capabilities.