

Release of DOD PLA Report: A Year of Pentagon Publications on the Chinese Military

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On Friday May 2, the Department of Defense (DOD) released its annual report *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019*. Also known as the *China Military Power Report* (CMPR), it joins two other major DOD publications produced this year that focus on People's Republic of China (PRC) military affairs: the Defense Intelligence Agency's (DIA's) *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win* (January 2019) and *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (February 2019), from the National Defense University (NDU) Press. With these three publications, the DOD has placed into the public domain an impressive amount of information and analysis about the Chinese military.

These publications come at a critical moment in the modernization of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), and those who follow PRC military affairs will benefit greatly from them. Specifically, since December 2015, the PLA has been undergoing its most sweeping reorganization since the 1950s. It has entailed the near-complete dismantling of the PLA's legacy and Soviet-inspired line and block charts, and replaced them with a new set of national-level, theater-level, service, and support organizations and structures. It has also entailed the creation of new command and control relationships, and myriad institutional reforms (critical systemic changes)—all focused on transforming the PLA into a joint and increasingly expeditionary force. Collectively, these US government publications provide a rich set of reference materials for those seeking to understand the significant changes the PLA is undergoing as well as their implications.

Although these DOD publications cover some common ground, each is unique in what it brings to the conversation on Chinese military modernization.

Released by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019* is an annual publication required by the

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US Congress in the National Defense Authorization Act of FY 2000. Thus, there is a statutory requirement for DOD to publish this report, as well as congressional guidance on some of the report's content. Upon release of the report, a Pentagon spokesman referred to it as "...the authoritative statement from the United States government on military and security developments involving China."² Consequently, the judgments, analyses, concerns, and policy statements in this document merit special attention.

For many years, analysts at home and abroad have looked to this publication to provide an official, public-domain DOD assessment of China's overarching strategic objectives, force modernization goals, trends in PLA capabilities, the balance of forces across the Taiwan Strait, and various significant developments in PRC military and regional security affairs under "special topics." The report has made accessible to non-specialists basic information in English about the PRC military—a public good in its own right.

This publication seems to get better with each iteration; the newly released FY 19 version is by far the best to date. Highly readable, well-written, well-organized, and commendably neutral in the presentation of information (this is, after all, a political document), the FY 19 version is notable for several reasons.

First, the report pulls no punches when it comes to rising concerns attendant to Chinese military modernization and Beijing's various security policies. Because of the authoritativeness of this publication, the following assessment of China's ambitions is worth reiterating: "China's leaders are leveraging China's growing economic, diplomatic, and military clout to establish regional preeminence and expand the country's international influence." This strategic assessment, but especially the various "whole-of-government" means Beijing is employing to achieve these assessed objectives, is the fundamental basis for the rising geostrategic tensions between China and the US—tensions that likely will not disappear with the striking of a trade deal, should one eventually materialize. Second, at the operational level, a notable feature of this year's report is Chapter 3, "Capabilities for Operations Along China's Periphery"—which is

² Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Affairs Schriver Press Briefing on the 2019 Report on Military and Security Developments in China, May 3, 2019, <<https://dod.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1837011/assistant-secretary-of-defense-for-indo-pacific-security-affairs-schriv-press/>>

important for understanding how the PLA is reorganizing to fight. The document discusses each of the PLA's newly created joint theater commands and identifies the operational planning focus of each (what the PLA refers to as "strategic directions"). It also provides maps and graphics with a basic laydown of the joint forces assigned and examines such issues as maritime disputes, relations with North Korea, and the military dimensions of China's approach to Taiwan. Third, the report includes two "special topics" currently receiving increased attention in the US and internationally: Chinese influence operations and China's interests and activities in the Arctic region. Thus, this report is the place to start for a political-military overview of how the US government assesses security developments in China, and it provides some excellent data on what some of those key developments are.

The second publication, DIA's *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*, is a new product in a new series. According to the report's preface, in 2017 DIA began to produce a series of public domain reports that provide "overviews of major foreign military challenges" faced by the US; the subject of the first one was Russia. Next in the series was *Global Nuclear Landscape 2018*, followed a year later by *China Military Power*.

Think of DIA's *China Military Power* as an unclassified handbook on the Chinese defense establishment that was produced, one presumes, by the same specialists who are writing the classified assessments for their government consumers—and who have painstakingly documented their data in more than 300 footnotes (a windfall for those in need of a PRC military bibliography). Signed-out by the director of DIA, the report can be assumed to represent an official institutional position—that of the greater defense intelligence community and therefore merits attention.

Whereas the recently released DOD report (CMPR) covers a wide range of political and military issues, the focus in DIA's *China Military Power* is most definitely on the military. In a little over 120 pages, the authors take readers across nearly every basic facet of this immense defense establishment—providing historical context for Chinese military modernization, national-level issues, military strategy and operational doctrine, and discussions of "core Chinese military capabilities." This handbook offers real value-added

by providing an overarching and cohesive narrative of what this military has been told it needs to achieve and why it needs to do so. It explains how the PLA is retooling itself to become a joint and more expeditionary force, and what kinds of conflicts the PLA thinks it will have to be prepared to fight in the future. At the same time, it calls out important capabilities, weapons systems, and operational concepts. Its 10 appendices cover each of the services and key supporting forces or organizations, logistical issues, and defense industrial affairs. Finally, the report offers judgments, not just information. Where is the PLA going to improve? Where will the PLA have challenges? What drivers are taking the PLA in new directions? These assessments are as important as the descriptive elements of this excellent report and, given the bona fides of the authors, are worthy of a careful read. If you are not a specialist of Chinese military affairs and have a need to become educated from a well-written and credible sourcebook, this report is the place to start.

The third major DOD publication in 2019 is an edited volume—*Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*. At 736 pages, this tome is the first (and still the only) full-length, scholarly, English-language study focused exclusively on the post-2015 PLA reforms and reorganization.

The content is the result of culling the best papers originally presented at a series of conferences held in Washington, DC and Taipei in 2016 and 2017. These conferences gathered a cohort of accomplished analysts of the Chinese military from government, think tanks, and the academy to make sense of the momentous developments that had just transpired in the PLA.

Although published by the NDU Press (thus, a government publication), this volume does not represent official US government views or opinions. It does represent some of the best initial thinking on the PLA reforms from a group of well-informed analysts working in public domain materials in both English and Chinese. Although neophytes will benefit greatly from this publication, the book explains, analyzes, and assesses the results of the reform enterprise begun in late 2015 at a highly expert level, and the scholarship and insights provided are indicative of how far the field of “PLA studies” has come over the past decades. Although the first two government publications are meant for the general

education of the public, this edited volume is closer to a study by experts for other experts. (Truth in advertising, this author has the lead chapter in the volume.)

Divided into five major parts (Drivers and Strategic Context, Building a Joint Force, Overhauling Services, Centralizing Authority, and Integrating with Society), the book's 18 chapters walk the reader through just about every facet of the ongoing PLA reform and reorganization effort that was knowable at the time of publication. Whether that enterprise progresses or falters, this volume will stand the test of time because it documents a remarkable moment of ambition, aspiration, and action by the Chinese military.

Finally, it is worth calling out a government publication on the Chinese military that was *not* present for duty in 2019, at least so far. This is a long-expected Chinese government document: namely, the hitherto biennial defense white paper published by the State Council of the PRC. Last published in May 2015, *China's Military Strategy* was a significant and authoritative document outlining Beijing's threat perceptions, the missions and tasks of the armed forces, military strategy, and modernization goals, among other issues. It was well received among those who follow PRC military affairs.

There has been no update to China's defense white paper since that time, which predates the launch of the reform and reorganization on December 31, 2015. It is unknown whether the absence of a new PRC defense white paper from Beijing after four years is because the PLA reorganization itself has made an update too difficult bureaucratically, there is a lack of consensus on what the next iteration would cover, or a decision has been made to cease publishing this document.

In the interim, those who follow Chinese military affairs will have more than enough materials to absorb just given the amount of information, data, and analysis contained in the three publications the DOD has placed in the public domain in 2019.