



China's Military Power

(Based on the April 2013 Defence White Paper of China and the US Department of Defence Annual Report to Congress on the Military and Security Developments involving the People's Republic of China - 2013)

M. V. Rappai

On 16 April, the Information Office of the State Council of People's Republic of China released the 2013 Defense White Paper (WP) – the eighth since 1998, when it started publishing bi-annual reports. Titled, *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces*, this WP is shorter in length compared to the earlier ones and mainly focused on the deployment of forces in various military regions across China.

The WP begins with addressing the 'new situation, new challenges and new missions' faced by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the present context. Compared to previous WPs, **the levels of transparency in this paper, as per international practice, seems to have improved slightly.** Apart from giving the details of the deployment of various military units across China, the current WP also gives a detailed account of the activities of the Army. Compared to 2006, when China officially admitted the strength of PLA as 2.3 million troops and the figures provided this year, we

estimate a reduction of approximately 700,000 men in its military strength.

The WP also for the first time, follows commonly-used US military terminology. For example PLA now uses the term Military Area Commands (MACs) instead of MRs.

In the context of China's nuclear weapon strategy, interestingly, while the WP does not refer to the 'no first use' concept, it clarifies that, 'if China comes under a nuclear threat, the nuclear missile force will act upon the orders of the Central Military Commission (CMC), go into a higher level of readiness, and get ready for a nuclear counterattack to deter the enemy from using nuclear weapons against China'. **The enhanced stress placed on the use of conventional and cruise missiles as a deterrent force, must be noted.**

The WP depicts the international scenario in the following terms: 'the trend towards economic globalisation and multi-polarity are intensifying, cultural diversity is increasing, and an information society is fast emerging ...

Balance of international forces is shifting in favour of maintaining world peace, and on the whole the international situation remains peaceful and stable.’

However, the threats posed by ‘three evils’, namely, terrorism, separatism and extremism, are on the rise. The ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist forces and their activities are still the biggest threat to peaceful development of cross-Straits relations. Significantly however, **the overall tenor of the WP does not suggest that the Taiwan threat is the overwhelming concern. Rather, the Chinese leadership and PLA are more worried about the overall changes taking place in its east.** The US decision to adjust its Asia-Pacific security including the re-balancing of its forces is taken very seriously in the WP.

The PLA Army (PLAA) is composed of mobile operational units, border and coastal defence units, guard and garrison units, and is primarily responsible for military operations on land. The PLAA mobile operational units include 18 combined corps (these units more or less follow the tasks covered previously by the Group Armies (GAs), but these composite units are organized to perform the joint tasks required by the modern day formations plus additional independent combined operational divisions (brigades), and have a total strength of 850,000.

The PLA Navy (PLAN) is responsible for safeguarding China’s maritime security and maintaining its sovereignty over its territorial seas. Currently, the PLAN has a total strength of 235,000 officers and men, and commands three fleets – the Beihai, the Donghai and the Nanhai. Each fleet has fleet aviation headquarters, support bases, flotillas and maritime garrison commands, as well as aviation divisions and marine brigades.

The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) is responsible for China’s territorial air security and maintaining a stable air defence posture nationwide. The PLAAF now has a total strength of 398,000 officers and men, and an air command in each of the seven MACs and in addition, commands one airborne corps.

Regarding the PLA Second Artillery Force (PLASAF), the WP defines it as the core force for China’s strategic deterrence. It is

mainly composed of nuclear and conventional missile forces and operational support units, primarily responsible for deterring other countries from using nuclear weapons against China, and carrying out nuclear counterattacks and precision strikes with conventional missiles. While the WP does not provide details of the strength of the PLASAF, the conventionally accepted figure is 110,000.

Further, specifying the challenges faced by China, the WP states that these are multiple and complicated and therefore, China has an arduous task of safeguarding its national unification, territorial integrity and development interests. Without mentioning the United States, the paper states, ‘[s]ome country has strengthened its Asia-Pacific military alliances, expanded its military presence in the region, and frequently makes the situation there tenser (sic)’.

In its mission statement, the WP has stressed that, China’s armed forces ‘unswervingly implement the military strategy of active defence’, guard against and resist aggression, contain separatist forces, safeguard border, coastal and territorial air security, and protect national maritime rights and interests and national security interests in outer space and cyber space. ‘we will not attack unless we are attacked: but we will surely counterattack if attacked.’ Following this principle, China will resolutely take all necessary measures to safeguard its national sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In the latest edition, the WP has highlighted the peacetime activities of PLA forces. The Paper has devoted a full section on formulating the concept of comprehensive security and effectively conducting Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW). China’s armed forces are adapting themselves to the new changes in security threats, and emphasize the employment of armed forces in peacetime. These MOOTW activities of PLA should not be confused with the *Sadhbhavana* activities undertaken by Indian units in some specific border areas. *Sadhbhavana* operations are largely humanitarian activities aimed at gaining the sympathy of the local population, where the army is deployed. On the other hand, MOOTW operations are hardcore relief-oriented work or

large construction projects undertaken by dedicated PLA units during the peacetime.

The hydroelectric units of the People's Armed Police Force (PAPF) have taken part in the construction of 115 projects concerning water conservancy, hydropower, railways and gas pipelines in Yunnan, Sichuan and Tibet. In addition, PAPF transportation units have undertaken the construction of 172 projects, including highways. Among these, the Galungla Tunnel along the Medog Highway in the Tibet Autonomous Region, should be of special interest for India.

While dealing with its diversified maritime disputes, China adopts a strategy to divide its adversaries wherever possible. In general, it advances maritime security cooperation, and maintains maritime peace and stability, as well as free and safe navigation. For example, within the framework of the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA), the Chinese and American navies regularly exchange maritime information to avoid accidents at sea. Also according to the Agreement on Joint Patrols by the Navies of China and Vietnam in Beibu Gulf, the two navies have organized joint patrols twice a year since 2006. However, this approach can go concurrently with the tough stance it has adopted towards Philippines.

Meanwhile, the US Department of Defence (DoD) has come out with its Annual Report to the Congress, titled 'Military and Security Developments Involving the PRC-2013'. If one reads this report together with the WP it gives some interesting insights. The DoD report mainly stresses PLA's expanding set of roles and missions including its investments in advanced short- and medium-range conventional ballistic missiles, land attack and anti-ship cruise missiles, counter-space weapons, and military cyberspace capabilities that appear designed to enable anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) missions, which PLA strategists refer to as 'counter intervention operations'.

This report has for the first time, blamed China for cyber-attacks on US official websites. However, some experts feel that this blame game may not be very useful as it is very difficult to pinpoint the origin of cyber-attacks. It may be recalled here, that the Mandiant report released in February 2013, observed that all the hacking

attacks were attributed to the Pudong, Shanghai-based military unit 61398; however, China's known cyber warfare units, both offensive and defensive, are widely spread and located under various MACs. In the cyber warfare field, it is evident nevertheless, that India must take necessary precautions and develop its own indigenous capabilities for both offensive and defensive operations.

In the field of ballistic missile defence (BMD), China has made efforts to go beyond defence based on aircrafts and cruise missiles. China's existing long-range surface-to-air missiles (SAM) offer limited capability against ballistic missiles. The SA-20 PMU2, the most advanced SAM Russia offers for export, has an advertised capability to engage ballistic missiles with a range of 1,000km and speed of 2,800m/s. China's domestic CSA-9 long-range SAM system is expected to have a limited capability to provide point defence against ballistic missiles. Therefore, China is proceeding with the research and development of a missile defence umbrella consisting of kinetic energy intercept at exo-atmospheric altitudes. In January 2010, and again in January 2013, China successfully intercepted a ballistic missile mid-course, using a ground-based missile.

The DoD has estimated China's military expenditure using 2012 prices and has given a total actual military-related expenditure for 2012 that is between US\$135 billion and US\$215 billion; the official Chinese budget for 2012 was US\$106.7 billion. The same report also calculated India's defence budget for 2012-13 as US\$45.5 billion; India's own budget estimate stood at US\$38.6 billion.

It will be useful to take note of the deep and thoroughgoing engagements developed by the US and China in various fields, including defence. The DoD report notes, 'sustained military engagement underpins U.S. policy objectives of promoting China's development in a manner consistent with international rules and norms and that contributes to regional and global problem solving'.

The WP specifically mentions India only three times, twice when it refers to safeguarding the security of international sea line of communications (SLOCs), including a reference to China, India and Japan strengthening their

convoy coordination in the Indian Ocean and a reference to India and Japan adjusting their convoy arrangements. The third time India is referred to is under the heading of ‘joint exercises and training with foreign armed forces’.

Some of the special topics covered by the DoD report deserve special attention of Indian military planners. These include China’s space-based imaging and remote sensing, its development of an aircraft carrier and related

future plans, developments relating to the stealth aircrafts of the PLAAF, its integrated air defence mechanisms and its C4ISR network.

The nature of these two reports – the issues covered and the questions left unanswered make it all the more imperative that the Indian leadership devotes special attention – perhaps through a Study Group – to understanding China’s long-term defence plans and draw the appropriate lessons for India.



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