

China's defence report highlights growing dangers of war

John Chan**18 January 2007**

China's military and strategic assessment, "National Defence in 2006", published in late December, is a highly political document that reflects Beijing's reaction to growing Great Power rivalry.

The White Paper, the fifth since 1998, is largely a response to increasing pressure from Washington. Since Bush came to power in 2001, the Pentagon has published a series of annual reports presenting the Chinese military as a "threat" to the US. Chinese President Hu Jintao has sought to down play the criticism, saying that his country was engaged in a "peaceful rise".

In a bid to deflect Washington's claims that China's military build-up is "secretive", the latest report provided far more detail about the country's military apparatus than previously. It provided information about defence spending, the command structure and an overview of military policy. The government held a special press conference on the report for some 70 military attaches from 45 countries.

However, China's economic dynamism has an objective logic of its own. With an average annual growth rate of 10 percent and \$1 trillion in foreign currency reserves, Beijing has been able to boost investment in the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Moreover, China's scramble for oil and raw materials around the world have led it into direct competition with the US, Japan and the European powers.

China's growing ties with Russia in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) have cut across US ambitions to dominate the Middle East and Central Asia. In Asia, Latin America and Africa, Beijing is engaged in extending its influence, offering aid in return for resources. China has supported and even provided arms for regimes in Sudan, Venezuela and Burma that Washington is openly hostile to.

The defence report points to growing concerns in Beijing about the Bush administration's aggression in the Middle East and internationally. Its first chapter assessing China's "security environment" warned of the "practice of a small number of countries that have intensified their military alliances and resorted to force or threats of force in international affairs".

The chapter warned particularly of the danger of a US-led strategic realignment in Asia. "The United States and Japan are strengthening their military alliance in pursuit of operational integration. Japan seeks to revise its constitution and exercise collective self-defence. Its military posture is becoming more external-oriented. The DPRK [North Korea] has launched missile tests and conducted a nuclear test. Thus, the situation on the

Korean Peninsula and in North East Asia has become more complex and challenging."

China is deeply concerned at the encouragement given by the Bush administration to Japan to play a more belligerent role in North East Asia. Beijing also fears that North Korea's nuclear test in October could provide a pretext for Japan to develop nuclear weapons. The Bush administration's thinly disguised pressure for "regime change" in North Korea poses the threat of a politically hostile state on China's doorstep.

The paper specifically named a formal declaration of independence in Taiwan, backed by the US, as the biggest threat to China's national security and territorial integrity. Beijing regards Taiwan as a renegade province and fears moves towards independence would encourage separatist movements elsewhere in China. The US has pledged to militarily defend the island from Chinese attack and, more importantly, has encouraged Japan to assist in any military action over Taiwan.

Washington has a series of military alliances or strategic arrangements with countries along or near China's borders and coastline, including South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Afghanistan as well as several Central Asia nations. China is expanding its military in response to the threatened US encirclement and to guarantee supplies of raw materials, particularly oil.

China's defence expenditure is expected to reach 283.8 billion yuan this year, or \$US36.4 billion, up nearly 15 percent from 2005. From 1990 to 2005, China's average annual increase in military spending was 15.36 percent. The White Paper tried to play down the increases saying that the rises mostly went to salaries. It also declared that China's military spending accounted for less than 1.4 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), compared to 6.2 percent by the US.

China made two huge separate cutbacks in troop numbers in 1983 and 1997 totalling one and a half million. Another reduction of 200,000 troops took place between 2003-2005. The PLA currently has 2.3 million personnel, the largest armed forces in the world. In addition, China has a 660,000-strong People's Armed Police Force, mainly to suppress domestic unrest.

The Pentagon claims that China's annual military budget is two or three times higher than the official figures because Beijing does not include the cost of foreign weapon procurement or income from military-related businesses in its defence budget. While American analysts claim have accused the Pentagon's estimates of

exaggerating the Chinese “threat” to justify increased US military spending, the pace of China’s military modernisation has undoubtedly stepped up since the early 1990s.

Until the 1970s, Mao Zedong’s peasant-based PLA was poorly equipped. Its main tactic in the event of US or Soviet aggression was to have a “sea of men” to encircle the invaders. In the 1980s, the US sought to use China as a counterweight to the Soviet Union and actively encouraged Beijing to use the proceeds of “market reform” to modernise its military.

A fundamental shift took place in 1990-91, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Chinese generals were shocked by the devastating defeat inflicted by the US on the Iraqi army in the first Gulf War. Beijing characterised it as a new era of “military revolution” dominated by hi-tech warfare. The Chinese leadership declared that the PLA had to catch up or go under as the US used its military superiority might to achieve global strategic dominance.

However, after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, the major Western powers had imposed an arms embargo. So China turned to Russia and became its largest customer for jet fighters, attack submarines and advanced military technologies. While Beijing’s immediate concern was the rising pro-independence movement in Taiwan, it also wanted the means to counter the emerging US strategic encirclement.

The section in the 2006 White Paper on “National Defence Policy” elaborates China’s goal of building a hi-tech military by 2050. The aim is to take “mechanisation as the foundation and informationisation as the driving force”. The report’s central emphasis is on an “active defence” and the ability to rapidly project a coordinated military force outside China’s immediate region with maximum hi-tech firepower.

Despite its rapid economic growth, China is far from being a mature industrial power. Its new generations of aircraft, tanks and warships are largely based on copying and extending the limited foreign technologies to which it has access. The PLA has not yet built a fully mechanised army, nor are its poorly educated peasant conscripts able to fight “informationised warfare”. China has built nuclear-powered submarines, but not a blue-water navy. Its air force is equipped with some precision-guided weapons, but its numerical strength is still based on antiquated Soviet jets.

In the area of nuclear weapons, China lags far behind the US. The White Paper reiterated the country’s official “no first use” nuclear policy and declared that China would not engage in a nuclear arms race. But the document has little to say about the country’s nuclear arsenal.

A study entitled “Chinese Nuclear Forces and US Nuclear War Planning” published in November by the Federation of American Scientists and Natural Resources Defense Council found that the Pentagon and the CIA have deliberately exaggerated the Chinese nuclear “threat” to justify US spending on a new generation of nuclear weapons.

“Some in the United States argue that China is the next great threat and therefore new weapons and increased military spending are necessary. Some in China see recent US-led wars, military modernisations, and aggressive strategies and policies as proof of American ‘hegemony’ and argue that this requires them to

modernise their military. Both countries are investing large sums of money in planning for war, and any US-China war comes with potential of escalating to use of nuclear weapons,” it warned.

The US stockpile of 10,000 nuclear weapons dwarfs that of China, which is estimated at just 200. China has only 20 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) capable of hitting the US, while the US has more than 830—most with multiple nuclear warheads—that can reach China. The US is also far ahead of China in nuclear technology, strategic submarines capable of launching nuclear weapons and nuclear air strike capability.

The study estimated even a limited nuclear exchange would result in huge casualties. A US nuclear strike just on China’s 20 ICBM silos would kill and injure 26 million people, while the study found the US has had plans for “much larger strikes” against China in the past. A Chinese attack on continental US with all of its 20 nuclear missiles can cause an estimated 40 million casualties. The figure would be much higher if China was able to deploy 75-100 nuclear warheads as predicted by the US.

There are signs, however, that the US is striving for nuclear primacy—that is, the ability to prevent nuclear retaliation in response to a first strike. Such a capacity would fundamentally alter the strategic equation, which, during the Cold War, was based on the paradigm of Mutually Assured Destruction—that is, a standoff in which neither side launches a first strike for fear of a devastating retaliatory attack. The Bush administration is not only refining its offensive nuclear capacity but is also developing an anti-ballistic missile system aimed at minimising any effective retaliation.

As potential targets of a US attack, China and Russia have been compelled to respond developing new generations of mobile ICBM’s to evade a first strike. The Bush administration has repeatedly criticised China for its “secretive” defence expansion. But its own relentless military build up, as well as its aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan, constitute the overriding destabilising factor in world politics and heighten the danger of war.



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