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“New Era” in China’s Defence Policy

Justyna Szczudlik

In July, China published its first defence policy white paper since 2015. The document is a response to similar documents by the U.S. and its growing engagement in Asia and confrontational policy towards China. Compared to the previous white paper, which introduced a new definition of security and the “active defence” of overseas interests, the new text focuses on a peaceful global order actively shaped by China and intended to contrast with its perspective of U.S. activities. However, the new focus does not mean China will not defend its “core interests”, which might be a challenge for NATO.

Since 1998, China has published biannual instalments of defence policy white papers for both informational and public relations reasons. The title of the latest document, “Defence in a New Era”, is consistent with the 19th Communist Party Congress decisions in 2017. During this conclave, the “new era” slogan was adopted as an expression for Xi Jinping’s second term. The content of the new white paper suggests that partly it is in response to the U.S. security strategy (2017), defence strategy (2018), and the recent Defense Department report about the Chinese military in which China is described as a threat. It is also a reaction to the Trump administration’s robust support for Taiwan.

The likely reason for the four-year break in publication was the different nature of the previous white paper from the others. In 2015, China released its first-ever “military strategy”. It presented new concepts with a long-term outlook, while less informative than previous ones. The strategy introduced “a comprehensive security concept”, attached greater importance to the defence of overseas interests, and a “people’s war” (the use of civilians and civil infrastructure for military purposes), and “active defence”. The latest text has a different goal, mainly to improve China’s image in the face of global criticism initiated by the U.S. China wants to show it has peaceful intentions, contrasting that with its view of the United States while clearly indicating red lines that cannot be crossed. The document devotes a lot of space to the vision of a global order co-shaped by China, which is a novelty compared to the 2015 strategy.

Threats to China. According to the document, the main challenge China faces is the growing great power competition. It finds the culprit is the U.S., which it sees as violating global stability. As evidence, it cites the latest strategic documents by the U.S., its policy of acting unilaterally and its increasing capabilities in nuclear, space, and missile forces. Further, it highlights NATO enlargement —(for China, “NATO” is largely synonymous with the “U.S.”), deployments of alliance forces in Central Europe, and more joint exercises. This, in turn, the paper argues, has led Russia to strengthen its capabilities, including in the nuclear sphere, to defend its strategic interests. It finds also there is a growing tendency in the EU to cooperate in the security domain.

The situation in Asia is assessed as stable due to regional cooperation based on the principle of non-alliance (according to China, an alliance implies an enemy) and refraining from actions against third countries. This is an allusion to U.S. and NATO actions. China also emphasizes that it cooperates with ASEAN and that this has resulted in a stable situation in the South China Sea. However, the stability is being harmed from the

outside, mainly by the U.S., which strengthens its alliances in the region and deploys troops there, with the best examples being the deployment of a THAAD system to South Korea or the deepening U.S. alliance with Australia.

The immediate perceived threats to China are related to violations of “core interests”, which refers to issues that China views as non-negotiable. They are not defined in this document (or in any other) but undoubtedly involve Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, Tibet, Xinjiang, as well as disputed territories in the South and East China seas. What’s more, the 2015 military strategy cited China’s need to defend its “overseas interests”, which extends the catalogue of interests. In the current white paper, most of the space in this area is devoted to Taiwan. The Taiwanese authorities are accused of fostering independence tendencies and being susceptible to foreign influence. The issue of the disputed areas in the seas is also seen as a threat. China accuses Western countries of violating Chinese territorial waters. This is an allusion to freedom of navigation operations (FONOP), in which vessels intentionally pass through disputed waters where China claims rights, conducted by the U.S., France and UK in the South China Sea. Other threats also include those related to the digital space and those that may threaten Chinese citizens living outside the country. This is a broad category given China’s investments on a global scale and large diaspora.

Counteracting. The document makes clear the Chinese military is ready to counteract the threats. To do this, the army (PLA) is being reduced by 300,000 to 2 million soldiers to make it more operation-focused. The number of land forces is decreasing while air, naval, space, and rocket forces are strengthening, and the deployment of combat forces are being optimised. This is a continuation from 2015.

The latest document, though, focuses on sending a peaceful message, claiming that China will never first use a nuclear weapon and will strive to prevent war. At the same time, it speaks about strengthening China’s preparedness and its ability to win wars. The sharpest tone is saved for Taiwan, which the document emphatically states must be reunited with the mainland. China does not rule out the use of force against those who “interfere” in the affairs of the island (which means non-Taiwanese) in support of its independence. China, it says, will actively defend “national unity” at all costs. In this spirit, there is also a passage about “hitting” Uighur and Tibetan separatism.

Another way the policy document finds to counteract the threats is to build a global security architecture based on Chinese ideas and cooperation models (e.g. state capitalism, an illiberal political system) which are promoted as more effective than that West’s. The concept of a “community of shared destiny for mankind” was given special attention in the document. It is worth mentioning that since 2018, this phrase has become a constitutional-level idea. It is a Chinese inclusive vision of world peace. China argues that global problems cannot be solved alone. Instead, it calls for a community based on openness, win-win cooperation, and partnerships. China sets these values in opposition to the current order shaped by Western countries, which, according to China, is characterized by conflict, exclusion (e.g., through entry standards that denies some countries access to international institutions), zero-sum games, and alliances. This concept is both utopian and Confucian. It is based on an organic vision of the world (unity and interdependence), at the centre of which is China, which sets the tone. Examples of activities under this concept include peacekeeping operations, in which China widely participates, Chinese help in the evacuation of foreign citizens (e.g., from Libya, Yemen), and closer cooperation with Russia, mentioned first as a partner worth cooperating with, which can be assumed as an aspirational note about closer ties with Russia against the U.S. In a subsequent part of the paper, China also presents its willingness to cooperate with European countries in the security domain.

Conclusions. The document is conceptually consistent with the 2015 strategy and completes its assumptions. It concentrates on external threats while internal challenges are not mentioned or are seen as inspired from the outside. For example, Chinese authorities talk in this way about the current protests in Hong Kong or the Taiwan authorities’ policy. The paper can be used to cover over problems caused by the dispute with the U.S. or concerns about internal stability by showing China as a responsible power.

The document indicates that China will more actively defend its overseas interests. The methods of pressure it could use (e.g., political, economic, military) can pose a challenge for the EU because they concern both the Union’s interests in Asia, such as maintaining open trade routes and preserving freedom of navigation, as well as in Europe itself, with Chinese investment and military cooperation (e.g., military exercises with Russia). China also has a presence in the EU’s neighbourhood—it invests in Africa and the Eastern Partnership countries and has a military base in Djibouti, among others.

China’s defence policy may pose a challenge to NATO, with the alliance discussing to what degree since at least the start of this year. The concerns relate to cybersecurity and Chinese investment in European and U.S. high-tech and critical infrastructure. China may try to weaken NATO, for example, by strengthening its relations with Central European countries at the expense of its relations with the U.S. In this context, it is worth mentioning that, according to China, currently one may observe a U.S. “pivot” to Central Europe. What is more, the U.S. may put pressure on NATO members to support its deterrence of China, such as in the South China Sea.