

# IDSA

## *Issue Brief*

# China's White Paper on Asia Pacific Security Cooperation: An Assessment

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## **S***ummary*

In its first white paper on Asia Pacific Security Cooperation, China highlights its vision of the regional security architecture. The white paper articulates key themes about China's approach to regional security issues which will form the basis of its foreign policy approach in the near term. The policy document has been released at a time of critical uncertainty in the Asia Pacific due to the extant ambiguities about the incoming US administration's approach towards the region. Through this white paper, China has affirmed its regional ambitions and aims to shape the regional security agenda in the Asia Pacific on its stated terms. Going beyond China's headline catching advice to small and medium powers to avoid taking sides in differences among major regional powers, the document needs a careful examination.

On January 11, 2017, China elucidated its position on Asia Pacific security through its first white paper on its positions and policies on Asia-Pacific security cooperation.<sup>1</sup> One of the key operative dictums included in the white paper, which was immediately flagged by news agencies,<sup>2</sup> was an advice or warning to small and medium countries in the region that they “need not and should not take sides among big countries”.<sup>3</sup> However, during the press conference at the release of the white paper, Chinese Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Liu Zhenmin clarified that the document was about security cooperation and not security issues. He also said: "The current security structure in the region is not satisfactory, which has led to mistrust among the nations." <sup>4</sup>

Through this white paper, China has proposed a concept of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security in the Asia Pacific Region.<sup>5</sup> The white paper considers the Asia Pacific region to be stable, although it also recognises multiple destabilising and uncertain factors that exist in the region. The areas of concern include the nuclear issue in the Korean Peninsula, the slow reconciliation process in Afghanistan, terrorism and maritime disputes. The white paper appears to indirectly indicate that the US military deployment is a regional security challenge along with the increasing military preparedness of Japan. There is also recognition of terrorism, transnational crime and natural disaster as non-traditional security threats in the region.

## **A Concept of Regional Peace with Chinese Characteristics**

The white paper presents China's concept of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable development which was proposed by President Xi Jinping at the Fourth Summit of CICA in May 2014. Common security has been defined as respecting and ensuring security for all rather than the security of one country or some countries. Alliances targeted at a third country are not conducive for common security. Comprehensive security has been defined to include traditional and non-traditional dimensions which need to be promoted through a holistic, multipronged, approach aimed at coordinated enhancement of regional security

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<sup>1</sup> “China Issues White Paper on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation,” *Xinhua News*, January 11, 2017, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-01/11/c\\_135973890.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-01/11/c_135973890.htm), accessed January 17, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> “China Issues White Paper, Warns Small- and Medium-Sized Countries Not to Take Sides,” *Channel NewsAsia*, January 12, 2017, <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asiapacific/china-issues-white-paper-warns-small-and-medium-sized-countries/3430786.html>, accessed January 17, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> “In Releasing Asia-Pacific Security White Paper, Beijing Sounds Warning to Small Countries to Avoid Taking Sides,” *TODAYonline*, January 11, 2017, <http://www.todayonline.com/world/releasing-asia-pacific-security-white-paper-beijing-sounds-warning-small-countries-avoid>, accessed January 17, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Goh Sui Noi, “Beijing ‘seeks to reshape’ Asia-Pacific security order,” *The Straits Times*, January 12, 2017, <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/beijing-seeks-to-reshape-asia-pacific-security-order>, accessed January 16, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> “Full Text: China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation - Xinhua | English.news.cn,” January 11, 2017, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2017-01/11/c\\_135973695.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2017-01/11/c_135973695.htm), accessed January 17, 2017.

governance by taking into account the historical background and reality. Cooperative security entails the promotion of security through dialogue and promotion. Finally, there needs to be focus on both development and security for sustainable security.

In order to enhance peaceful development in the region, the document outlines China's commitment to fostering security through dialogue and cooperation and describes its six fold policy framework thus:<sup>6</sup>

- cooperation on economic development;
- seeking common grounds for cooperation with countries in the region while recognising differences;
- adherence to multilateralism along with willingness to shoulder regional and global security responsibilities;
- promotion of rule setting and improvement of the institutional safeguards for peace and stability;
- intensify military exchanges and cooperation; and
- proper resolution of differences and disputes.

In its security vision, the document considers old security concepts -- based on Cold War mentality, zero sum game and focus on force -- as outdated. It seeks exploration of a new path for Asian security through an innovative security vision, improvement in regional systems and strengthening of solidarity and cooperation with transparency and inclusiveness. While describing its relations with other major Asia Pacific countries through the details of ongoing bilateral exchanges and initiatives, China aims for a non-confrontational new model of major country relations with the US; strategic partnership of co-ordination with Russia; closer partnership with India; and strive for closer relations with Japan. China has also identified regional hot spots, which includes the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula, anti-Ballistic missile deployment in South Korea, Afghanistan, terrorism and maritime security, and has stated its policy position on each of these issues. The white paper also reviews China's participation in major multilateral mechanisms and regional non-traditional security cooperation.

While the core focus of the white paper is on the promotion of peace and stability in the region, China has expressed its unease about the existing regional security order. China's advice to medium and small countries to maintain their neutrality is preceded by the expectation that major countries would "treat the strategic intention of others in objective and rational manner, reject the cold war mentality, respect others' legitimate interest and concern."<sup>7</sup> It also advises against beefing up "a military alliance targeted at a third party."<sup>8</sup> China has stated its opposition to nuclear and missile tests by North Korea and affirmed its commitment towards denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula. However, it has also stated its firm opposition to the deployment of the THAAD anti-ballistic missile system in South

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Section I.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, Section I, Para 3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, Section II, (1) Para 2.

Korea, the stated rationale being “we cannot just have the security of one or some countries while leaving the rest insecure, still less should we seek “*absolute security*” of oneself at the expense of the security of others” [emphasis as in original].<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding the purported reason for the THAAD deployment being a threat from North Korea, China realises that the anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea can potentially counter Chinese ballistic missiles as well.<sup>10</sup>

## Enduring Challenge of Maritime Security

Maritime security in the Asia-Pacific region is a core focus of the white paper and has also been listed among the regional hotspots of security concern. The documents highlights the growing non-traditional security threats (piracy, smuggling, drug trafficking, natural disaster and ecological concern) to maritime security but also recognises that “misunderstandings and lack of mutual trust among some countries about traditional security issues also pose risks to maritime security.” Regarding its maritime boundary issue, China maintains that it “has indisputable sovereignty over the Nansha (Spartly) Islands and their adjacent waters” and also asserts that “the Diaoyu (Senkaku) Islands are an integral part of China's territory.”<sup>11</sup> At the same time, China hopes that these issues will be resolved through dialogue with ASEAN, relevant state parties and Japan, respectively.

A key concern of China is provocation of regional disputes by “certain countries for their selfish interest”, which it “resolutely opposes” and whose action compels China’s retaliatory response. This seems to be an indirect reference to the Freedom of Navigation Patrols by the US. China’s preference for maritime dispute resolution through bilateral dialogue is unambiguous. In a clear caution against external mediation efforts, the white paper asserts that “no effort to internationalize and judicialize the South China Sea issue will be of any avail for its resolution; it will only make it harder to resolve the issue, and endanger regional peace and stability.”<sup>12</sup> On the maritime dispute with Japan, China has “urged Japan to abide by agreements on bilateral relations, properly manage and control disputes and conflicts and avoid creating obstacle to the improvement of bilateral relations.”<sup>13</sup>

For the settlement of disputes over territories and maritime rights, China asks the parties concerned to “respect historical facts” and seek a solution through negotiations under procedures of “universally recognised international law” and UNCLOS. China recommends the promotion of rule setting and improvement of the institutional safeguards as an important aspect for peace and stability in the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Nan Li, “THAAD Is Coming to China’s Doorstep (But Beijing Has a Plan to Push Back),” *The National Interest*, November 17, 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/thaad-coming-chinas-doorstep-beijing-has-plan-push-back-18437>, accessed January 17, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> “Full Text: China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation - Xinhua | English.news.cn.” Section IV (5), Paras 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, Section III (4), Para 1.

region. In the Chinese view these “rules should not be dictated by any particular country”, rather “regional and international rules should be discussed, formulated and observed by all concerned.”<sup>14</sup> China considers that at present certain rules and their interpretations are being imposed in the regional context unilaterally by some countries. While there exists no further elaboration, it could be inferred that these concern existing interpretations about the concept of Freedom of Navigation and jurisdictional interpretation of UNCLOS, which has been contested by the United States.

## **Terrorism and Afghanistan**

The white paper recognises terrorism as a severe security and stability challenge in the region. This challenge includes the spread of violent and extremist ideologies, cyber terrorism, infiltration into the region of international terrorist organizations, and the inflow of foreign terrorist fighters. China’s cooperation with neighbouring countries in dealing with the threat from the "Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement" (ETIM) has been highlighted.<sup>15</sup> Recalling counter terrorism collaboration with various countries in the region, China contends that there should not be any “double standard in fighting terrorism which should not be associated with any particular country, ethnicity or religion.”<sup>16</sup> On Afghanistan, China believes that only an “Afghan led and Afghan owned” inclusive reconciliation process can provide ultimate solution to the issue.<sup>17</sup> However, China’s participation in a meeting on the Afghan issue with Pakistan and Russia, which had excluded Afghanistan, contradicts this policy statement about its faith in an “Afghan led and Afghan owned” solution.<sup>18</sup> This may provide some indication about the Chinese tactical adjustment on Afghanistan and terrorism, notwithstanding the stated policy position in the white paper.

## **Engagement with Regional Multilateral Forums**

The white paper highlights China’s involvement in regional multilateral mechanisms and lists its involvement in, and contribution to, all regional forums including ASEAN, ASEAN Plus Three, China-Japan-ROK Cooperation, East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting PLUS (ADMM Plus), Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Six Party talks, and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measure in Asia (CICA). The white paper highlights China’s commitment towards pushing forward the development of a regional security mechanism through active security dialogue and cooperation. The white paper

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, Section I, Para 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, Section VI (2).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, Section IV (4).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, Section IV (3).

<sup>18</sup> “Pakistan, China, Russia Warn of Increased IS Threat in Afghanistan,” *DAWN.COM*, December 27, 2016, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1304794>, accessed January, 16, 2017.

mentions the 'Xiangshan Forum' as one of the dialogue forums for enhancing the regional security mechanism. The Shangri La dialogue at Singapore, which has always seen high level participation from China, does not find any mention in the white paper. This could be due to implicit displeasure with Singapore.

## Relations with India

The white paper is largely positive about India, which has been recognised among the four major powers in the Asia Pacific. China considers that its strategic partnership with India has further deepened since the signing of the China-India strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity in 2015. The white paper recounts high level bilateral visits and the frequent interactions between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi. Coordination and collaboration between India and China on various issues, including in the WTO and on Climate Change, has helped to safeguard the common interest of both countries as well as of other developing countries. Relations between the Indian and Chinese militaries has been considered as healthy and stable.<sup>19</sup>

## Evolving Views on Regional Security

China's military strategy was published in 2015 as a white paper, which contained its assessment of its national security situation.<sup>20</sup> The regional security environment described in the current document on Asia Pacific security cooperation needs to be compared with the Chinese military strategy published in 2015 in order to assess continuity and changes. Though the broad description of China's external security environment remains the same in both documents, there are, however, some crucial differences.

China's military strategy had clearly identified the US rebalance in the Asia Pacific as a concern along with Japan's increasing military capability. The current white paper maintains this narrative, but omits direct adversarial references to both countries.

China's military strategy had highlighted that in addition to maritime territorial disputes, "certain disputes over land territory are still smoldering." The white paper on Asia Pacific Security Cooperation has listed China's maritime territorial issues but has no references to any land boundary disputes. Curiously there is no mention of Taiwan which was one of the key focus area in its military strategy.

On the hotspots of security concern, China's military strategy was generic and had listed issues such as ethnic, religious, border and territorial disputes. In

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<sup>19</sup> "Full Text: China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation - Xinhua | English.news.cn." Section III (3).

<sup>20</sup> "Full Text: China's Military Strategy," May 26, 2015, [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2015-05/26/content\\_4586805.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Press/2015-05/26/content_4586805.htm), accessed January 17, 2017.

comparison, the current white is more precise in its description of hotspots – the nuclear issue on Korean Peninsula, Anti- Ballistic Missile issue, Afghanistan, terrorism and maritime security. China has also elucidated its position on each of them with clarity as highlighted earlier.

Maritime security issues have been one of the focal areas of the current white paper. The word 'maritime' occurs 39 times, while the word 'terror' finds 33 mentions. In contrast, China's military strategy had referred to the word 'maritime' just 15 times including in the description of its coping maritime strategies.

### **Reading Chinese Tea Leaves**

China, through its white paper, has attempted to clarify its position on regional security challenges. One of the clearest messages is that the THAAD anti-ballistic missile should not be deployed on the Korean Peninsula. China also conveys its dissatisfaction with the existing rules-setting mechanism in the region as well as global rules and norms. On the freedom of navigation issue, the Chinese view stands in sharp contrast to that of the US, and the statement that rules in the region are being dictated by one country reflects that sentiment. However, there appears to be a duality in the Chinese approach on this issue. On peace and stability, China wants negotiations about rule setting on regional stability to be based on "the spirit of the rule of law" and in accordance with "widely recognised rules of fairness and justice". At the same time, China calls for a dialogue based on "respect of historical facts" and "universally recognized international law and modern maritime law" including UNCLOS for dispute resolution on maritime jurisdiction. The Chinese appeal for setting aside pending disputes for the time being and focusing on cooperation is, in essence, a reiteration of the policy followed since Deng Xiaoping.<sup>21</sup> Through its call for the "rejection of Cold War mentality" and the warning issued to small and medium powers about not taking sides, China aims to shape the regional order in its favour.

China has maintained its strategic ambiguity regarding its jurisdictional rights in the South China Sea. There is no reference to the 'Nine Dash Line' in the white paper. However, it has claimed "indisputable sovereignty over Nansha (Spratly) islands and their adjacent waters." The Chinese advice against efforts to resolve the South China Sea issue through judicial or international arbitration seems to be a response to the arbitration decision of The Hague Tribunal and is aimed at dissuading other interested parties from seeking further judicial interventions.

From the Indian perspective, the white paper seems slightly positive by recognising India as one among four major powers in the region, omitting a reference to the land boundary dispute, and through the assessment about progressive strengthening of stable bilateral relations. Notwithstanding statements about convergence on trade and climate change, a drastic change in the contours of

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<sup>21</sup> Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 121.

India-China relations seems unlikely considering China's positions on Indian membership of NSG<sup>22</sup> and on declaring Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar as a global terrorist.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

The white paper has been released at a time when the US government is under transition and there is still uncertainty about President elect Trump's policy approach towards global security issues in general, and the security environment in the Asia Pacific in particular. However, the emerging contours of the incoming administration indicate a hawkish political approach towards China. The seizure of the US Navy Unmanned Underwater Vehicle (UUV) was termed as a theft by Trump. In his confirmation hearing, Rex Tillerson, Secretary of State Nominee, indicated that if China continues with its effort to change the status quo in the South China Sea through artificial reclamation, its access to these islands could be interfered with.

It appears that through the release of this white paper at this time of uncertainty, China has affirmed its regional ambitions and aims to shape the regional security agenda in the Asia Pacific Region on its stated terms.

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<sup>22</sup> "India's NSG Membership Can't Be Farewell Gift: China to US," *The Indian Express*, January 16, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/indias-nsg-membership-cant-be-farewell-gift-china-to-us-4476997/>, accessed January 16, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Rezaul H Laskar, "China Again Blocks India's Bid to Ban JeM Chief Masood Azhar," *Hindustan Times*, December 30, 2016, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/china-again-blocks-india-s-bid-to-ban-jem-chief-masood-azhar/story-a5upiumVkJQSOiZ8KIIe47L.html>, accessed January 16, 2017.

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