



JIIA Strategic Comments(No.14):

Key Points of China's New Defence White Paper

LI Hao (Junior Visiting Fellow, The Japan Institute of International Affairs)

Chinese(中文)

Japanese(日本語)

On July 24, 2019, China released a white paper on national defence titled “China's National Defence in a New Era.” China has been publishing a defence white paper almost every other year since 1998, but this is the first such publication in four years. The delay in the announcement may have been due to the large-scale reorganisation of the military under the Xi Jinping administration begun at the end of 2015.

It is a widely known fact that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) under the party's leadership, and not the State Council, is in control of China's defence policy. The new defence white paper is a document that strongly reflects the policy preferences of the military.

Every time China has released a defence white paper, foreign media and intellectuals have criticised (1) the lack of transparency in defence policies, strategies and costs, and (2) excessive military expansion. The response to the new defence white paper has generally been the same, but it is said that the new defence white paper is more forceful than past ones. This paper introduces the main points and political messages of the new defence white paper, and examines its significance for Japan.

Criticism of the United States

From the perspective of external observers, the main focus of attention in the new defence white paper is its hard-line stance toward the United States. Reference to the US in past defence white papers was made in four main areas: (1) intervention in Asia through military alliances; (2) arms sales to Taiwan; (3) comparisons of defence expenditures; and (4) introduction of international military exchanges. Of these, only on the Taiwan issue have white papers been openly critical of the US. In contrast, the new defence white paper has clearly become more disapproving of the US. The following is a summary of the criticism of the US in

the new defence white paper.

“The US has adjusted its national security and defence strategies, and adopted unilateral policies. It has provoked and intensified competition among major countries, significantly increased its defence expenditure, pushed for additional capacity in nuclear, outer space, cyber and missile defence, and undermined global strategic stability.”

“As the world economic and strategic centre continues to shift towards the Asia-Pacific, the region has become a focus of major country competition, bringing uncertainties to regional security. The US is strengthening its Asia-Pacific military alliances and reinforcing military deployment and intervention, adding complexity to regional security. The deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system in the Republic of Korea (ROK) by the US has severely undermined the regional strategic balance and the strategic security interests of regional countries.”

In this way, the new defence white paper asserts that the US is the country that is disrupting global stability and order, and it harshly criticises the US, unlike past defence white papers. Since the inauguration of the Trump administration in the US in 2017, China and the US have intensified their rivalry in various areas, including trade, cyberspace and the South China Sea. In the US, it is said that a group critical of China (“the Dragon Slayers”) has seized the initiative, and the relationship between the two countries has been characterized by strategic competition for several years. The changes in the defence white paper are clearly in response to the tensions over the past few years. Some US experts have taken the new defence white paper as a kind of warning and expressed concern about future troubles.

The Taiwan Issue

Another focus of the new defence white paper is the Taiwan issue. All past defence white papers described “Taiwanese independence” as the greatest threat to cross-strait relations. In addition, the four defence white papers published during the Democratic Progressive Party’s Chen Shui-bian administration (2000-2008) criticise the “Taiwanese authorities” and Chen Shui-bian for pursuing Taiwanese independence. The new defence white paper for the first time criticised the DPP by name – “the DPP adamantly maintains its ‘independence of Taiwan’ position” -- and did not use the word “Taiwanese authorities.” The authors may have decided not to identify the DPP government with Taiwan out of keen awareness of the presence of the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party of China).

Of particular note in the defence white paper’s account of Taiwan is its unambiguous statement

that “We make no promise to renounce the use of force.” There were similar phrases in the defence white paper during 1998 to 2002. The 2004 defence white paper stated that “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,” but the new white paper is the first it has directly referred to the use of force since 2002. In response to the new defence white paper, Taiwan immediately issued a statement saying that military expansion on the mainland side was damaging peace.

Serving as the backdrop for this was, of course, the inauguration of the Tsai Ing-wen administration. The Tsai Ing-wen administration does not accept the so-called “1992 Consensus” in which the authorities on both sides of the strait agreed that China was one. In January of this year, on the 40th anniversary of the “Message to Compatriots in Taiwan” that called for peaceful unification, the mainland again presented the “one country, two systems” model and called for unification, but Taiwan immediately refused. The mainland has intensified its pressure by various means, including the suspension of personal travel to Taiwan, and the Tsai Ing-wen administration is showing strong opposition. Despite Xi Jinping’s passion for unification, conversation and communication between the two sides have stopped, a situation the mainland side never wanted. This change in circumstances has influenced the content of the new defence white paper.

China’s Perspective

China has received generally critical responses from abroad, but the release of the defence white paper offers China a good opportunity to communicate its defence policy to the outside world. The new white paper, for the most part, gives an overview of the military reforms that have been carried out in recent years, explains the rationality of defence spending, and discusses China’s contributions to the international community, including anti-terrorism and peacekeeping operations. Of course, many outside observers consider China’s disclosures far from adequate. However, the Communist Party of China, which advocates Leninism, is traditionally secretive and cautious about disclosing information not only about the military but also about all other areas. From China’s point of view, the white paper can be said to be the result of efforts to disclose information to the greatest extent possible and to be an attempt to justify itself.

The new defence white paper, with about 27,000 characters, is considerably longer than the one in 2015. However, the 2015 defence white paper is exceptionally short. The new defence white paper is on par in volume with previous defence white papers. Considering that previous defence white papers provided relatively detailed explanations of each service, the amount of

information disclosed in the new defence white paper has declined.

The new defence white paper contains an overview of recent military reforms. It is not a sufficient explanation because of its brevity, but there are some points worth mentioning. First, the emphasis on the army was removed and four Central Military Commission (CMC) organs (General Staff Department, General Political Department, General Logistics Department, and General Armament Department) were reorganised into 15 organs directly under the CMC's leadership and management, while the seven military area commands (MACs) were reorganised into five theatre commands (TCs). In addition, the Strategic Support Force was created to carry out electronic warfare and cyberwarfare, and the Joint Logistic Support Force was assigned the mission of logistics support. The main features of these military reforms are illustrated in the new defence white paper. Another important reform is the upgrading of the Discipline Inspection Commission (DIC). In the past, the DIC was part of the General Political Department, but now it is under the direct control of the CMC. It is well known that the Xi Jinping administration's anti-corruption campaign was conducted through the DIC, and this reform should further strengthen the discipline inspection units within the military. The white paper's mention of the People's Armed Police (PAP) is also important. In the past, the PAP had been directed by both the State Council and the CMC, but in 2018 it was integrated into the CMC. The new defence white paper states that the basic functions of the PAP remain unchanged and have not been incorporated into the military hierarchy. The section on military reform is titled "China's National Defence and Military under Reform" and it is clear that military reform is still in progress.

From China's point of view, the emphasis of the new defence white paper is that its defence policy is defensive, and that its military is a guardian of world peace. The section outlining China's defence policy is titled "China's Defensive National Defence Policy in the New Era." China's basic stance is to follow a path of peaceful development, to adopt an independent and autonomous foreign policy of peace, and to value harmony. China characterises its national defence as one of "never seeking hegemony, expansion or spheres of influence." The phrase "never seeking hegemony or expansion" has been used in almost every defence white paper thus far and has become a mantra in China's defence policy. The new defence white paper adds that China is not pursuing a sphere of influence. Furthermore, by referring to the concept of "community with a shared future for mankind" that has been repeatedly proposed in recent years, China claims that its military will protect world peace and stability. Examples include contributions to peacekeeping operations, maritime security, humanitarian relief, disarmament, nuclear non-proliferation, anti-terrorism, cybersecurity, and natural disaster relief. Based on China's actual actions, many outside observers may not be convinced by the new defence white

paper's explanation. China, however, has consistently maintained this position and repeatedly made it public.

Another point to note is the importance China attaches to the United Nations. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China has always stressed the significance of the United Nations, in which it has a strong voice. In most past defence white papers, the term "UN" has appeared about 20 to 40 times. It was used 19 times in the text of the new defence white paper. China has highlighted its contributions to the United Nations and hopes that the United Nations will play a role in international cooperation.

Implications for Japan

There are not many references to Japan in the new defence white paper. "Japan is adjusting its military security policy, allocating resources, seeking to break away from its 'post-war regime' and increasing its military extroversion," the report said. The previous white papers on national defence contain little criticism of Japan, and it can be said that the new defence white paper basically continues this same tone.

It should be noted that, with regard to national sovereignty and territorial integrity, this is the first white paper to state that "The South China Sea Islands, Diaoyu Islands and attached islands are China's inherent territory." Only one defence white paper in the past mentioned the "Diaoyu Islands" (Japanese name: Senkaku Islands), the defence white paper published in 2013 criticised the so-called nationalisation of the islands by the Japanese government, saying, "Japan is causing trouble on the Diaoyu Islands issue." Because China often refers to the South China Sea and the "Diaoyu Islands" together when it talks about territorial protection, the white paper touches on these in response to growing tensions in the South China Sea. It should be noted, however, that China has decoupled the territorial issue from rapid improvement of relations since Prime Minister Abe's visit to China in 2018. The fact remains, though, that the security environment in the East China Sea has not improved, with China continuing to send coast guard vessels to areas around the islands.

As China's new defence white paper does not criticise Japan, except for its reference to the territorial issue, its direct impact is not expected to be significant. However, the new defence white paper reflects the severity of the security environment in East Asia, including the standoff between China and the United States, the Taiwan issue, and tensions in the South China Sea. Japan needs to make efforts to ensure that the escalating conflict between China and the United States does not undermine stability in East Asia. It is important to encourage China to contribute to the international community, pay close attention to China's behaviour, demand

further information disclosure and self-restraint, and properly criticise any behaviour that deviates from the rules.

References

“China’s National Defence in a New Era” (July 2019)

http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-07/24/content_4846443.htm

List of past defence white papers (Ministry of National Defence website)

http://eng.mod.gov.cn/publications/node_48467.htm

(2019-09-13)