



# ISSUE BRIEF

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## China's Defence White Paper, 2019



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On July 24, 2019, China issued its 10th Defence White Paper (DWP) titled "China's National Defense in the New Era."<sup>1</sup> This is the second DWP to be released under the leadership of Xi Jinping and comes after a gap of 4 years. It is also the first comprehensive White Paper on national defence since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CCP) in 2012.

### A Background

Beginning with 1998, China has issued DWPs generally every alternate year. The only aberrations to this trend have been the DWPs issued in 2013 and 2019.<sup>2</sup>

The following table gives a summary of the previous DWPs:

### Key Points

1. China views "historical facts" as an important parameter for resolving disputes. Hence, there would be an increased emphasis on the Chinese interpretation of History and counter of other narratives.
2. The growing bonhomie between Russia and China is evident in the latter's defence of Russia increasing its conventional and nuclear arsenal.
3. The DWP makes a clear mention of Xi Jinping's supreme and unquestioned authority.
4. There is a mention of "overseas interests." It could be a reference to the global, Chinese companies and the projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. A strong reaction can hence be expected from China when it comes to companies like Huawei which could (and should) be barred from the 5G trials in India.
5. In the context of Tibet and Xinjiang, the DWP makes a mention of "external" forces. This could imply that China will continue to use its economic clout to effect self-censorship vis-à-vis Tibet and the Dalai Lama in the Western world, as also deepen its relationship with the Taliban in Afghanistan so that the Uyghur separatists do not get any external support.
6. The DWP's mention of AI, big data, quantum information, etc., with respect to Informationised Warfare, point to increasing convergence between China's tech giants (BAT – Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent) and the CCP/PLA.

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## China's Defence ...

DWP	For the Year	Year Published	Remarks
China's Military Strategy	2015	May 2015	<p>First DWP dealing solely with military strategy.</p> <p>Elaborates on preparation for military struggle (PMS) and how the focus will be on "winning informationized local wars, highlighting maritime military struggle and maritime PMS."</p> <p>Puts forth important statements on expediting the development of a cyber force, People's Liberation Army Navy's (PLAN's) shift of focus from "offshore waters defense" to the combination of "offshore waters defense" with "open seas protection," People's Liberation Army Air Force's (PLAAF's) shift of focus from territorial air defence to both defence and offence, People's Liberation Army Second Artillery Force's (PLASAF's) efforts towards informationisation, importance of maritime power, etc.</p>
Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces	2013	April 2013	<p>As opposed to previous DWPs on "China's National Defense," this was the first DWP on a specific topic.</p> <p>For the first time, officially publicises the designations of the 18 Group Armies in the PLA Army (PLAA).</p> <p>Also reveals the size of PLAA's operational troops, PLAN, PLAAF, and the missile types equipped in the PLASAF.</p>
China's National Defense in 2010	2010	March 2011	<p>Dedicates separate sections to and elaborates for the first time on the modernisation of PLA, military legal system, as also, military confidence-building measures.</p> <p>For the first time, expounded on the issue of creating the military security mechanism of mutual trust across the Taiwan Straits.</p>
China's National Defense in 2008	2008	January 2009	<p>For the first time, introduces a strategic blueprint for defence development.</p> <p>Expounds on the basic mission of the PLASAF and the specific missions of the nuclear missile forces.</p> <p>Dedicates separate sections to the PLAA, PLAN, PLAAF, PLASAF, and People's Armed Police Force (PAPF) detailing their history, structure, etc.</p> <p>Reveals for the first time, the defence expenditure in the 30 years since opening up, size of public security and border defence forces, and scale of militia force.</p>
China's National Defense in 2006	2006	December 2006	<p>Comprehensively analyses China's security environment for the first time.</p> <p>Dedicates separate sections to PLA, PAPF, "National Defense Mobilization and Reserve Force," and "Border and Coastal Defense."</p>
China's National Defense in 2004	2004	December 2004	<p>Introduces a section on Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) with Chinese characteristics dealing with, inter alia, "Reducing the PLA by 200,000," "Strengthening the Navy, Air Force and Second Artillery Force," "Speeding Up Informationization," and "Accelerating the Modernization of Weaponry and Equipment."</p>
China's National Defense in 2002	2002	December 2002	<p>Puts forth five national interests as the fundamental basis for defence policy.</p> <p>Introduces the composition of the PLA, the PAPF, and the Chinese militia.</p> <p>Releases the aircraft number of the aviation regiment as well as the aircraft-pilot ratio.</p>

DWP	For the Year	Year Published	Remarks
China's National Defense in 2000	2000	October 2000	Calls the security situation "far from peaceful." Underscores that China prioritises territorial integrity. Expatriates on the Taiwan issue for the first time.
China's National Defense in 1998	1998	July 1998	China expounds its defence policies and outlook on security for the first time. First judgement by China on Cross-Strait relations of seeking unification by peaceful means, but "not commit itself not to resort to force."

As is evident, the theme of the DWPs has gradually and systematically evolved from expounding a defence policy, putting forth the structure and composition of the PLA, RMA including informationisation, to PMS.

A trend evident since the first DWP was published is the attempt to equate India and Pakistan. If there is a reference to India, Pakistan is necessarily mentioned in the DWP. The same is true of the absence of references. Interestingly, the 2015 DWP makes no mention of India or Pakistan.

Despite the *iron friendship* that China and Pakistan share, the 2019 DWP makes no major mention of Pakistan except a few references with regard to the stability of South Asia and India-Pakistan confrontations endangering it, the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM), PLANS' humanitarian operations including evacuation of Pakistani citizens in Yemen, admission of Pakistan (& India) as members of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and various other treaties and exercises with Pakistan.

### The 2019 DWP

The Paper consists of the following six sections:

- **International Security Situation**

This section contains four subsections on the global military competition, China's security challenges, the security situation in the Asia-Pacific, and the changing international strategic landscape.

- **China's Defensive National Defence Policy in the New Era**

This section contains five subsections on how China plans to "resolutely" safeguard its interests, has no hegemonistic or expansionist interests, what its military strategic guidelines for the "new era" are, how it plans to continue to strengthen the military in the "Chinese way," and the global significance of the Chinese armed forces.

- **Fulfilling the Missions and Tasks of China's Armed Forces in the New Era**

This section consists of 7 subsections on safeguarding territorial sovereignty and maritime rights, maintaining combat readiness, military training in real combat conditions, safeguarding Chinese interests in major security fields, countering terrorism, protecting China's overseas interests, and participation in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR).

- **Reform in China's National Defence and Armed Forces**

Under 5 subsections, this section gives a detailed account of the reforms in the leadership and command system, optimisation of the size, structure, and force composition, reforms in military policies and institutions, reshuffle of PLA and PAPF troops, and all-round defence and military development.

- **Reasonable and Appropriate Defence**

- **Expenditure**

This section has two subsections on China's defence expenses since 2012, and comparative figures of defence expenditure of China and other major defence spenders.

- **Actively Contributing to Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind**

This section has five subsections dealing with "resolutely" upholding the UN charter, building a new model of security partnership, regional security cooperation architecture, dealing with territorial and maritime disputes, and China's contribution to international security.

### What is the "New Era"?

A term often used by Xi Jinping, especially since the 19th National Congress of the CPC, the preface of the DWP gives an impression that it refers to the stage in which China is, having almost completed the building of a moderately prosperous society and transitioning to the building of a "modernized socialist country."

### 2019 DWP – The Key Points

The following are the main takeaways from the 2019 DWP:

- **Chinese Stake to Global Leadership**

This White Paper can be seen as a public relations exercise trying to portray China as a just leader and a better alternative to the US in the international order. In this regard, the following remarks in the DWP are telling:

- China "advocates partnerships rather than alliances," "does not join any military bloc," "stands against aggression and expansion," "opposes arbitrary use or threat of arms," "will never threaten any other country or seek any sphere of influence," "China has played a constructive role in the political settlement of ... the Korean Peninsula issue, the Iranian

nuclear issue and Syrian issue," "China opposes hegemony, unilateralism and double standards, promotes dialogues and consultations, and fully and earnestly implements UNSC resolutions."

- The forces of peace are "predominating over elements of war."
- The SCO is "forging a constructive partnership of non-alliance and non-confrontation that targets no third party ..."

- **Image Building**

Through this DWP, China has tried to sell its narrative of how it is a peaceful and non-partisan nation. It takes the moral high-ground when it talks about how China has risen without colonial plunder or military expansion, is opposed to interference in the domestic affairs of others, the abuse of weak by the strong, and the imposition of one's will on others. It mentions that progress of China benefits the entire world and that a strong Chinese military is a "staunch force for world peace ..."

- **Chinese Revisionist Approach to History to Continue**

The DWP states that China is committed to resolving disputes through dialogue with the concerned parties, respecting "historical facts" and "international law."

The mention of "historical facts" is significant here as China often relies on what it considers historical evidence, often vague and dubious, in support of its territorial claims such those in the South China Sea. Hence, China's convenient interpretation of History to substantiate claims on the territories in East and South China Seas will continue and China is not likely to honour decisions based purely on legality. This would further mean an increased emphasis on its interpretation of History counter of other narratives.

- **Censure of the US**

Apart from the veiled attack on the US while presenting itself as a fair alternative to it, China has also openly castigated the US and its "unilateral policies."

It has criticised the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence system in the Republic of Korea, the arms sales to Taiwan, sanctions on the Central Military Commission Equipment Development Department and its leadership, US' alleged, illegal entry into what China claims to be its territorial waters and maritime and air spaces, and wide-range reconnaissance.

Sino-US relations, even as the trade and currency wars go on, are going to get more confrontational.

- ***Deepening Sino-Russia Relations***

The DWP makes a special mention of Russia and how the China-Russia strategic partnership is playing an important role in “maintaining global strategic stability.”

While China is embroiled in a trade war with the US, Russia has been at the receiving end of US sanctions since 2014. With an Eastern trade pivot by Russia, China has become Russia's biggest trading partner, replacing Germany.<sup>3</sup> The DWP is defensive of Russia, viewing its shoring up of conventional and nuclear arsenal as a step to “safeguard its strategic security space and interests.” Interestingly, the Paper does not mention Russian intervention in Eastern Europe and its aggressive pursuit of cyberattacks. Moving forward, further deepening of the relationship is expected, especially in light of the cooperation between the two countries vis-à-vis the Polar Silk Road.

- ***Mention of India***

India has been mentioned in the following context:

- While discussing the security situation in South Asia, which the DWP described as “generally stable” but for the occasional flare-ups between India and Pakistan.
- While justifying its military reforms and expenditure where the DWP gives the comparative

figures of average defence expenditures as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) and as a ratio of spending to government expenditure, and the per capita defence expenditure. The DWP also mentions how other countries, including India, are “rebalancing and optimizing the structure of their military forces.”

- While mentioning how People's Liberation Army Navy evacuated foreign citizens including Indian, in 2015 during the ongoing Yemen crisis.
- While mentioning how the Chinese Armed Forces are taking “effective measures” for the “peaceful resolution” of the Doklam stand-off, and in the context of border defence cooperation between India and China.

The reference to India has been passing, but for the one discreet mention with respect to the resolution of the Doklam issue. It wouldn't be wrong to assume that the US and Russia are the priority countries for China at the moment.

- ***Pivot to Asia-Pacific***

Stating that the world's economic and strategic centre is continuing to shift towards the “Asia-Pacific,” the DWP criticises the alleged de-stabilising role of the US in the region. It also makes a mention of how Australia is increasing its military engagement in the region.

Given the importance China accords to the Asia-Pacific and its view of the American and Australian presence in the region it could become more militarily assertive in the region. It is apposite to mention here that while BeiDou Navigation Satellite System's positioning accuracy is 10 metres globally, the same is 5 metres in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>4</sup>

- ***Xi—Larger than Life ... and the Party***

While the 2019 DWP lucidly and strongly puts forth the absolute authority of the CPC over the armed forces,

what is clear from the DWP is the supreme authority of Xi Jinping. According to the 2019 DWP, the armed forces will “unswervingly take Xi Jinping’s thinking on strengthening the military as the guidance” and uphold him “as the core of the CPC and the whole Party.”

The Paper also makes several allusions to Xi Jinping. For example, the names of Guo Boxiong, Xu Caihou, Fang Fenghui, and Zhang Yang have been mentioned as examples of the anti-corruption drive in the armed forces. These are those who have been caught as part of Xi’s policy of going against “tigers and flies at the same time”. The DWP makes a mention of how “China must be and will be reunited” – a widely reported quote by Xi while addressing the nation to commemorate the 40th anniversary of China’s reform and opening up.

#### ● *China’s Interests*

In the section on safeguarding China’s interests, the 2019 DWP makes a mention of, inter alia, the following:

- China’s security interests in outer space, electromagnetic space, and cyberspace.
- Safeguarding China’s overseas interests.
- Supporting the sustainable development of the country.

“Overseas interests” can be seen as a reference to the global, Chinese companies and the projects under the Belt and Road Initiative. A strong reaction can hence be expected from China when it comes to companies like Huawei which could (and should) be barred from the 5G trials in India.

#### ● *Threats to China*

The DWP mentions threats to not just China’s territorial integrity, which has been a recurrent theme in the DWPs, but also its “military security.” It explicitly mentions the following threats:

- The separatist forces of Taiwan independence.
- The external separatist forces of Tibet

independence, and for the creation of East Turkistan.

- Risks of technology surprise and technological generation gap in the military.

The mention of “external” forces in the context of Tibet and East Turkistan (i.e., the Uyghur separatists) is noteworthy. This means that the CCP believes it is in complete control of the situation in Tibet and Xinjiang and only external forces could destabilise it.

In the context of Tibet, “external” could be an allusion to not just Dharamshala (i.e., the Tibetan government-in-exile), but also followers of Dalai Lama all around the world including influential figures, like actors, in the Western world. China will continue to use its economic clout to effect self-censorship vis-à-vis Tibet and Dalai Lama in the Western world.

In the context of Xinjiang, China is expected to further deepen its relationship with the Taliban in Afghanistan so that the Uyghur separatists do not get any external support. Interestingly, the Paper also makes a mention of the QCCM. Also, the entire human rights and media glare on the “re-education camps” notwithstanding, no easing of the situation for the detainees is likely.

#### ● *“Intelligent” Armed Forces*

The DWP underscores the need to build “strong and modernized” land force, naval force, air force, rocket force, strategic support force, joint logistic support force, and armed police force, and gives an account of how China is working towards building a military capable of fighting and winning wars in the Information Age.

With set time frames for achieving mechanisation, informationisation, modernisation, and building of a “world-class” military, it mentions how reform in the leadership and command system, and transformation from being personnel-intensive to being Science-and-Technology-intensive will aid the process.

To this end, the 18 group armies have been reorganised into 13 new ones, all major combat units of the PLA follow a group army-brigade-battalion system, and 77 universities and colleges have been restructured into 44 by the PLA and the People's Armed Police Force. In addition to these, the DWP states that following Xi Jinping's military ideology and ensuring full authority of the CPC over the military are the ways of strengthening national defence and building "socialist military institutions with Chinese features."

Stating how the world is moving towards Informationised Warfare, the Paper makes a mention of how artificial intelligence (AI), big data, quantum information, etc., are changing the military environment. This statement is in conformity with China's goal of becoming a world leader in AI by 2030 and points to increasing convergence between China's tech giants (BAT – Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent) and the CCP.

Given the array of challenges it faces, the Chinese military leadership might have demanded a new strategy for the times. That has not occurred and "active defense" continues to be the "strategic guideline for a new era."

- **Justifying China's Military Push**

The DWP stresses on the point that China's military expansion is reactionary and not proactive by pointing out how the US is in pursuit of "absolute military superiority" and has "undermined global strategic stability" by building its military capacity in various domains. It also gives examples of the EU, NATO, Russia, the UK, France, Germany, Japan, and India to underscore the point that China has no hegemonistic designs. Stating that the PLA is still way behind the world's leading militaries, the Paper mentions how China's expenditure as a percentage of government expenditure dropped more than 12 percentage points from 1979 to 2017, and how China's average defence

expenditure from 2012 to 2017 was less than those of the US, Russia, India, the UK, France, and only marginally more than those of Japan and Germany. It gives a significant explanation of China's defence expenditure which is broken down into the three categories of personnel, training and maintenance, and equipment.

China believes in the centrality of possessing a modern military force to being a world leader. It will continue to relentlessly focus on building a force capable of power-projection at short notice and also "fighting and winning wars in the information age" by improving its military capacities and capabilities across domains.

- **Threatening Tone on Territorial Claims**

As in the first DWP, in this one too, China states in unambiguous terms that it reserves the option to use force with respect to the Taiwan issue. It mentions that sailing ships and flying aircraft around Taiwan send a "stern warning" to the separatists. In addition, it clearly states that China will not only continue to conduct patrols around what it calls the Diaoyu Islands (Senkaku Islands), but also build infrastructure and military capabilities in South China Sea's islands and reefs, which it sees as an exercise of its "sovereignty." China, hence, is expected to continue displaying a muscular posture when it comes to what it considers matters of sovereignty.

- **Calling China's Bluff**

While China is critical of the US, it is as much guilty of the same (and even more) sins it accuses other countries of. Be it shielding of terrorists at international forums, creation and eventual militarisation of artificial islands and hence, destabilising the regional situation, neo-imperialism by way of debt-trap diplomacy, currency manipulation, blatant flouting of the rights and freedom of its own people, state-theft of Intellectual Property Rights,<sup>5</sup> and so forth, China is no just and "peaceful" nation that it portrays itself to be. Moreover, China's

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defence budget is known to be not very transparent though it makes details available to the UN Report on Military Expenditures. The official figures given by China vary widely when compared with the estimates

of the US Department of Defence and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, though the official figures given now are regarded comparatively more accurate.<sup>6</sup>

### Notes

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