



# Chinese Military Strategy

A CIMSEC Compendium

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<b>Preface</b>	<b>3</b>
<b><i>The Influence of Han Feizi on China's Defence Policy</i></b> <i>By Paul Pryce</i>	<b>4</b>
<b><i>From Expediency to the Strategic Chinese Dream?</i></b> <i>By Sherman Xiaogang Lai</i>	<b>7</b>
<b><i>Where You Stand Depends on Where You Sit: U.S. &amp; Chinese Strategic Views</i></b> <i>By Daniel Hartnett</i>	<b>10</b>
<b><i>Bear, Dragon &amp; Eagle: Russian, Chinese &amp; U.S. Military Strategies</i></b> <i>By Chad M. Pillai</i>	<b>13</b>
<b><i>Avoiding Conditions for an Asia-Pacific Cold War</i></b> <i>By Jack McKechnie</i>	<b>18</b>
<b><i>Beyond the Security Dilemma? De-Escalating Tension in the South China Sea</i></b> <i>By Jan Stockbruegger</i>	<b>21</b>
<b><i>A Grain of Contextual Salt in the Chinese Military Strategy</i></b> <i>By Chang Ching</i>	<b>25</b>
<b><i>Deep Accommodation: The Best Option for Preventing War in the Taiwan Strait</i></b> <i>By Eric Gomez</i>	<b>27</b>
<b><i>Assessing China's Nuclear Ambitions</i></b> <i>By Debalina Ghoshal</i>	<b>30</b>
<b><i>The Unnamed Protagonist in China's Maritime Objectives</i></b> <i>By Amanda Conklin</i>	<b>32</b>
<b><i>A Pacific Rebalance with Chinese Characteristics</i></b> <i>By Justin Chock</i>	<b>35</b>
<b><i>Becoming a Maritime Power? The First Chinese base in the Indian Ocean?</i></b> <i>By Xunchao Zhang</i>	<b>38</b>



## Preface

*By Dmitry Filipoff*

*Director of Online Content*

The CIMSEC Chinese Military Strategy topic week ran from August 3-7 and featured experts from around the globe and representing various military branches. Through their work we were exposed to numerous interpretations, challenges, and means to produce meaningful progress as China defines its role.

Numerous questions abound on how to manage the complex rise of China in the Asia-Pacific. How can China militarily rise with power commensurate with defending one of the world's great economies, while not producing a more uncertain status quo ripe for miscalculation? How can the United States and China both increase their influence in the Asia-Pacific without appearing to contain one another? We should bear in mind the historical origins of trends, areas of convergence and divergence, and competing philosophies on the role of nations as our authors have so eloquently discussed.

The CIMSEC team would like to thank all the authors who responded to our call for articles and used CIMSEC as a platform for their excellent analysis. We would also like to thank guest editor Eric Murphy who handled the numerous details and challenges in executing the topic week.

Keep on the lookout for future calls for articles, and at any time prospective contributors are free to contact the CIMSEC team at [Nextwar@cimsec.org](mailto:Nextwar@cimsec.org) to see what we can accomplish.

## About Us

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## ***The Influence of Han Feizi on China's Defence Policy***

*By Paul Pryce*

There is much of concern in China's Military Strategy white paper released by the Chinese Ministry of National Defense in May 2015. In particular, the notion of active defense extolled in the document arguably poses a far greater threat to the stability of the Asia-Pacific region than the reinterpretation of Article 9 in Japan's Constitution. Coupled with other recent developments in the formulation and expression of China's defense policy, there is a startling willingness to resort to the threat of force in order to resolve disputes. In July 2015, a meeting of the Central Military Commission announced that the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) requires a stealth-capable strategic bomber with a minimum range of 8,000 kilometers and the capacity to carry a payload of more than 10 tons of air-to-ground munitions. Although this envisioned replacement to the Xian H-6K bomber would still have a range and payload capacity less than the Northrup Grumman B-2 Spirit that has been in service with the United States Air Force (USAF) for almost two decades as of this writing, the extended range would allow China's bomber fleet to reach as far as Guam or Japan's Northern Territories, also known as the Kuril Islands.

This saber-rattling can be explained in part by examining a school of thought that has risen to prominence together with the

People's Republic of China's fifth generation of leadership, of which Xi Jinping is a part. Since Mao Zedong, Chinese leaders such as Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin promoted the virtues of Confucianism and frequently quoted from Confucian works in their public remarks. With an emphasis on community-mindedness and obligations to the authority of the state, Confucius seemed to offer the philosophical justification for the entrenchment of the Communist Party of China in all areas of Chinese life. But there has been a noticeable departure from this tradition under Xi Jinping, who has relied heavily upon references to the works of Han Feizi.

Believed to have lived from 280 to 233 BC, Han Feizi was one of the founding thinkers of Legalism, a meritocratic ideology that came into being during the Warring States period of China's history and was formally adopted by the victorious Qin state. Han Feizi has been called China's Machiavelli, concerned more so with the efficiency of the state than with any over-arching moral or ethical questions. One passage from Han Feizi's essay "The Eight Villainies," a quote the fifth generation of leadership has apparently taken to heart, reads, "It is customary with a ruler that, if his state is small, he will do the bidding of larger states, and his army is weak, he will stand in fear of stronger armies.

When the larger states come with demands, the small state must consent; when stronger armies appear, the weak army must submit.” Han Feizi does not comment on whether the doctrine of might makes right ought to be; he simply regards it as a natural and unavoidable consequence of a system in which different actors hold varying levels of power. There is also no apparent role for soft power in Han Feizi’s worldview – the strength of a ruler and his state is directly tied to military strength.

The memory of foreign occupation looms large for many Chinese leaders. In 2010, a diplomatic spat emerged when Chinese officials asked visiting British dignitaries to remove their poppies, worn to commemorate Remembrance Day and the Commonwealth’s war dead, because it allegedly reminded them of the Opium Wars. Xi Jinping himself often evokes the century of humiliation and the supposed role of the Communist Party of China in restoring national independence. If we regard Chinese history from the 1840s to the 1940s in the Legalist context, China was made subservient because it was militarily weak in relation to global powers like the United Kingdom, France, Russia, the United States, and others. If the weak must do the bidding of the strong and China is militarily weak in comparison to American hyperpower, the conventional thinking among the members of the Central Military Commission is that the gap must be closed or else it will only be a matter of time before the United States dictates to China once again.

One need not look far for examples of this anxiety about the capability gap. Xu Qiliang, the vice chairman of the Central Military Commission, wrote in 2013 that the People’s Liberation Army cannot currently meet the needs of national security and requires rapid modernization to contend with “the world’s advanced militaries.” Even though China already possesses the means to deter military aggression from any of its neighbors, it is apparent that the fifth generation of leadership still regards China as vulnerable

unless it has an equivalency to every tool in the United States’ security toolbox. After all, it is telling that Xu Qiliang does not regard China as one of the world’s advanced militaries even though the PLA’s contingent of Xian H-6K bombers places China in a very exclusive club – only the United States, the Russian Federation, and the United Kingdom can also boast having strategic bombers at their disposal.

It is also worth noting how the presentation of the most recent Chinese Military Strategy reflects Han Feizi’s thought. In another of his works, *The Difficulties of Persuasion*, Han Feizi writes that, “If you wish to urge a policy of peaceful coexistence, then be sure to expound it in terms of lofty ideals, but also hint that it is commensurate with the ruler’s personal interests.” Just as the white paper advances the ideas of active defense and bottom-line thinking, it also emphasizes China’s commitment to participating in United Nations peacekeeping missions, the role of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in counter-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden, and appeals to such values as “the peaceful settlement of disputes.” This reflects a growing awareness on the part of Chinese officials that the rest of the world is paying attention to what kind of actor China might become in the 21st century. The message, in many respects, is that the Chinese Dream is inclusive – other nations and societies can benefit from China pursuing its own national interests, such as the investment and increased security that might come to Djibouti through the proposed establishment of a PLAN base there.

It is vital that those studying or interacting with Chinese policymakers to consider the historical context for China’s policies and their ideological framework. The China threat narrative considers Chinese strategy within a strictly neo-realist prism that supposes conflict will inevitably arise from a shift in polarity in international politics. Rather, Xi Jinping and Xu Qiliang can be best understood by consulting Han Feizi. As

such, the explicit reference to China in the United States' most recent maritime strategy, A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower, might not help matters. It indicates to the Chinese political leadership that Han Feizi's view of international politics endures more than two millennia later – the strong will continue to dictate to the weak, and so the United States will continue to determine the outcome of any territorial dispute in the South China Sea or East China Sea so long as the capability gap with China persists. An appeal to lofty ideals in the U.S.-China relationship, rather than explicit reference to geopolitical changes, could have spoken to the fifth generation of leadership on a deeper level without alienating the US' Asia-Pacific allies. For its part, the National Military Strategy of the U.S. released in June 2015 goes some way toward accomplishing this, balancing criticism of China's actions in the South China Sea with assertions that the U.S. "support[s] China's rise."

It may be that the revised maritime strategy adopts a harsher tone toward China in order to generate political will among other countries to participate in what the original Cooperative Strategy termed the Global Maritime Partnership. By distinguishing the U.S. from China as far as adherence with international maritime law is concerned, the U.S. Navy demonstrates that it can be a more reliable partner than PLAN to such countries as the Philippines and Vietnam. Nonetheless, with China participating meaningfully in the Rim of the Pacific Exercise (RIMPAC) and other multilateral venues, there must be consistency in the message delivered by the U.S. at the strategic, tactical, and operational levels. Security in the Asia-Pacific region will not benefit from mixed signals delivered by any actor.

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## ***From Expediency to the Strategic Chinese Dream?***

*By Sherman Xiaogang Lai*

China's Military Strategy, the white paper released by the Chinese Ministry of Defense on 26 May 2015, is a milestone document in the People's Republic of China's military history. It marks China's confidence in its ability to control the potentially explosive issue of Taiwan and its territorial disputes with its neighbors in the East and South China Seas and signals the beginning of China's advance into overseas markets, where China's interests have been rapidly expanding since Deng Xiaoping initiated his market-oriented reform by terminating Mao Zedong's regime of isolation, "self-reliance, and arduous struggle." *China's Military Strategy* states that "the basic point for PMS [preparation for military struggle] will be placed on winning informationized local wars, highlighting maritime military struggle and maritime PMS." It asserts that the "traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests." For the first time in its history, the mission of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy (PLAN) is defined as *jinhai fangyu, yuanghai huwei* ("offshore waters defense and open seas protection"), and the PLAN's focus is on the transition from the former to the latter.

This new military strategy traces its origin to the Military Strategy Guideline of the New Era (MSGNE) of 1993. Although the text of

the MSGNE has not been made public, its objective is known to be deterrence of Taiwan from *de jure* independence. The current strategy is thus significantly different from the MSGNE because of the former's emphasis on the navy's role in protecting sea lines of communication (SLOC), which were used by Admiral/General Liu Huaqing, China's Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, to promote the PLAN as early as 1975, when Mao was alive. That Liu did not engage in the process of the MSGNE's formation and in fact kept himself at a safe distance from it deserves attention. This reveals China's strategic dilemma created by Taiwan's inclination toward *de jure* independence and China's growing dependence on international trade. The former demanded that the PLA develop an effective fighting capacity to deter Taiwan and convince the United States that it would pay a price if it did not help China in this effort. The latter required that the PLAN assume a new mission to protect China's growing overseas interests. The hope was that this dilemma would be solved when China's rapid economic growth eliminated the huge gap in living standards across the Taiwan Strait, bringing the two sides together. However, despite China's admirable economic growth, Taiwan shows no sign of surrender. In addition, China's territorial disputes with its neighbours in the East and South China Seas have escalated. The PLAN's strategic dilemma thus remains intact. Will China's tremendously increased

economic and military strength help the PLA solve this problem and guide China onto the track toward the “Chinese Dream?” Before answering this question, let us go back to the fall of 1992, when the MSGNE was conceived.

By the spring of 1991, the PLAN leaders, including Admiral/General Liu, faced an unprecedented embarrassment: in addition to it being well known that the PLA was armed with obsolete weapons, the Allies’ triumph in the Gulf War demonstrated that the PLA’s operation doctrine was outdated. Making the situation worse was the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union. China, which had been benefiting tremendously from the West-East rivalry, had to face pressure from the United States, Taiwan’s patron, alone. As the island was in the process of rapid democratization and those residents who had fled to the island from the Mainland in 1949 were losing their dominance in politics, Taiwan began to pursue de jure independence and emerged as the fatal threat to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communists’ rule over Mainland China. Having recognized the reality of the changed world, Admiral/General Liu, one of the members of the PLA’s commanding agency, the Central Military Commission (CMC), and other PLA strategy planners began to develop a new strategy. Liu’s efforts coincided with Jiang Zemin’s endeavour to control the PLA. Jiang was a protégé of one of Deng’s rivals and managed to obtain Deng’s trust in the fall of 1992. As Jiang did not serve in the PLA, Deng appointed General Zhang Zhen, the PLA’s most senior officer in active duty, to help Jiang, who then asked Zhang to develop a new military strategy. Zhang tasked General Zhang Wannian, the recently appointed Chief of General Staff, with completing this job. Both generals’ entire careers were devoted to the PLA, and the final fruit of their efforts was the MSGNE approved in 1993.

The MSGNE departed fundamentally from the PLA’s strategic tradition at the time,

which was based on ground forces armed with outdated weapons, in two aspects. The first was its shift from continental defence to the immediate challenges off China’s coast: deterring Taiwan’s de jure independence and managing the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The second was prioritizing development of a few critical weapon systems, the so-called shashoujian, in contrast to the previous emphasis on ideological indoctrination. It is interesting that the MSGNE has not been officially defined and explained, despite it being a watershed strategy in the PLA’s history. Equally interesting is the fact that Admiral/General Liu was away from Beijing when the Generals Zhang were preoccupied there developing this maritime-oriented military strategy. The authors of his official biography cautiously implied that Liu had nothing to do with the creation of the MSGNE.

Twenty years after the MSGNE was implemented, a PLAN consisting of two very different fleets emerged. The first consists of large surface warships and auxiliary vessels capable of operating as far as the Mediterranean Sea. The second is an anti-access fleet of submarines, fast missile craft, and destroyers supported by the PLAN’s land-based aircraft, the PLA Air Force, and the strategic striking force of the Second Artillery. In 2013, the world’s first anti-ship ballistic missile, the DF-21, with a range of 3,000 km, was reported to be operational. The deployment of the DF-21 means that US fleets, especially its aircraft carriers, are exposed to critical attacks by China’s conventional missiles when they are far from China’s territorial waters. The DF-21 is a part of the PLA’s shashoujian and alters the naval game in the Pacific. Although it offers Chinese leaders more options in weapon selection, it makes a military solution more tempting and creates a set of challenges to both Chinese and American decision-makers if a cross-Strait conflict breaks out. The Chinese leaders will be able to use the DF-21 against approaching US fleets instead of their



nuclear weapons. US leaders will have to make the decision either to risk US aircraft carriers being lost to the DF-21 in international waters and thus being forced into a large-scale war against China or to acknowledge China's hegemony over the Western Pacific.

Neither Beijing nor Washington wants to make these difficult decisions. But China, the weaker side of this cross-Pacific rivalry, gains much more than it loses from the deployment of DF-21, and this gives it confidence. The PLAN's new "offshore waters defense and open seas protection" mission is a reflection of this new confidence among the Chinese national and naval leaders over their recent boost in naval strength. This new mission could be regarded as China's tremendous contribution to world peace if it were irrelevant to the DF-21 and the tension in the South and East China Seas. The intermediate DF-21 is a weapon system of expediency to compensate for China's lack of command of sea in the case of a cross-Strait war, but it is able to disrupt the status quo of the world if it is used offensively as a shield for its fleets. Admiral/General Liu must have recognized this potential danger, which was in opposition to his dream for a high-seas fleet protecting China's SLOC. As the founder of China's modern navy, he knew the PLAN's inherent deficiencies better than anyone. In striking contrast to the PLAA, which was forged into a formidable fighting machine through numerous victories and defeats, the PLAN was a mosaic of Soviet-trained officers with fragments of the Nationalist navy trained by either the US Navy or the Royal Navy. And it did not experience the forging process that the PLAA did and thus has been plagued with factional struggles and has been vulnerable to the struggle among the PRC leadership. In addition, China's semi-closed coast places the PLAN in a disadvantageous geographic position if it is involved in a war against the United States. Realizing that its expediency would lead the PLA and China into a cul-de-sac, Liu kept himself out of the MSGNE's development. If he were alive

today, he would be proud of his beloved PLAN while increasingly anxious about its future.

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## ***Where You Stand Depends on Where You Sit: U.S. & Chinese Strategic Views***

*By Daniel Hartnett*

Within approximately a month of each other this year, both China and the United States published official documents detailing their respective views of the current security environment. China's assessment was captured in its 9th biennial defense white paper, published in late May, and officially titled China's Military Strategy. The U.S. view is presented in the National Military Strategy of the United States of America, 2015 (hereafter, U.S. National Military Strategy), published in June. The authoritative nature of each document provides an interesting opportunity to comparatively assess how both nations see the international military and security situation, more clearly understand their similarities and differences, and draw out any relevant implications.

Before comparing the views contained within the two documents, however, it is important to clarify that this is not a perfect comparison. Although both documents are official and therefore represent the approved views of the respective government, they are not exact equivalents. China's defense white paper, while drafted by the Chinese military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), is actually coordinated with and vetted by China's foreign policy making community, to most importantly include the Chinese Communist Party.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it represents the view of the Chinese Party-State, not just the PLA. On the other side of the ledger, the

Joint Chiefs of Staff is responsible for producing the U.S. National Military Strategy. This document draws closely from other U.S. government statements, most importantly from the President's National Security Strategy. However, ultimately the U.S. National Military Strategy is a U.S. military document, not a whole-of-government product. As a result, comparing it with China's Military Strategy is imperfect at best. However, such an exercise is still of value, particularly given the authoritativeness of the two documents combined with the general lack of publicly released official Chinese statements on national defense issues.

Going forward with this imperfect yet still useful comparison of these two views on the international security situation yields four findings of interest. First, both documents describe the international security situation as experiencing great change. According to the U.S. National Military Strategy, "complexity and rapid change characterize the strategic environment, driven by globalization, the diffusion of technology, and demographic shifts." China's defense white paper paints a similar picture, stating that "profound changes are taking place in the international situation." Although China's Military Strategy is silent on what is causing these changes, it does assert that the changes in question are changes to the international

balance of power, global governance structure, and Asia-Pacific geostrategic landscape, as well as an increase in international economic, military, and technological competition.

Second, although they both maintain the international system is in flux, the two documents disagree about the impact these changes will have. The U.S. National Military Strategy takes a more pessimistic view, stating that these changes are giving rise to a host of problems. As General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, writes in the foreword to the U.S. National Military Strategy, “today’s global security environment is the most unpredictable I have seen in 40 years of service,” and that “global disorder has significantly increased while [U.S.] comparative military advantage has begun to erode.” Concerns noted include increasing societal tensions, resource competition, political instability, military challenges, and non-traditional security concerns. More concerning, the document also asserts that the risk of “U.S. involvement in interstate war with a major power is assessed to be low but growing” [emphasis added].

China’s assessment, on the other hand, is more positive. It asserts that overall the international situation is good, although it also recognizes that some problems exist. For example, the document maintains that “peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit have become an irresistible tide of the times,” continuing a basic position held since the mid-1980s when then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping took China off the constant pre-war footing of Mao Zedong.<sup>2</sup> That doesn’t mean that China’s Military Strategy doesn’t recognize the existence of international problems; the document notes such issues as “hegemonism, power politics, and neo-interventionism,” as well as increasing competition for power and interests, international terrorism, and ethnic, religious, and territorial disputes. However, it does assert that “the forces for peace are on

the rise, [and] so are the factors against war,” and as a result, a major war is unlikely and the “international situation is expected to remain generally peaceful”—although minor conflicts and wars can occur. More importantly, China’s Military Strategy states explicitly that China confronts a “generally favorable external environment,” something the document claims is a prerequisite for China’s continued development.

Third, the two documents focus on different levels of the international system. The U.S. National Military Strategy, for example, squarely assesses the international situation from a global perspective. For example, the four countries mentioned by name as revisionist (Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China) span much of the globe. Similarly, when discussing the threat of violent extremist organizations, the document notes this is a global concern (although it does highlight the Middle East and North Africa for exceptional concern). Furthermore, the U.S. National Military Strategy explicitly rejects the notion of emphasizing any one region or issue, stating that “the U.S. military does not have the luxury of focusing on one challenge to the exclusion of others.”

In contrast, China’s Military Strategy emphasizes China’s periphery, and in particular the maritime areas of the western Pacific Ocean. Although global issues are mentioned, they are done so only briefly and ambiguously. Instead, China’s Military Strategy mainly discusses regional concerns. Concerns noted include the U.S. rebalance to Asia, especially efforts to strengthen the U.S. military presence and alliances in the region; Japan’s ongoing adjustments to its defense policy; tensions on the Korean Peninsula; relations with Taiwan; and extremist movements that could spill over China’s borders. Of particular note is China’s focus on maritime concerns, such as the growing tensions concerning its disputed claims in the East and South China seas, U.S. special reconnaissance operations, and alleged outside interference in China’s maritime

disputes. The only non-peripheral concern expressly noted in the document reflects the recognition that China's growing overseas interests are creating new security issues, such as sea lane security and the security of Chinese foreign investments and overseas citizens.

Fourth, each document portrays the other country as part of the problem. According to China's Military Strategy, the increase in China's peripheral insecurity is partially due to U.S. actions in the region, such as the U.S. rebalance to Asia and its interference in China's maritime disputes with other East Asia states. For its part, the U.S. National Military Strategy also explicitly calls out China, stating that its "aggressive land reclamation efforts" in the South China Sea could allow the PLA to position forces "astride vital international sea lanes." As a result, "China's actions are adding tension to the Asia-Pacific region." This mutual finger pointing in order to assign blame for tensions in the South China Sea exemplifies what Dr. David M. Finkelstein, director of CNA's China Studies division, has referred to as a "perception gap" between China and the United States on regional security concerns.

From this simple comparison of the two authoritative documents, it is easy to see that a large divide exists between the U.S. and Chinese views on security issues. While the United States sees the rapidly changing international systems as a potential concern, China sees it as an opportunity for continued development. The U.S. focus on the global level is indicative of its position as an established global power with global interests. Conversely, China's focus, although gradually expanding to the international level, emphasizes the East Asia region, reflecting that Beijing continues to be primarily concerned with its immediate periphery. Each country also sees the other as part of the problem, especially in the case of the South China Sea issue.

Ultimately this difference in views should not

be shocking since both countries have their own set of national interests and related concerns. The more important questions, however, are: Is it possible, as some claim, to bridge these differences and build "mutual trust" between the two militaries? Or will asymmetries of interest on certain issues prevent reaching a peaceful accord? Can the two militaries reach a middle ground on issues where they see the other as the main culprit? For this author, it would seem a difficult challenge, for as the Truman-era senior bureaucrat Rufus F. Miles said in the late 1940s, "Where you stand depends on where you sit."<sup>3</sup>

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## ***Bear, Dragon & Eagle: Russian, Chinese & U.S. Military Strategies***

*By Chad M. Pillai*

Last year, I wrote about “The Return of Great Power Politics” and described an emerging multi-polarity and its impact on the global security environment. Since then, the updated Russian Military Doctrine, Chinese Military Strategy, the U.S. National Military Strategy were all released. Each has its own distinct characteristics that illuminate each nation’s perception of its global power and that of its primary threats. While there has been commentary on a possible Sino-Russian block balancing the U.S. hegemonic position, the jockeying for global power, position, and prestige is far more complicated. As such, I offer a comparative analysis of the three military doctrines/strategies and how they relate to one another.

### **The Bear Reawakens but Remains Paranoid**

Russian President Putin described the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geo-political disaster of the 20th Century. It ushered in an era of weakness and shame for the Russian people as NATO expanded eastward next to the Russian border. During this period, the Russian military performed poorly in Chechnya and much of its infrastructure and human capital degenerated. However, since Putin’s rise to power, he has charted a new course for

Russia, promising to re-establish the global respect it once had during the Soviet period.

The 2014 Russian Military Doctrine reflects this new optimism while remaining true to the Russian historical paranoia about its security. It clearly identifies NATO, and by extension the U.S., as its primary security threat. This includes the presence of NATO in Afghanistan and U.S. forces operating from regions considered within the traditional spheres of influence of previous Russian empires. Because of their realization of their conventional force inferiority compared to the West, the Russian doctrine emphasizes the right to use nuclear weapons in the event of an aggressive conventional force act by the West that makes nuclear escalation necessary – an ambiguous red-line that undermines the US policy of escalation dominance. To regain its influence in its immediate border region (to include Ukraine), Russia has employed an unconventional war strategy to keep the conflict below the boiling point for a western response while simultaneously exercising its heavy conventional forces and deployment of theater ballistic missiles as deterrence towards NATO. Simultaneously, Russia is expanding its military capability in the arctic region and sees naval cooperation with China in the Pacific and India in the Indian Ocean. Russia’s military doctrine does not view

China as a military threat and states areas of cooperation with China on regional counter-terrorism through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). However, as China grows more powerful, Russia may need to relook the threat to its eastern frontier; especially as recent Russian policy attempts to counter the PRC essentially squatting its way to de facto control over parts of Siberia.

The rest of the document focuses on how the Russian Military and Defense establishment will rebuild itself. It focuses on reforming its military command and control structures, developing professional expeditionary forces, and investing in advanced technologies for cyber, ISR, precision strike, and anti-access/area denial (A2/AD). Additionally, it calls for reform of Russia's defense industrial sector, patriotic indoctrination of the Russian people, and greater cooperation with bordering states representing the Commonwealth of Independent States, Collective Security Treaty Organization, and SCO. The document reflects the reawakening of the Russian Bear from the nightmare of the post-Soviet collapse as it seeks to remind the world of its place among the great powers of the global order.

### **The Dragon's Ascent**

The Chinese Military Strategy reflects the Chinese Dream to repair the damage of the Century of Humiliation and regain a position atop the global order by the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party's defeat of the Nationalists. Its growing confidence and the perceived decline of U.S. hegemonic power is evident in its analysis of the world order when it states, "Global trends toward multi-polarity and economic globalization are intensifying, and an information society is rapidly coming into being." China views the U.S. and its allies and partners as the primary threats to its ascent in the global order. According to Henry Kissinger's book *World Order*, the Chinese had no say in the development of the post-WWII order and now seek to modify it "with Chinese

Characteristics" according to their Neo-Confucius Tributary Hierarchal world view where China was called the Middle Kingdom for a reason.

The Chinese Military Strategy serves to safeguard the nation's core interests while preparing to assume a greater global role in security matters. Its Strategic Guideline for Active Defense lays out the goal of updating its operational doctrines to ensure combat forces are integrated to "prevail in system-vs-system operations featuring information dominance, precision strike, and joint operations." As a result of the Chinese studying U.S. joint operations since the 1991 Gulf War, the Chinese appear on the path of counter-optimizing against U.S. Joint Operational Doctrine (especially the "Joint Anti-Air Raid campaign"). This PRC strategy culminates a 75-year evolution of the People's Liberation Army from securing the Communist Party of China, to securing China from invaders and disruptors, to an unprecedented role as guarantor of access to the global markets upon which China's economy depends.

To gain the initiative, the Chinese seek to "proactively plan for military struggle in all directions and domains, and grasp the opportunities to accelerate military building, reform, and development." To achieve its ends, the People's Liberation Army is directed to "elevate its capabilities for precise, multi-dimensional, trans-theater, and multi-functional and sustainable operations." The Navy was directed to shift towards an "Open Seas Protection" approach, build an effective marine force, and be capable of "strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime maneuvers, joint operations at sea, comprehensive defense and comprehensive support." The Air Force was directed to shift its focus from "territorial defense to both defense and offense, and build an air-space defense force structure that can meet the requirements of 'informationized' operations." It also recognizes its critical security elements of

cyber, space, and nuclear forces. Finally, the Chinese recognize the need to plan for military operations other than war ranging from counterterrorism to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

The Chinese strategy recognizes the need for security cooperation to create “a security environment favorable to China’s peaceful development.” It articulates the need to maintain cooperation with the Russian military within a framework of a comprehensive strategic partnership while maintaining ties with the U.S. military that conform to a new model of “major-country relations.” The difference in language reflects China’s view that they are more on par with the U.S. in global standing and that the Russians are simply regional partners.

China’s strategic position is shaped by having the world’s second largest economy and, unlike the U.S., a worldview that doesn’t see Russia as a military threat – though the PRC has historically calibrated its rhetoric on Russia to its correlation of military forces, so Russian activism in the Pacific could quickly change China’s rhetoric. Like Russia, however, China’s economy is experiencing a slowdown that may threaten its ability to increase military spending due to domestic pressures to alleviate rising unemployment. Also like Russia, demographic pressures are likely to force more internal investment as China’s working population moves from wage earners to pensioners and transitions to a new working cohort that is severely constrained by the aftermath of the one-child policy. For now, though, the PRC appears to recognize that there is a unique window of opportunity to reassert itself as the Middle Kingdom.

### **Exhausted Eagle**

The tone of the U.S. National Military Strategy (NMS) is one of an exhausted super power engaged in the preservation of a global order increasingly threatened by state and non-state actors. It asserts that “we now face

multiple, simultaneous security challenges from traditional state actors and trans-regional networks of sub-state groups – all taking advantage of rapid technological change.” The NMS articulates the threat that both Russia and China represent; however, unlike the Chinese and Russians, it clearly articulates the threat posed by Iran, North Korea, non-state actors such as ISIL, and cyber. These threats fall in line with Chairman Dempsey’s 2-2-2-1 construct describing the global security environment: two heavyweights (Russia and China); two middleweights (Iran and North Korea); Al Qaeda and trans-national criminal networks; and cyber.

To address the emergent security environment, the NMS specifies three national military objectives: (1) Deter, deny, and defeat state adversaries; (2) Disrupt, degrade, and defeat violent extremist organizations; and (3) Strengthen our global network of allies and partners. The NMS enumerates 12 prioritized joint force missions ranging from maintaining a nuclear deterrent to security cooperation within the global integrated operations construct. In an increasing fiscally constrained environment, the NSM list the mission of “strengthening partners is fundamental to our security, building strategic depth for our national defense.” While the NMS acknowledges the potential negative impact of sequestration on the defense budget, it fails to specify what trade-offs it will make in the face of these pressures, such as placing less emphasis on developing a global network to ensure remaining available forces are capable of achieving the deter, deny, defeat state adversaries.

To address the growing risk and fiscal constraints, the NMS list three areas of Joint Force initiatives: (1) producing creative, adaptive leaders; (2) adopting efficient, dynamic processes; and (3) developing flexible, interoperable capabilities. Of these, adopting efficient, dynamic processes will be the most important as the Department of

Defense will continue to struggle with balancing the capabilities required and available resources. As the nation struggles to reduce its financial debt, the DoD needs to demonstrate greater efficiency in resource management in light of two decades of program mismanagement ranging from the Army's Future Combat System (FCS) to the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

The Eagle, is exhausted by 14 years of continual conflict with violent extremist groups. Even as it attempts to contain the global terrorist threat, it faces traditional-state challengers seeking to re-align the global order. These challenges coupled with domestic political gridlock and fiscal mismanagement will continue to stress the U.S.'s ability to maintain its position.

### **Areas of Convergence and Divergence**

The Russian, Chinese, and U.S. National Military Strategies have three areas of convergence where cooperation among the powers is possible. All three national military doctrines/strategies recognize the threat from violent terrorist organizations such as ISIL/Daesh – both the direct threat and the indirect threat via similar or affiliated groups such as Chechnyan extremists and Uighur separatists – and all three nations seek their destruction. However, unlike the U.S., Russia and China will not commit significant resources to combat ISIL/Daesh. In fact, it serves their longer term interests to allow the U.S. to take the lead against ISIL/Daesh and further erode its resource base in the effort. Further, all three powers agree on the dangers caused by trans-regional criminal and narco-trafficking groups that cause instability in places like Afghanistan and the Central Asian States. Finally, all three powers recognize the danger from the proliferation of WMD falling into the hands of terrorist organizations but have different views on the threats posed by nation states such as Iran and North Korea.

There are two significant areas of divergence

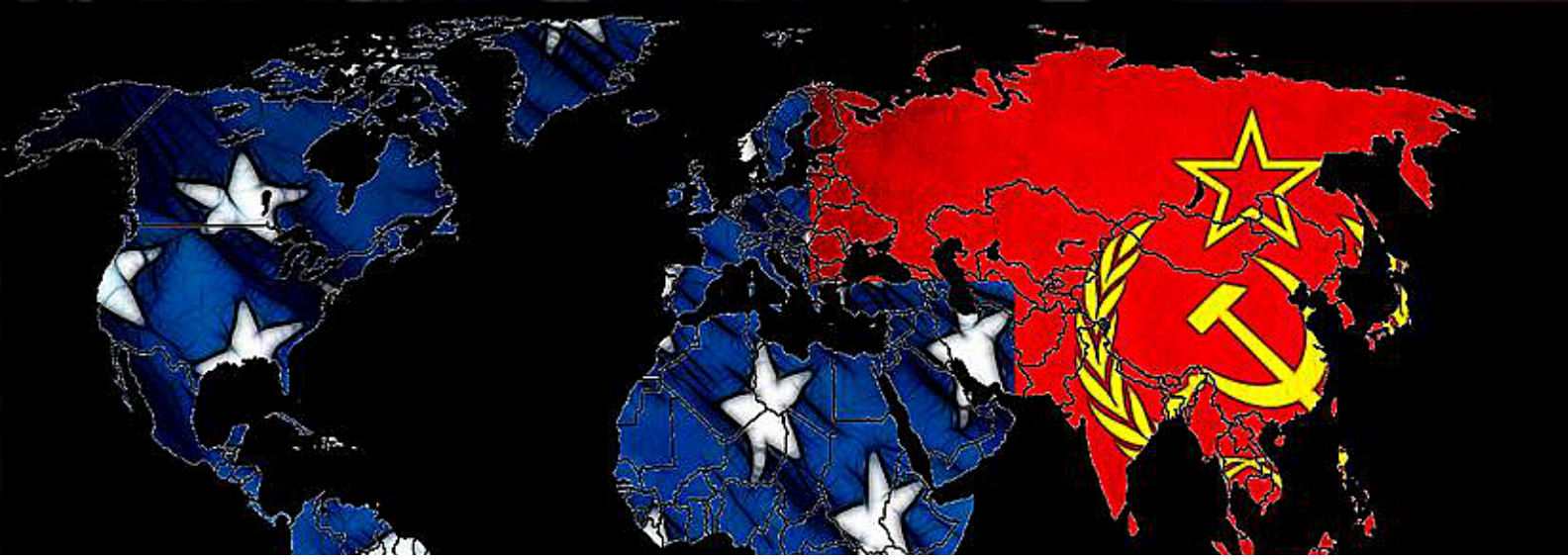
between the three powers. The strategies and the national interests of the Russians, Chinese, and U.S. will more seriously diverge in the Central Asian States as all three powers compete for influence and access to tap into the region's economic potential. While Russia may accept Chinese economic development in the region, it may react negatively to any Chinese military engagement or posture to protect its core economic interests. Both Russia and China are wary of a long-term US presence in the region fearing that any counter-terrorism posture could be refocused on serving as a military platform against either state. A second area of divergence will be the emerging importance of the Arctic. While Russia is actively building its military capability for the arctic region, the U.S. published a strategy in 2013 highlighting the importance of the region and the need to work with its key Arctic Allies such as Canada and Norway. China is also looking northward in the race for natural resources by actively engaging with the Nordic Nations and Irish, signing a joint statement with Russia on shipping access, and becoming a member of the Arctic Council in 2013.

### **Conclusion**

As a multi-polar moment approaches, understanding the military strategies of the key players will be of utmost importance. Unlike the Cold War's bi-polar world, the Bear, the Dragon, and the Eagle will simultaneously seek cooperation while posturing to deter the others. Additionally, each will have to develop new relations with other emerging regional powers such as Iran and India who will play increased roles in the global order. As a result, each will have to place a greater emphasis on balance between its external national security and domestic responsibilities. And the global power whose economic and political foundation collapses first from the competitive strain will be displaced with unforeseeable global consequences.



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## ***Avoiding Conditions for an Asia-Pacific Cold War***

*By Jack McKechnie*

The People's Republic of China's new Military Strategy white paper indicating China's military strategy is a positive step towards transparency, but comparison with the recent U.S. National Military Strategy (NMS) reveals a significant difference and ominous implications of future paths. Should China and the U.S. pursue their stated military strategies, a period of increasing tension and force buildup will ensue as the U.S. and allies seek to maintain an absolute advantage over a rising Chinese regional advantage. While the national leaderships of China and the U.S. will likely strive to avoid the use of force, miscalculations can occur and attempts at reassurance can fail with severe, complicating, and long-lasting consequences for everyone involved. A future strategy by China that reassures the rest of the world that its rise is peaceful is necessary to avoid this situation.

Although both documents appear to portray each country's military strategies, there is a key difference that makes this an imperfect comparison. While the U.S. president is both commander-in-chief of the U.S. military as well as party chief of his political party, the U.S. military is not a party army, and the U.S. NMS has no mandate to keep the Democratic Party in power. Xi Jinping is both chairman of the China's central military commission as well as general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC), but the PLA is a party army, and the PRC defense white paper

declares that "China's armed forces will unswervingly adhere to the principle of the CPC's absolute leadership" and "remain a staunch force for upholding the CPC's ruling position."

The PRC defense white paper articulates a response to security threats to the CPC, not China, and there are circumstances in which a move benefitting the CPC does not benefit China. A fixation to remain in power and a tendency to exaggerate threats to party rule may lead the CPC to assume a more aggressive posture resulting in higher risk of conflict than the actual security threat to China would justify. The risk of a serious conflict, which would be devastating for the Chinese people, warrants consideration of an assuring and less threatening stance instead. The CPC's aggressive rhetoric regarding Taiwan, Japan, and the South China Sea may be intended to bolster domestic support for the CPC, but should miscalculation and conflict occur, the impact to China's growth could be severe. Ironically, these economic consequences of conflict may cause the CPC to face a primary concern, disorder at home, and which they may hope to forestall by rallying their populace with assertive foreign policy.

From the perspective of the CPC, this makes reassurance and the avoidance of miscalculation critical, but the difference in objective for the PRC defense white paper

contributes to difficulties in reassuring the U.S. and other countries that China's rise will remain peaceful. The U.S., distrustful of authoritarian governments and wary of attempts to unilaterally disrupt the international order by a rising power, would need enhanced reassurances from China.

Dale Copeland describes the commitment problem as the inability of one state's leadership to convince another state's leadership that promises made today will be kept. In this case, the U.S. may not only be concerned that China may have a change of heart later once they have more relative power, but also that new leaders in China may adopt very different policies.<sup>1</sup> Ambiguity in the PRC defense white paper regarding how they intend to safeguard Chinese maritime interests and address the issue of Taiwan fails to ease the U.S. and regional states. And while principles of defense, self-defense, and post-emptive strike are declared, other countries have little assurance that these principles will be adhered in the future.

The ambiguity in the PRC's strategy, in conjunction with an alarming, sustained military buildup at a time when China's mainland has never been safer from invasion, may be construed as a more or less direct contradiction of reassurances that China does not pose a security threat. Neither the U.S. nor the Chinese military strategy explicitly discusses force posture, but the fact that the U.S. is transparent with products such as the U.S. Navy's 30-Year Shipbuilding Plan to Congress, a document that describes long-term future fleet composition, while China has no overt guidance for their desired size for their rapidly-growing military does give cause for concern by the U.S. and the rest of the world.

The strategies executed together produce the conditions for an Asia-Pacific Cold War in the future security environment as described by a report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: "Deepening regional

bipolarization and militarization, driven by a worsening U.S. – China strategic and economic rivalry in Asia."<sup>2</sup> Arms races, military crises, and increasing tension regarding Taiwan reunification could result in a period of constant tension while the U.S. and regional allies balance the increase of Chinese capabilities to preserve an absolute advantage that, they hope, deters conflict. China's lack of articulation regarding the intended future size of their military and the failure to provide reassurance for exclusively peaceful means to handle their concerns with Taiwan, Japan, and with other claimants in the South China Sea do not reassure the U.S. and other countries, and the likely result will be continued arms build-up and increasing tensions.

The deliberate use of lethal force by China in pursuit of territorial claims, whether for a coercive reunification of Taiwan or establishment of solid control over the nine-dash line, will result in dramatic changes around the world. A loss of confidence in Asia will cause multiple, independent actors to react in unforeseen ways which may have a dramatic effect on Asian commerce. Moreover, the CPC may not understand the potential resolve of the U.S. and other democracies to resist lethal aggression and what actions they may take against China and what consequences, economic and otherwise, they are willing to impose. While growth and stability of the entire world would be profoundly affected, China, with its high growth dependence on foreign trade and commerce, could face the most serious consequences. The results within China would ironically jeopardize the social and political order the CPC may have used to justify aggression in the first place.

To best serve the security interests of China and maximize economic potential while minimizing threat of war, there are measures the CPC might pursue to assure the rest of the world while remaining in power. As stated by James Steinberg and Michael O'Hanlon, China can better reassure the U.S.

and regional countries by leveling military budget growth at approximately half of the U.S. level and scaling back missile deployments and other military capacities directed at Taiwan, commit to exclusively peaceful means towards Taiwan, and join in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Code of Conduct with a commitment not to use or threaten force to resolve territorial disputes.<sup>3</sup> As a revisionist power, assurance is incumbent on the Chinese, and only positive measures such as these will provide the necessary assurance to regional and global powers that China's intent is peaceful and will minimize the risk of miscalculation and the associated social, economic, and military consequences.

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## ***Beyond the Security Dilemma? De-Escalating Tension in the South China Sea***

*By Jan Stockbruegger*

In May 2015 China presented its new Military Strategy white paper. The white paper, which appeared at a time of heightened tensions over land reclamations in the South China Sea, has triggered much debate and discussion. How should the strategy be interpreted, and how should policy makers respond to it? Does it demonstrate China's expansionist and revisionist intentions? And does more need to be done to contain China's rise as a super power? In this contribution to the debate I briefly summarize China's new military strategy and reflect on it in the light of two diverging interpretations. I first argue that the strategy needs to be understood in terms of a deterrence logic that indicates the emergence of a security dilemma in the Asia-Pacific. I then offer a reverse interpretation that sees China's military strategy as a move towards transparency and building trust and confidence. I conclude with some optimistic thoughts about how these two contradicting logics play into each other.

### **Maritime Rebalance and Military Modernization**

China's new military strategy is a very analytical document. It describes, analyses, and explains China's perspective on

international security, and it provides a frank and honest assessment of the threats and challenges the country faces. This includes "Taiwan independence' separatist forces," as well as the U.S. "rebalancing' strategy," and its "military presence and its military alliances in this region." China is particularly worried that some "external countries" – most likely the U.S. "are ... busy meddling in the South China Sea affairs" and that a "tiny few maintain constant close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China." The strategy also refers to the dispute in the South and East China Sea – though it does not say so explicitly – when it notes that "some of China's offshore neighbors take provocative actions and reinforce their military presence on China's reefs and islands that they have illegally occupied." China thus has to protect its "territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests." Hence, the strategy argues the "traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned," and "great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans." China, it claims, will become a "maritime power" and "develop a modern maritime military force structure." China intends to strengthen its navy, which "will gradually shift its focus ... to the combination of 'offshore waters defense' with

‘open seas protection.’” The “preparation for military struggle,” in particular maritime military struggle, is central to China’s new military strategy.

Yet in the strategy China also claims that it does not have offensive military ambitions and will avoid armed confrontation and escalation. Its military philosophy is based on the idea of active defense, which holds that China “will not attack unless we [China] are attacked.” China will try to prevent crisis and, most importantly, “strike a balance between rights protection and stability maintenance.” The strategy also says that China supports collective security and embraces Confidence Building Mechanisms. Notably, China intends to deepen “military relations with the U.S. armed forces” to reflect the “new model of major-country relations” between the two states.

China’s new military strategy is to some degree ambiguous if not contradictory. It announces an ambitious military modernization program to protect its expanding interests while at the same time emphasizing its peaceful intention. This leaves room for interpretation. So how should one understand China’s military strategy? And how should the international community, in particular the U.S. and regional states, respond to it?

### **Deterrence and Security Dilemma**

One way to interpret China’s military strategy is to look at what it says about the country’s military intentions and ambitions. From this perspective, China’s military modernization program appears threatening. It signals China’s long-term determination to dominate the Asia-Pacific and to use its expanding military capabilities to further narrow national security objectives. The strategy suggests that China will not accept Taiwan’s independence, will not abstain from its claims in the South China Sea, and will try to limit U.S. influence and military operations in the region. From this

perspective, China is a threat that needs to be deterred. The U.S. in particular needs to do more to reassure its allies, to contain China, and to strengthen its predominant position in the Asia-Pacific.

This interpretation has significant implications for the regional security environment. It would eventually create a security dilemma, a situation in which, according to the eminent political scientist Robert Jervis, “the means by which a state tries to increase its security decreases the security of others.” It is easy to see how this would work. China feels its position is insecure, and it modernizes its military to deter potential aggressors. East Asian states and the U.S., on the other hand, feel threatened by China’s military build-up and behavior in the South China Sea, and they therefore strengthen their military capabilities to counter potential Chinese aggressions. Hence, even though neither side might want to risk conflict, their behavior increases exactly that risk. This dynamic reinforces rivalries, triggers intense security competition, and increases the likelihood of a confrontation between the world’s major military powers.

It is important to note that the security dilemma is not a fantasy or a distant future; its contours are already clearly visible, not only in China’s new military strategy and ongoing military modernization program, but also in the U.S. rebalance to Asia. Indeed, current U.S. defense debates are no longer about whether or not China needs to be deterred militarily; instead, analysts are already discussing specific military deterrence strategies (e.g., the Air-Sea Battle Concept, now renamed the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons). According to the new U.S. Seapower Strategy, 60 percent of U.S. Navy ships and aircraft will soon be deployed in the Indo-Asia-Pacific. Put differently, the Asia-Pacific security dilemma is an emerging reality, and China’s new military strategy further reinforces this trend.

## **Transparency and Strategic Trust**

Another way to interpret the strategy is to view it as a move towards military transparency, openness, and dialogue. In the strategy, China officially declares its long-term military interests and ambitions. It describes threats and challenges, outlines China's plans for military modernization, and it also discusses China's strategic new orientation. This might sound worrying and threatening to some security analysts. However, the strategy certainly does contribute to clarifying China's military intention and explaining its rationale. Hence, a U.S. Defense Department spokesman commented in the New York Times that China's new strategy "is an example of transparency" and "exactly the type of thing that we've been calling for."

Military openness and transparency create trust and confidence among adversaries. They enable a better understanding of what each side wants, why they do the things they do, and how they might behave in the future. A military strategy hence also contributes to dialogue and mutual engagement. It allows actors to identify disagreements, develop joint interests, and reach common ground. Military dialogue does not resolve political conflicts, such as the islands disputes in the South China Sea, but it creates opportunities to avoid military escalation and to manage the security competition that such unresolved disputes produce.

Such an Asia-Pacific military dialogue is already underway. In April 2014 regional naval representatives at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium signed a Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea. A similar document, a Memorandum of Understanding Regarding Rules of Behaviour for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters, was signed by the U.S. and China in November 2014. Both documents, which are not legally binding, regulate military encounters at sea and seek to prevent incidents that could trigger military confrontations. The militaries of

China and the U.S. also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Notification of Major Military Activities. With this document both sides "seek to foster greater comprehension of each other's security policy." They agree to engage in "regular exchanges of information related to major official publications and statements," which includes "White Papers, strategy publications, and other official announcements related to policy and strategy."

This is exactly what China has done with the publication of its new military strategy. Hence, from this perspective China's military strategy does not reinforce the emerging Asia-Pacific security dilemma; rather, it is part of a pragmatic coping mechanisms aimed at managing this dilemma and de-escalating tensions in the region.

## **De-Escalating the Security Dilemma?**

In this piece I have offered two interpretations of China's new military strategy. I have argued that China's military strategy contributes to a deterrence-based logic, and that it also de-escalates security competition. These two interpretations are certainly contradictory, but they are not mutually exclusive. China's military strategy reflects a pragmatic double-strategy through which states seek to balance their security interests. On the one hand, China finds it necessary to deter potential adversaries militarily. On the other hand, however, it also relies on a peaceful international environment based on cooperative security arrangements. Yet whether the Asia-Pacific will manage to keep this balance is unclear. Regional disputes and conflicts are yet to be resolved, military expansion and modernization continue, and the emerging security order remains fragile. Are more efforts needed to manage the security dilemma and to ensure that security competition remains peaceful? This is exactly the question that stakeholders need to discuss jointly and as part of a sustained

dialogue aimed at keeping peace and security in the face of increased geopolitical tensions and security competition in the region.

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## ***A Grain of Contextual Salt in the Chinese Military Strategy***

*By Chang Ching*

Whether the newly-published Chinese Military Strategy white paper can be a credible source to decipher the military thinking of the People's Liberation Army of the People's Republic of China is an important question, one the author seeks to answer. Consider the following.

First, this publication known as the Chinese Military Strategy is generally misperceived as a publication of the Chinese Ministry of National Defense, when in fact it is in the form of a governmental white paper chiefly edited and published by the State Council Information Office, headed by Jiang Jianguo. The First Bureau of the State Council Information Office is responsible for coordinating with other governmental agencies to edit and to develop these publications and satisfy inquiries submitted by the foreign media. More importantly, the State Council Information Office is also a government agency with another title within the Chinese Communist Party apparatus — the International Communication Office of the Communist Party of China Central Committee — charged with conducting international propaganda. These facts provide context for judging the credibility of the document and its policy implications.

Second, this publication is not a legally

binding document nor is it a document demanded by the PRC's National People's Congress and associated with the budgeting process. Neither is it a document defined by any legislative process, law, decree or statutory regulation in the PRC's judiciary system. And it differs from the U.S. National Military Strategy, a document that must be consistent with the U.S. National Security Strategy, and other strategic guidance defined by the 1947 National Security Act and its descendants. This is not the case for the PRC's seemingly-equivalent publications. The so-called defense white papers published by the State Council Information Office do not direct the PLA's force planning and strategic thinking. Contents of these white papers are rarely quoted as the internal guidelines for directing military maneuvers or developing doctrine. These white papers are never treated as the basis for arguing defense policies or defending military strategic thinking in any domestic political arena. This suggests the irrelevance of these white papers within the PRC's political decision-making process and provide reason for caution in other nations using them to understand the military strategy of the PRC and the PLA.

Third, the ratio between retrospective conclusions and prospective intentions may

also reveal the value of this white paper. Generally speaking, most of the contents focus on conclusions associated with previous achievements and interpretations of their significance such as assistance given in rural and poor economic areas and law enforcement functions as described in the 2012 white paper on “The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces.” As to declaring a plan for future direction, the statements of the white paper mainly follow existing practice such as the anti-piracy patrol mission. Although certain strategic challenges are explicitly pointed out, measures or policies for tackling these are basically repetition of previously-declared positions such as those regarding the situations in the East and South China Seas. Perhaps, though, it is optimistic to expect anything new may be exposed by a vehicle for international propaganda.

Last but not least, all readers should consider the respective prepared contexts for the introduction of the Chinese Military Strategy white paper and the 2015 U.S. National Military Strategy. The press conference introducing the U.S. strategy to the public was jointly hosted by the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of the Staff. Comparatively, the PRC’s white paper was introduced at a press conference in the State Council Information Office and attended by several senior colonels. The 2015 US National Military Strategy was signed and publicized by a four-star general, the incumbent CJCS who will retire in September 2015. Since it is part of their political education, the members in the People’s Liberation Army well know the positions put forward in the Chinese Military Strategy white paper as it relates to their internal political decision-making process. But this is not a source for formal direction of military policy. It is no surprise that no significant discussion may occur within the Chinese military on this document except as a means to boost morale or boast of past success.

Of course, the content of the Chinese Military Strategy white paper is not totally without value. At least, readers may glean from it the areas of inquiry from the foreign press and policy critics that most concern the PRC’s State Council Information Office (or office for international propaganda). It may also be of use in understanding how the government of the PRC would like to shape the public image of the PLA. But the value of this document should never be overstated. Reading its content is a necessary precondition for understanding the PLA’s strategic thinking, but do not take it as sufficient for thorough understanding.

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## ***Deep Accommodation: The Best Option for Preventing War in the Taiwan Strait***

*By Eric Gomez*

History has shown that emerging great powers and established or declining great powers are likely to fight major wars in order to determine the balance of power in the international system. There is considerable fear that the U.S. and China are heading towards great power conflict. As Christopher Layne argues, there are “several important — and unsettling — parallels between the Anglo-Germany relationship during the run-up to 1914 and the unfolding Sino-American relationship.” The headline-grabbing dispute in the South China Sea offers an excellent example of one of the several flashpoints that could spark a larger conflict between the U.S. and China. But the probability of great power conflict between the U.S. and China can be reduced if the two states can find ways to better manage interactions in flashpoint areas.

The oldest flashpoint, and the area most important for Chinese domestic politics, is the Taiwan Strait. In 1972, the Shanghai Communique stated that the so-called Taiwan question was the most important issue blocking the normalization of relations between the U.S. and China. This question has yet to be solved, mostly because Taiwan has been able to deter attack through a strong indigenous defense capability backed up by American commitment.

The status quo in the Taiwan Strait will be unsustainable as China continues to improve its military capabilities and adopt more aggressive military strategies. If the U.S. wants to avert a war with China in the Taiwan Strait, it must start looking for an alternative to the status quo. Taiwan’s strategy of economic accommodation with China under the Ma Ying-jeou administration has brought about benefits. The U.S. should encourage Taiwan to deepen its military and political accommodation with China. This would be a difficult pill for Taiwan to swallow, but it could offer the most sustainable deterrent to armed conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

For years, Taiwan’s de facto independence from China has relied on a qualitatively superior, defense-focused military that could prevent the landing of a large Chinese force on the island. The growing power of the Chinese military, especially its naval and missile forces, has begun eroding this qualitative advantage. Indeed, some observers have already concluded that “the days when [Taiwan] forces had a quantitative and qualitative advantage over [China] are over.” Taiwan still possesses a formidable military and could inflict high costs on an attacking Chinese force, but ultimately American intervention would likely be necessary to save Taiwan from a determined

Chinese attack.

Military intervention by the U.S. on the behalf of Taiwan would be met with formidable Chinese resistance. China's anti-access/area denial strategy complicates the U.S.'s ability to project power in the Taiwan Strait. China's latest maritime strategy document, released in May of this year, states that China's navy will start shifting its focus further offshore to include open seas protection missions. Such a shift implies an aspirational capability to keep intervening American forces away from Taiwan. American political leaders have not given up on Taiwan, and the 2015 U.S. National Military Strategy places a premium on reassuring allies of America's commitments. However, the fact that China's improving military capabilities will make an American military intervention on behalf of Taiwan more and more costly must not be ignored.

The best option for preventing a war in the Taiwan Strait is deepening the strategy of accommodation that Beijing and Taipei have already started. According to Baohui Zhang, accommodation "relies on expanding common interests, institutionalizing dialogues, promoting security confidence-building and offering assurances to establish mutual trust." The Ma Ying-jeou administration in Taiwan has tried to use accommodation as a way to lock in the status quo and avoid conflict, but their efforts have been met with more and more popular backlash in Taiwan. China's military strategy document does acknowledge that "cross-Taiwan Straits relations have sustained a sound momentum of peaceful development, but the root cause of instability has not yet been removed."

If Taiwan is serious about accommodation as a means of deterring military conflict, then it should cease purchasing military equipment from the U.S. Stopping the arms purchases would send a clear message to Beijing that Taiwan is interested in deeper accommodation. A halt in arms sales would

also benefit U.S.-Chinese relations by removing a "major stumbling block for developing bilateral military-to-military ties." This is certainly a very controversial proposal, and would likely be very difficult to sell to the Taiwanese people, but as I've already explained the status quo is becoming more and more untenable.

There are two important things to keep in mind about this proposal which mitigate fears that this is some kind of appeasement to China. First, halting U.S. arms sales does not mean that Taiwan's self-defense forces would cease to exist. China may be gaining ground on Taiwan militarily, but the pain that Taiwan could inflict on an attacking force is still high. China may be able to defeat Taiwan in a conflict, but the losses its military would take to seize the island would significantly hamper its ability to use its military while it recovers from attacking Taiwan.

Second, there is an easily identifiable off-ramp that can be used by Taiwan if the policy is not successful. Stopping arms purchases is meant to be a way of testing the water. If the Chinese respond positively to the decision by offering greater military cooperation with Taiwan or some form of political concessions then Beijing signals its commitment to the accommodation process. On the other hand, if the Chinese refuse to follow through and meet Taiwan halfway then Beijing signals that it is not actually committed to accommodation. Taiwan would then resume purchasing American weapons with the knowledge that it must find some other way to prevent conflict.

Accommodation by giving up American arms sales is a tough pill for Taiwan to swallow, but it simply does not have many other viable alternatives to preventing conflict. Taiwan could pursue acquiring nuclear weapons, but this would be met by American opposition and would likely trigger a pre-emptive attack by China if the weapons program were discovered. Taiwan could try to avert conflict

by increasing military spending to forestall, but this would be difficult to sustain so long as China's economy and military spending is also growing. Analysts at CSBA have argued for deterrence through protraction, which advocates employing asymmetric guerrilla-style tactics to prevent China from achieving air and sea dominance. This has the highest likelihood of success of the three alternatives mentioned in this paragraph, but it still relies on intervention by outside powers to ultimately save the day.

Taiwan's military deterrent will not be able to prevent a Chinese attempt to change the status quo by force for much longer. Any conflict in the Taiwan Strait would likely involve a commitment of U.S. forces and could lead to a major war between the U.S. and China. Accommodation could be the best worst option that Taiwan, and the U.S., has for preventing a war with China. Announcing an end to American weapons purchases could bring Taiwan progress on negotiations with China if successful while still providing off-ramps that Taiwan could take if unsuccessful. I admit, the idea of accommodation does have its flaws, and more work needs to be done to flesh out this idea. I hope that this idea of deep accommodation will add to the discussion about the management of the Taiwan Strait issue. The status quo won't last forever, and a vigorous debate will be needed to arrive at the best possible solution.

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## ***Assessing China's Nuclear Ambitions***

*By Debalina Ghoshal*

In May 2015, the People's Republic of China's Ministry of National Defense released its latest Military Strategy white paper. The paper outlines Beijing's national security concerns, the mission and strategic tasks of the Chinese armed forces, a series of guidelines to strengthen China's active defense, and an approach to developing China's armed forces in preparation to counter challenges. In it, China has also highlighted its nuclear ambitions and strategy in the overall context of expanding and intensifying the preparation for military struggle (PMS):

"China's armed forces must meet the requirement of being capable of fighting and winning, focus on solving major problems and difficulties, and do solid work and make relentless efforts in practical preparations, in order to enhance their overall capabilities for deterrence and warfighting."

Nuclear forces are a crucial component in Beijing's military strategy, and the white paper describes China's nuclear force as a strategic cornerstone for safeguarding national sovereignty and security. The document stresses how the People's Liberation Army Second Artillery Force (PLASAF) is placing emphasis on both conventional and nuclear missiles, even for precision long-range strikes, stating that:

"...the PLASAF will continue to keep an

appropriate level of vigilance in peacetime. By observing the principles of combining peacetime and wartime demands, maintaining all time vigilance and being action-ready, it will perfect the integrated, functional, agile, and efficient operational duty system."

According to the Chinese government, Beijing is developing capabilities to maintain strategic deterrence. It is also preparing itself to be able to carry out a nuclear counter-attack. The White Paper also assures that Beijing is committed to its stance on no-first-use of nuclear weapons. This is distinct from its 2013 White Paper, which made no reference to the no-first-use doctrine, leading many to wonder if Beijing was rethinking its policy. The 2015 document also states that Beijing will not attack any non-nuclear state or nuclear weapons free zone with these weapons.

The document does mention Taiwan, however, and reunification remains crucial to China's national security. And while Beijing has reiterated its stance on no-first-use doctrine this time, however, the no-first use may not be applicable to territories which Beijing considers its own. Therefore, in case of greater resistance from Taiwan, China's no-first-use doctrine may not apply.

The document also stresses China's willingness to limit its nuclear weapons to a

minimum level sufficient to ensure its national security interests. Beijing also expresses its unwillingness to involve itself in a nuclear arms race with any country, emphasizing that they will optimize their nuclear force structure; improve strategic early warning, command and control, missile penetration, rapid reaction, and survivability of their forces; and deter other countries from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against China.

China is already working on missile penetration aids and Chinese missiles could be fitted with decoys, chaff, mylar balloons, and sub-munitions. China has also developed missiles flying at depressed and lofted trajectories and is working on multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles (MIRVs) and maneuverable re-entry vehicles (MARVs) as penetration aids. Chinese engineers are attempting to overcome a hit-to-kill intercept by enclosing the anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) warheads in a metallic shroud cooled by liquid nitrogen.

With a no-first-use doctrine, the survivability of nuclear forces is crucial and enables a minimum deterrent posture. Beijing has been working on the survivability of its nuclear forces, including replacing liquid fueled missiles with solid, with only the DF-5 and DF-5A liquid fuel missiles left in its arsenal. It has also been working on developing mobile missile systems, dummy silos near silo-based missile sites, and hard and deep tunnels (in the Hebei Mountains, for example).

China is also believed to be concentrating on an early warning system to detect enemy nuclear capable ballistic missiles. This, along with missile and air defense systems, enables Beijing to not only detect incoming ballistic missiles but also to intercept them and launch a counter-strike.

Deep, protected underground tunnels along with the early warning system will only enhance China's ability to absorb a first

strike and retaliate, thereby strengthening Beijing's no-first-use policy. Possessing a credible early warning system would also limit the need for China to mating its nuclear warheads with delivery systems during peacetime.

China's sea-based nuclear deterrent also provides survivability for its nuclear force. Beijing has already developed ballistic missile submarines of the Jin and Xia class. The Xia class submarine can fire the JL-1 submarine launched ballistic missile (SLBM) and the Jin can fire JL-2 SLBM which is of longer range than the JL-1. According to the Federation of American Scientists, naval facilities have been built to service the new ballistic missile submarine fleet which includes upgrades at naval facilities, submarine hull demagnetization facilities, underground facilities and high bay buildings for missile storage and handling, and covered tunnels and railways to conceal these activities.

While the document highlights concerns over the U.S. re-balancing strategy in the Asia Pacific region, it carefully left out concerns over the U.S. ballistic missile defense systems in Taiwan and Japan. There is also no mention of nuclear arms control and nuclear disarmament as an objective in China's long-term nuclear strategy. At a time when analysts and practitioners of international security are apprehensive of China's nuclear weapons and have suggested including it in nuclear arms control measures, the exclusion of any mention of control and disarmament leaves it unclear where the country really stands on the issue.

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## ***The Unnamed Protagonist in China's Maritime Objectives***

*By Amanda Conklin*

China's ability to exercise its power in the maritime domain is essential to advancing its economic interests and ensuring its security. Attention to safeguarding maritime rights and interests was documented in China's 2012 National Defense white paper, and the 2015 Chinese Military Strategy white paper has expanded the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) area of operations from offshore defense to include open seas protection. As the PLAN moves into the open ocean, the responsibility for offshore defense and protection of China's interests in its near seas will fall to the China Coast Guard (CCG). Changes in the organizational and operational mandates of the CCG are paving the way for it to become a more important actor in the achievement of the PLA's traditional and non-traditional security objectives.

Since the 1980s, China's changing threat perceptions and growing economic interests have catalyzed a shift in the strategic orientation and the perceived utility of naval forces. By 1987, PLAN Commander Admiral Liu Huaqing established a strategy referred to as offshore defense, expanding the bounds of China's maritime defenses beyond coastal waters to deter, delay, and if necessary, degrade potential intervention in a regional conflict. Offshore defense is associated with

operations in the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea (China's near seas), covering 875,000 square nautical miles. The Philippine Sea, a key interdiction area in the event of a conflict over Taiwan or in the South China Sea, expands the battlespace by another 1.5 million. In this vast space, navies and coast guards from seven regional countries and several forward-deployed nations combine with tens of thousands of fishing boats, cargo ships, oil tankers, and other commercial vessels in an area often referred to as "China's 3 million square km of blue territory."

From the founding of the PRC in 1949 until the mid-1980s, China's strategic concept of naval operations was limited to coastal defense (the inherent mission of any coast guard), with an emphasis on defending China's coast from amphibious invasion. As the PLAN shifts away from patrolling the near seas and expands its area of operations, the CCG will need to meet demands to operate well off China's coast. Many in the U.S. view the CCG's activities in the East and South China Seas as a product of a coordinated national strategy. The goal is quiet expansion — as opposed to a loud invasion and occupation by the PLA.



Evidence of a strategy can be traced to possible visions guiding procurement decisions made years in advance, such as the State Council's approval of plans to purchase dozens of rights protection cutters in 2010. Protecting China's expanding coastlines, as well as fishermen and maritime companies, requires the CCG to conduct operations further from their home ports and for longer periods of time. For example, a 2012 standoff between China Maritime Surveillance (former CCG) vessels and the Philippines Coast Guard at the disputed Scarborough Shoal lasted for ten weeks, and since then the CCG has maintained a continuous presence there to preempt a recurrence of that event. This could put the CCG in an uncomfortable and unsustainable operating scheme unless it procures large ships, recruits enough officers for numerous and simultaneous rotations at sea, and coordinates communications and collaboration across 3 million square km of blue territory.

In 2013, China consolidated its maritime law enforcement (MLE) agencies to better protect China's sovereignty and safeguard its maritime interests. During the March 2013 National People's Congress, the Chinese government announced a new State Oceanic Administration (SOA) that would essentially form a "fist out of fingers" by combining the organizations and the responsibilities of the existing SOA and four MLE agencies into the China Coast Guard (CCG), which maintained a purely civilian status. The consolidation allows the CCG to more flexibly deploy patrol ships from its larger fleet in response to sovereignty challenges and maintain its presence in hotspots.

Additionally, during the last decade, China's MLE forces have increased both the sizes of their ships and overall capability. As of March 2015, China had 95 large patrol ships (over 1,000 tons) and 100 patrol combatants between (500-1,000 tons). The current phase of the construction program, which began in 2012, will add over 30 large patrol ships and over 20 patrol combatants to the force by the

end of 2015. This will increase the overall CCG force level by 25 percent — faster growth than any other coast guard in the world.

Although the CCG has taken an increased role in asserting China's maritime sovereignty over disputed areas, PLAN vessels still share the responsibility for patrols in China's territorial waters, contiguous zones, and exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The PLAN's close relationship with the CCG certainly helps deter counter actions by other claimants. When the CCG responds to an incident, the PLAN will likely also deploy destroyers and frigates several dozen miles behind to provide an indirect, over-the-horizon presence. This approach intimidates smaller claimants and contains larger ones, but also limits the potential for confrontations to escalate since most CCG ships are not heavily armed (though some are refitted navy vessels with permanent torpedo tubs and gun turrets that add a factor of intimidation to the CCG's presence). Given the recurrence of confrontations, China is wise in not using armed ships, but arguably, deploying the CCG allows China to be more aggressive against foreign civilian ships than it could be with the PLAN. Instead, while CCG activities assume a militarized connotation, PLAN ships make friendly port calls to China's neighbors.

China's controversial use of the CCG to assert its sovereignty in maritime disputes and expand China's presence in disputed areas gives it the unique privilege of being the world's only maritime law enforcement (MLE) agency to regularly make international headlines for activities other than botching rescue missions. The CCG's press coverage, however, has been overwhelmingly negative for causing conflagrations with China's neighbors, and the fallout of its activities has reinforced China's need for its sustained presence. China must reconcile that the CCG's activities to advance its interests in the South China Sea have inspired Southeast Asian nations to

strengthen their own MLE organizations. The Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia have already turned to the U.S. and Japan for help increasing their capacity.

China's use of the CCG has created a conundrum for the U.S. Navy, but it does not want to risk a conflict by using the 7th Fleet to check China's white hull advance. Meanwhile, the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) does not have a dedicated presence in the area (its closest port is at Guam), and funding troubles have already stretched its capacity for traditional missions. Even though the USCG has 42,190 active duty service members compared to the new CCG's 16,296 billets, the USCG is not concentrated in a single region. It has a global mission ranging from the Arctic to NATO countries to the Pacific. Thus, the USCG, like other branches of the U.S. military, has placed emphasis on utilizing and building the capacity of its partners in the region – an asset the U.S. has more of than China (the new military strategy only named Russia as a partner).

The growing possibility of clashes at sea is troubling. If the CCG is able to easily coerce smaller actors in China's various maritime disputes, especially in the South China Sea, and institute a new status quo to safeguard China's interests, this would have serious implications for freedom of sea navigation and safety of passage, as well regional stability and peace. If the U.S. and its partners believe this is the goal of a comprehensive strategy, building more capable maritime law enforcement and coast guard organizations in Southeast Asia could deter Beijing from maritime expansion. However, China's approach to its maritime interests goes beyond the CCG's veiled offensive, or active defense, maneuvers. China's hybrid strategy also involves legal,

economic, high-tech, and cyber elements that are less likely to provoke a large-scale war and do not fit neatly into challenges addressed by traditional military strategies. Adequately addressing the role of CCG as an increasingly capable civilian implementer of China's foreign policy and unique tool in China's military missions will require the U.S. and its partners to consider new, comprehensive policy options in the Asia-Pacific.

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## *A Pacific Rebalance with Chinese Characteristics*

*By Justin Chock*

China's newest national military strategy provides further insight on the framework that Chinese leaders use for their routinely enigmatic decision-making processes. The current paper builds on previous military white papers, which necessitates a look to previous editions in understanding the most recent one. Comparing the 2013 Defense White Paper with the 2015 strategy shows a great deal of overlap, but more interesting than the party lines consistent over many years are the differences, including the absence of key issues, from the most recent document. A reading of China's Military Strategy alongside an analysis of contemporary events in the Sino-Japanese relationship illuminates a subtle shift in Chinese strategy since late 2013 from the East China Sea toward the South China Sea in China's own Southeast-Asia Pacific Rebalance centered on the Maritime Silk Road.

Controversial island building by the Chinese and surveillance flights by the U.S. Pacific Fleet Commander have highlighted the significance of South China Sea relations within the past few months, but the 2015 Chinese Military Strategy further reflects this importance. In the paper, China highlights their "South China Sea Affairs" that encounter the "meddling of other powers," a point notably lacking from the 2013 White Paper given the long history of the dispute and the degree of scrutiny that decision

makers put into these documents.

But observers may question why Chinese planners decided to undertake the hugely provocative project of island building and why the 2015 paper would touch upon it. Part of the reason may deal with the timing of the building with respect to other claimants. Vietnam began its land reclamation around 2010, and the Philippines followed suit with runway construction in 2011.

So China was not the first to engage in island-building activity (although the speed and scale of the projects vastly outweighs the Vietnamese and Philippine efforts); instead China, under the comparatively bolder Xi administration after 2012, decided to run full speed in the race to grow its claims starting in October 2013 when the projects were first spotted. This start date coincided closely with the One Belt One Road announcement in September 2013 and Maritime Silk Road announcement in October 2013, with the latter running directly through the South China Sea and near the disputed areas. Additionally, the October 2013 efforts post date the 2013 White Paper, published on April 16, 2013, allowing time for a strategic shift that was not solidified until after the document's publication (or was perhaps deliberately omitted).

So, for China it appears the importance of island building in the South China Sea lies in

ensuring secure maritime lanes for both its current trade and for the heightened flow that will come from the Maritime Silk Road. As a comparison of China's land and sea economic trading shows, the nation is effectively an economic island, and the vulnerable flow through the South China Sea is the lifeblood of China's economy. Should the nation lose control of that flow, its economy would be crippled, the consequences of which the Chinese people (and the Chinese Communist Party, which owes a great deal of political legitimacy to its economic growth) do not want to risk. The result: islands to enable enhanced oversight of the sea lanes.

As important as the addition to the 2015 paper, however, are its omissions. The 2013 paper depicts a "Japan (that) is making trouble over the issue of the Diaoyu islands," but nowhere in the 2015 version is there an explicit mention of the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute. The only mention of Japan in the new strategy addresses the "overhauling [of] its military and security policies" (an understandable mention given the recent Japanese Diet bill increasing the scope of Self Defense Force operations) and its potential inclusion with the above South China Sea "meddling powers," though the latter is not explicitly stated. The decision to remove an explicit mention of the Diaoyu islands dispute mention from the 2015 document is significant. This significant shift is reflected in recent reports of oil rigs in the East China Sea showing that China is choosing to literally not cross the line with Japan in this contentious geography. Statistical anomalies and shifting tactics aside, this is consistent with its deeds and not just its actions. If one is to make comparisons—albeit difficult given the different situations between East and Southeast Asia—a provocative statement toward Japan's equivalent to South China Sea island building would be to cross the median line and assert China's original stance regarding the continental shelf on the Japanese side of the line.

Instead, China sees the larger picture: the East China Sea is at a stalemate while the South China Sea remains comparatively free to shifts in the status quo. This couples with the decrease in Chinese patrols within Senkaku/Diaoyu waters beginning in October 2013 and coinciding with the beginning of Chinese island-building efforts in the South China Sea. If one were to draw an albeit difficult analogy, a provocation equivalent to island building in the South China Sea would be for China to literally cross the line and assert its original stance on Japanese and Chinese claims to the continental shelf. Yet, it appears that China is taking a holistic strategic view of regional issues and refraining from simultaneous confrontation.

There are a number of reasons why China might decrease its focus on Japan. Whether China feels secure enough in the region with the November 2013 establishment of its East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone or whether Chinese leadership have taken into account the increasingly interdependent economic relationship, the potential to warm the Sino-Japanese relationship, or too much perceived risk in the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, their words and deeds suggest Japan is no longer China's primary security focus. Instead, China's military (or at least, its maritime forces, which the National Military Strategy states will be increasingly emphasized) is drawing resources away from the East and toward the Southeast to support the Maritime Silk Road in China's own Southeast-Asia Pacific Rebalance.

For the U.S., this Southeast-Asia Pacific Rebalance warrants careful consideration of any substantial increase in support of Japan or major shift in Japanese posture (e.g., expanded operational scope for the Japanese Self-Defense Force [JSDF]). Since a shift in the current balance may force China to once again focus on the East China Sea, for both the U.S. and Japan this suggests the wisdom of measures to reassure China. For example, emphasizing that the JSDF's increased scope

does not imply a corresponding increase in hostile intent or the targeting of that scope against China.

With respect to the South China Sea, and extending the analogy between the East and South China Seas, awareness of this rebalance places more decision-making leverage in American hands. Should the U.S. want to deter China in these waters as in the waters surrounding the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, stationing troops in the region, partnering with Southeast Asian allies, or reconciling with states in Southeast Asia and along the Maritime Silk Road are all potentially viable approaches. These approaches will become increasingly important as the Road is further established in the coming years and as China correspondingly shifts its focus to these waters; as China shifts focus to Southeast Asia, the U.S. must shift focus as well.

The new U.S. National Military Strategy falls in line with this thinking, describing how China's "claims to nearly the entire South China Sea are inconsistent with international law," and thus are a strategic focus of the U.S. However, conscious efforts must be made to maintain this momentum as China's Rebalance appears to be a long-term project. This includes, as the Chinese Strategy states, further partnerships with states along the Maritime Silk Road as it expands, the groundwork of which will require diplomatic and political work today in preparation for the Road's expansion. While other pressing issues (e.g., Russia, ISIL, etc.) top the list in describing the strategic environment in the U.S. Strategy, the American Asia-Pacific Rebalance must endure as the long-term strategy.

This interest in increased U.S. presence along the Maritime Silk Road is reciprocal. For Southeast Asian leaders, China's rebalance marks the beginning of more vigorous Chinese engagement in the South China Sea and Southeast Asia as a whole. These nations must be prepared for increased Chinese

presence and attention, and plan for higher levels of more geopolitical friction. Each nation's approach will depend on their unique circumstances, but allowing U.S. counterbalancing forces into the region is one of a handful of options for adapting to the changing circumstances.

For all parties, tensions in the South China Sea present a serious challenge to both joint economic growth and regional security. While the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute will remain on China's agenda, the evolving Chinese military strategy and Chinese actions suggest that South China Sea is the next area of focus for the rising nation. This gives the region and the states within it an increasing strategic priority that cannot be ignored.

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## ***Becoming a Maritime Power? The First Chinese base in the Indian Ocean?***

*By Xunchao Zhang*

In May 2015, it was reported that China was going to establish a naval base in the East African nation of Djibouti. In the past, there has been much talk about Chinese overseas bases, but the Chinese official response to this news suggest the base is likely to be more than a rumor. The Chinese Foreign Ministry did not deny the report but instead stated that “Regional peace and stability serves the interests of all countries and meets the aspirations shared by China, Djibouti and other countries around the world. The Chinese side is ready and obliged to make more contributions to that end.” Likewise, the Chinese Defense Ministry also expressed China’s willingness to “make even more contributions” to peace and stability of the region. More directly, the official Xinhua News Agency has argued that time is ripe for a base in Djibouti. The talk of a Chinese naval base in Djibouti seems to confirm a 2014 report from Washington predicting the establishment of Chinese “dual-use” bases in the Indian Ocean serving both commercial and security functions. All of this brings to mind three questions: First, why would China choose to increase its Indian Ocean presence? Second, what is the strategic environment in which China has to operate? And third, what are the strategic implications for Sino-U.S. strategic interactions and China’s maritime strategy?

### **Strategic Rationale**

The increasing importance of the Indian Ocean to vital Chinese maritime interests form the rationale of having a Chinese base in the area. Although the official white paper “China’s Military Strategy” did not explicit confirm an out-of-area naval base, it did designate several reasons requiring the People’s Liberation Army Navy’s (PLAN) presence in Indian Ocean. A base in the Horn of Africa is consistent with the strategic shift from solely “offshore waters defense” to a combined “offshore waters defense” and “open seas protection.”

The white paper states that the “traditional mentality that ‘land outweighs sea’ must be abandoned” especially regarding sea lines of communication (SLOCs), of which, exports of manufactured goods and crude oil imports are paramount. Since a significant share of these rely on Indian Ocean sea lines, an out-of-area naval presence is almost a necessity. The February PLAN exercise in Lombok Strait sent a strong signal of the increasing Chinese naval footprint in the Indian Ocean. Moreover, the PLAN has responded to several non-traditional security contingencies near the Horn of Africa. For instance, the PLAN has conducted a series of evacuation operations in the nearby states of Yemen, Libya, and Syria. China has also

operated in the Gulf of Aden as a part of the international anti-piracy force since 2008. The official white paper states that the abilities and experiences in dealing with non-traditional challenges should be extended into traditional security areas.

## **Strategic Environment**

Multiple political and economic factors shape China's rather favorable environment in the Indian Ocean region. One of the most significant is the lack of direct geopolitical tensions with the regional states. In contrast to the situation in the West Pacific, where China had a wide range of maritime territorial disputes with its neighbors in the South and East China Seas, China has far more cooperative relations with most states in the Indian Ocean region. Beijing not only has strong partnerships with countries like Pakistan but robust commercial and political ties with African states as well.

Under the Xi administration, China has placed greater economic emphasis on the Indian Ocean region. For instance, the recently announced 'Maritime Silk Road' involves connecting East Asia with Indian Ocean economies such as India, Pakistan, Kenya and others via the promotion of maritime trade and investment in port infrastructures. Indian analysts have dubbed this the "String of Pearls." Although the "String of Pearls" concept is an exaggerated reading of largely commercial Chinese infrastructure investments in the Indian Ocean, the scope of Chinese port building does reveal Chinese economic-political weight in the area.

Many international media observers have zealously pointed out the "conflict" between China's new overseas base strategy with China's non-interventionist principles. However, overseas basing is not necessarily incompatible with the principle of non-intervention, as long as base arrangements and military deployments are based upon agreement with rather than coercion of

foreign governments. A naval base is also irrelevant to the domestic politics of the state where the base is to be located. Hence, in a technical sense, it is possible for China to establish overseas bases while maintaining the non-intervention principle at the same time.

## **Strategic Implications**

Realistically speaking, China has a long way to go if it is to fulfill the objectives outlined in the recent defense white paper. China would have to overcome not only the overall capability gap with the U.S., but also the lack of experience in running overseas bases, as well as the doubts concerning the cost-benefit calculus of overseas bases. Comparatively, the U.S. military has operated from its own Djibouti base, Camp Lemonnier, during a variety of naval and counter-terrorism missions since 2001. The U.S. base has more than 4,000 personnel and is likely to be much larger and more functionally comprehensive than the potential first Chinese base. Furthermore, as mentioned in the 2014 NDU report, some voices in China are rather skeptical of overseas bases citing the concern about principle of non-intervention and the possibility of foreign opposition. Therefore, there is possibility that the function of a first Chinese overseas base in Djibouti would be deliberately kept small to avoid controversy. In addition, even in the official white paper, the goal of transformation from "offshore defense" to "open sea protection" remains a limited one, reflecting the Chinese awareness regarding its own limited power projection capabilities.

In terms of overseas naval operations, the Chinese defense strategy white paper clearly took a reassuring tone emphasizing the cooperative and non-confrontational nature of PLAN open sea protection, and SLOCs security objectives. Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean region is neither intended to nor sufficient to pose challenge to the current maritime order. But it does indicate

an increasing determination on Beijing's part to provide security for its own overseas interests rather than merely relying on the "public goods" provided by the U.S. Navy. In this sense, China's increasing Indian Ocean presence, though insufficient to trigger real strategic competition between the United States and China, is certainly feeding the popular narrative of global Sino-US competition in the media.

In sum, the strategic move towards an overseas base is part of the continuation of changing Chinese strategic culture that is increasingly outward-looking and maritime-oriented. But if the base in Djibouti is to be materialized, even in its most limited form, it is certainly a transformative moment in the strategic cultural shift. The increasing PLAN overseas presence, particularly in the India Ocean region is almost a foregone conclusion. However, it depends on how the PLAN is able to deal with its growing pains, the extent and effectiveness of which remains to be seen.

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