

China's National Defense in 2006 — Roundtable Report
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Executive Summary

On January 10, 2007 a roundtable was held to discuss the latest Chinese defense white paper, released by Beijing on December 29, 2006. The following are the main points that emerged from that roundtable.

Getting Better At Communicating. The general consensus was that the English language version of this white paper is more sophisticated than previous editions in terms of communicating Beijing's security interests, security objectives, and security concerns.

Globalization: A Double-Edged Sword. On the one hand, the paper confidently asserts that China's "overall national strength has considerably increased, as has its international standing and influence." Moreover, it is stated, "Never before has China been so closely bound up with the rest of the world as it is today." However, according to the paper, this now means that, "The growing interconnections between domestic and international factors and interconnected traditional and non-traditional factors have made maintaining national security a more challenging task."

Clearest Articulation to Date of China's "Nuclear Strategy." Of all the public Chinese government documents to date, this one provides the clearest, most comprehensive, and most authoritative articulation of the elements that form the "nuclear strategy" of the People's Republic of China.

The United States and Japan: More Worrisome Than North Korea? In the section of the paper that discusses the Asia-Pacific Region, some programs and policies of the United States and Japan are listed as the first three items in a series of factors that Beijing assesses to be making security in the region more "complex." The DPRK nuclear test, the most significant security event in Asia since the last white paper, comes fourth.

The Taiwan Issue. Relative to previous editions, this latest defense white paper takes a careful, studied, and subdued approach to its discussion of the Taiwan issue. It is clear, however, that concerns about constitutional reform on the island are at the top of Beijing's list of near-term worries vis-à-vis the cross-Strait issue.

Defense Modernization. The sections of the paper that speak to defense modernization objectives, programs, and policies indicate that the PLA persists in its goal of building a leaner and more technology-intensive force capable of prosecuting joint campaigns, as articulated in the 2004 edition. Moreover, the PLA continues to emphasize the development of naval and air forces capable of conducting operations farther out from the Chinese littoral to increase strategic depth.

China's National Defense in 2006 — Roundtable Report

David M. Finkelstein¹

On December 29, 2006, the PRC released *China's National Defense in 2006*, the latest version of Beijing's biennial defense white paper. Beginning with the publication of the first edition in 1998, The CNA Corporation has hosted roundtable events at which expert panelists and exceptionally well-informed audiences have gathered to discuss and analyze these important official documents. On January 10, 2007, we convened for the fifth time. This year our panelists included Dr. Michael Swaine (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace); Dan Blumenthal, J.D. (American Enterprise Institute); Dr. Phillip Saunders (National Defense University); Dr. Evan Medeiros (RAND Corporation); and Mr. Dennis Blasko (LTC, U.S. Army, Retired). Dr. Dave Finkelstein (The CNA Corporation) moderated. What follows are major points that emerged from the event.

Getting Better at Communicating

There was a general consensus that the English language version of this latest white paper is more sophisticated than previous editions in terms of communicating Beijing's security interests, security objectives, and security concerns.

There are still stock Chinese formulations in this document that will cause many foreign eyes to glaze over ("power politics," "hegemonism," and others), but they are held to a minimum. Foreign readers may not like all the messages being sent, but the messages are becoming easier to ingest. The drafters of this document are becoming better at laying out the issues in a writing style that communicates more clearly and precisely than in the past.

In discussing the issues of tone, formulations, and communication, participants raised the following points:

- This document serves as a shaping tool and a perception management tool, not just a vehicle for discussing national defense issues—and the target audience is domestic as well as foreign.
- The white paper is not just "the PLA's white paper." While the military has the lead for drafting the sections on national defense, this is a coordinated document that goes through the equivalent of an interagency process.

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- The nuance and relative sophistication of this edition likely reflect the increasing sophistication of the drafters as well as the experience they have gained from having gone through this process five times now.

Enmeshed in a Globalizing World

One the more prominent threads that weave through the first section of the paper—“The Security Environment”— is the impact of “globalization” and what that means for China.

This thread speaks to: (1) the increasing degree to which China sees itself as a major player in the international order; (2) Beijing’s acknowledgment that its ability to achieve its own domestic goals is increasingly tied to a broader set of security issues at home and abroad; (3) the linkage of domestic well-being to foreign policy and security policy; and (4) rising concerns about non-traditional and transnational security challenges. The following quotes from the paper are instructive:

- China’s “...overall national strength has considerably increased, as has its international standing and influence.”
- “Never before has China been so closely bound up with the rest of the world as it is today.”
- “The impact of economic globalization is spreading into the political, security, and social fields...Security issues related to energy, resources, finance, information, and international shipping routes are mounting. International terrorist forces remain active...Natural disasters, serious communicable diseases, environmental degradation, international crime and other transnational problems are becoming more damaging.”

The bottom line for Beijing is:

- “The growing interconnections between domestic and international factors and interconnected traditional and non-traditional factors have made maintaining national security a more challenging task.”

Whether China will become a “*responsible stakeholder*,” as former Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick encouraged in his 2005 speech, remains to be seen. But this white paper makes it plain that China clearly sees itself as a stakeholder whose national objectives cannot be achieved through autarky.

- One panelist pointed out the absence, in this edition, of the stock phrase “China adheres to an independent foreign policy” (present in the 2004 version). Instead, this white paper emphasizes “China’s practical cooperation with major countries...”

Further discussion among attendees centered on the implications of a more inclusive concept of national security for the PLA.

- One participant was struck by the fact that the PLA’s “historical missions for the new stage of history” (outlined in this white paper) include “providing a strong strategic

support for safeguarding national interests, and playing a major role in maintaining world peace...” and improving the PLA’s ability to “...respond to crises, maintain peace, [and] deter and win wars under complex circumstances.”

The question, still unanswerable, is whether these types of statements portend a PLA preparing to take on missions beyond its littoral, or perhaps beyond the region, either in the singular pursuit of Chinese interests or in the context of larger international efforts.

- One attendee highlighted this issue in the context of the white paper’s assertion that the security of “international shipping routes” is one of China’s many new concerns.

Clearest Articulation to Date of China’s “Nuclear Strategy”

Of all the public Chinese government documents to date, this document provides the clearest, most comprehensive, and authoritative articulation of the elements that form the “nuclear strategy” of the People’s Republic of China.

One specialist in Chinese nuclear issues offered that there is nothing “dramatically new” about the discussion in the white paper. Others agreed they had read bits and pieces in other PRC publications or had heard some of these formulations previously from Chinese interlocutors.

Nevertheless, the fact that key elements of PRC nuclear policy were pulled together, were couched in terminology that one attending specialist ascribed to China’s nuclear weapons community, were placed under the term “nuclear strategy” for the first time, and were articulated publicly was in itself considered new and noteworthy.

“Pursuing a self-defensive nuclear strategy. China’s nuclear strategy is subject to the state’s nuclear policy and military strategy. Its fundamental goal is to deter other countries from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against China. China remains firmly committed to the policy of no first use of nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances. It unconditionally undertakes not to use or threaten to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones, and stands for the comprehensive prohibition and complete elimination of nuclear weapons. China upholds the principles of counterattack in self-defense and limited development of nuclear weapons, and aims at building a lean and effective nuclear force capable of meeting national security needs. It endeavors to ensure the security and reliability of its nuclear weapons and maintains a credible nuclear deterrent force. China’s nuclear force is under the direct command of the Central Military Commission (CMC). China exercises great restraint in developing its nuclear force. It has never entered into and will never enter into a nuclear arms race with any other country.” — ***China’s National Defense in 2006***

Clearly, Beijing made a conscious decision to be forward leaning on nuclear issues in this edition.

- It was pointed out that the last defense white paper to discuss this topic was in 2000, and the topic did not merit a separate sub-section as it does in the current edition.
- Discussants did not come to closure about why nuclear strategy was highlighted—although in side-bar discussions some wondered whether one factor was the controversial and widely reported comments that a PLA major general made to the foreign media in 2005 concerning the use of nuclear weapons.

In spite of the white paper's relative clarity on "nuclear strategy," participants agreed that there are still some *very* fuzzy issues to grapple with. One outstanding question is, what type of nuclear arsenal (quantitative and qualitative) will Beijing decide satisfies the stated objective of "building a lean and effective nuclear force"?

- Some participants voiced consternation that the PRC still does not provide any official statement about the number of nuclear weapons it possesses, even in rough terms.
- Most agreed that the section on nuclear issues would be a good topic for discussion between U.S. and PRC officials in senior-level strategic discussions.

The U.S. and Japan: More Worrisome Than North Korea?

In the section of the paper that discusses the Asia-Pacific Region, the programs and policies of the United States and Japan are listed as first among a series of factors that are making security in the region more complex.

Although it presents them as a matter of fact, and does not directly ascribe hostile intentions to either country, the white paper places the activities and policies of the United States and Japan at the top of Beijing's list of issues that are adding to the "growing complexities in the Asia-Pacific security environment." Specifically listed, in this order, are concerns that:

- The United States is "accelerating its realignment of military deployments" to the region in order "to enhance its military capabilities,"
- The United States and Japan "are strengthening their military alliance in pursuit of operational integration," and
- Japan is looking to revise its constitution to "exercise collective self-defense" and Tokyo's "military posture is becoming more external-oriented."

Only after listing the above three factors is the North Korean nuclear test mentioned in the litany of new "complexities." Certainly, from an American perspective, the nuclear tests conducted by the DPRK would qualify as the single most significant event to affect security in the Asia-Pacific region since the last PRC defense white paper. Some participants asserted that the placement of this event as fourth on the list, after concerns about the United States and Japan, may speak volumes about differences in perspectives and priorities.

- There were different views among participants about how the "U.S. issue" was handled in this latest white paper. Some thought that the low-key and matter-of-fact manner in which concerns about the United States were brought up in this paper (especially relative to the screeds in the 2000 version) was a positive development. They pointed out that the terms "power politics" and "hegemony" (PRC euphemisms for "wrong-headed U.S. policies") appeared only once each.
- Others disagreed, arguing that, tone and terminology notwithstanding, it was very clear that the PRC still considers the United States a real security concern and that

PRC military modernization is still using U.S. capabilities as the touchstone for China's own programs.

The Taiwan Issue

Relative to previous editions, this latest defense white paper takes a careful, studied, and subdued approach to its discussion of the Taiwan issue. It is clear, however, that concerns about constitutional reform on the island are at the top of Beijing's list of near-term worries vis-à-vis the cross-Strait issue.

One panelist noted that concerns about Taiwan did *not* top the list of challenges in the section addressing China's own security situation. It was also noted that the formulation in the 2004 edition, which stated, "The situation in the relations between the two sides of the Taiwan Straits is grim," was dropped.

Instead, the first mention of Taiwan in this edition accentuates the positive: "The Chinese government has taken a number of significant measures to improve relations across the Taiwan Straits, thus promoting cross-Straits relations toward peace and stability." This is a clear allusion to visits to the PRC in 2005 by leaders of the "Pan Blue" opposition political parties on Taiwan.²

Furthermore, unlike the 2004 paper, this one:

- Contained no references to Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian by name.
- Included no direct threat to use force against Taiwan.³

However, this paper makes clear that Beijing has already assessed that: "Taiwan authorities...aim at creating 'de jure Taiwan independence' through 'constitutional reform', thus still posing a grave threat to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as peace and stability across the Taiwan Straits and the Asia-Pacific region as a whole."

- Some participants offered that even though this edition contains no direct threat to use military force against Taiwan, the absence of such language does *not* take this option off the table for Beijing.

² In March 2005 KMT Vice Chairman Chiang Pin-kung led the visit of the first official KMT delegation to return to the mainland since 1949; in April 2005 Lien Chan (KMT), former Vice President of the ROC (1996 to 2000) made a very high profile visit to the PRC that included a meeting with Hu Jintao; and in May 2005 James Soong of the People First Party (PFP) made his visit.

³ The 2004 edition stated: "We will never allow anyone to split Taiwan from China through whatever means. Should the Taiwan authorities go so far as to make a reckless attempt that constitutes a major incident of 'Taiwan independence,' the Chinese people and armed forces will resolutely and thoroughly crush it at any cost."

Defense Modernization Issues

The sections of the paper that speak to defense modernization objectives, programs, and policies indicate that the PLA persists in its goal of building a leaner and more technology-intensive force capable of prosecuting joint campaigns, as articulated in the 2004 edition. Moreover, the PLA continues to emphasize the development of naval and air forces capable of conducting operations farther out from the Chinese littoral to increase strategic depth.

One panelist dubbed this edition the “Stay The Course White Paper,” meaning that the objectives of moving the PLA to a higher plane of “informationization” and “jointness”—so clearly articulated in the 2004 edition—continue to be emphasized in this current edition.

This paper also emphasizes (as in the past) that the PLA Navy and Air Force are working toward extending their respective operational ranges.

- “The Navy aims at gradual *extension of the strategic depth* for offshore defensive operations and enhancing its capabilities in integrated maritime operations and nuclear counterattacks.” (Emphasis added.)
- “The Air Force aims at speeding up its transition from territorial air defense to both offensive and defensive operations, and increasing its capabilities in the areas of air strike, air and missile defense, *early warning and reconnaissance, and strategic projection.*” (Emphasis added.)

For the first time in a white paper readers were told that PLA modernization is following a three-phase program to be accomplished over time:

- “China pursues a three-step development strategy in modernizing its national defense and armed forces, in accordance with the state's overall plan to realize modernization. The first step is to lay a solid foundation by 2010, the second is to make major progress around 2020, and the third is to basically reach the strategic goal of building informationized armed forces and being capable of winning informationized wars by the mid-21st century.”
- One participant pointed out that this “three-step” plan first surfaced in the Chinese press as early as 2003, and that reporting at the time claimed the objective was to more closely align PLA modernization plans and programs with the State’s larger objectives and economic plans.
- Along these lines, one participant, taking the long view of the relationship between China’s civilian economic objectives and defense requirements, gave the opinion that China’s defense has moved over the years from being “*subordinated*” to larger national economic objectives (1980s and 1990s), to being “*coordinated*” with the economy (1990s to 2000), to perhaps today being “*integrated*” with the larger economy.

Hu Is In and Who Is Out?

It was pointed out that this current white paper does not mention any previous or current Chinese leader by name; nor are the “theories” of previous leaders showcased or given homage. At the same time, the imprint of Hu Jintao is clearly present.

Unlike previous editions, this white paper does not mention Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping by name. Nor does it seem to need, as past editions did, to justify Chinese defense policies or PLA modernization programs in terms of “Mao Zedong Thought,” “Deng Xiaoping Theory,” or the “Three Represents”—Jiang Zemin’s ideological “legacy” that was present in the 2004 edition.

While Hu Jintao makes no appearance by name, his presence is felt through references to some of his stock ideas, exhortations, and concerns, such as: China’s commitment to building a “harmonious society”; an emphasis on “scientific” approaches to defense modernization issues; and the concept of a sustainable and “coordinated” national defense program. For those who follow Chinese elite politics and civil-military relations, these issues were of interest, although no closure on larger associated questions was reached.

- One participant speculated that if, hypothetically, Hu Jintao wanted to get Jiang Zemin “out” of this version (meaning no allusions to the “Three Represents”), he may have had to drop references to Mao and Deng as well as their theories.

Concluding Observations: Looking Back Over Five Defense White Papers

The “Habit” Has Taken Root. The good news is that the “habit” of issuing PRC defense white papers has taken root. Even if some of the judgments or policies in these documents are disconcerting, it is better to have them in the public domain than guessed at. The frustrating news remains the fact that there is still a good deal of basic information about the PLA that the PRC *could* include but still chooses *not* to, such as the number of personnel by service. Even so, no one who reads these documents can say they have learned nothing about the PLA.

“Delayed Fuse” Data. An inspection of current and previous versions of the defense white paper in conjunction with other research on PRC defense issues strongly suggests that some key defense policies, programs, and decisions showcased in these white papers have actually been in place for a while. For example, the PLA’s policy of giving priority to the modernization of the navy, air force, and second artillery (showcased in the 2004 edition), as well as the need to increase strategic depth (mentioned in the 2006 edition), are actually decisions that were made in 2002. What this means is that readers of these documents should not assume that all that is presented in these papers is “new” and “current.” In other words, one has to differentiate between the time at which a policy is put into place and the time at which the PRC decides to publicize that policy.

Each Version Is “A Child of its Time.” Each defense white paper has been a “child of its time” in regard to the analysis of the security situation in the front section of these documents. In retrospect, each can be given a thematic title:

1998: *The “Début” Edition*. This first edition was driven by the perceived need to counter what Beijing termed the “China threat theory” developing in the Asia-Pacific Region and beyond, especially in Southeast Asia. Until this time, China had issued no public document addressing defense policies, so the very act of issuing a defense white paper was a message—specifically, “We are becoming more transparent” and “Don’t worry about China.”

2000: *The “Calm the Worries But Stay Vigilant” Edition*. This version came on the heels of a major domestic debate in 1999 in which concerns were raised about the prospects for China’s security in the aftermath of a series of international events such as the errant bombing of the PRC Embassy in Belgrade and beyond. This edition had an important message for the Chinese people—that “peace and development” was still the keynote of the times, and that China was under no imminent threat of attack, *but that the PRC must remain vigilant*. This edition underscored China’s rising concerns about the allegedly destabilizing impact of U.S. “hegemonism” and “power politics.” It also was notable for its dire assessment that “the Taiwan Straits situation is complicated and grim”—reflecting worries raised by former Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui’s “Two State Theory” (1999).

2002: *The “Don’t Rock the Boat” Edition*. This iteration came after September 11th, the 16th Party Congress, and a leadership transition. This was also a period during which U.S.-China relations were beginning to slowly recover from a downturn that reached a nadir with the EP-3 incident. By 2003, Chinese analysts were assessing that the United States had put China on the back burner as “America’s new enemy” because Washington, they asserted, was now forced to focus on the war against terrorism. This version, therefore, was a “don’t rock the boat” edition. Compared to the 2000 white paper, it was a fairly toned down document as far as judgments on U.S. policies were concerned. It was also a document that highlighted China’s cooperation in international security regimes, and the rhetoric on Taiwan was ratcheted down.

2004: *The “Taiwan-Centric” Edition*. If any single issue drove the 2004 version, it was likely the heightened concern over Taiwan, especially the policy predilections of Chen Shui-bian. The clarity of the paper’s statements on the Taiwan issue made this obvious. Some scholars have argued that due to its careful layout of the objectives and progress of PLA modernization programs, the 2004 white paper could itself be viewed as an act of deterrence aimed at Taiwan.

2006: What thematic title shall we give this latest iteration? As mentioned earlier, in the discussion of military modernization, one participant suggested that this edition be titled the “Stay the Course” edition. That seems appropriate. However, in regard to larger strategic issues, one could argue that this document should be titled the “Globalization is a Double-Edged Sword” edition. Why? It heralds the good news for China that Beijing is becoming a major player in world affairs. But it also underscores worrisome news for China—namely, that Beijing’s future security is tied as much to forces beyond its shores and beyond its control as it is to the policies developed in *Zhongnanhai*.

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