

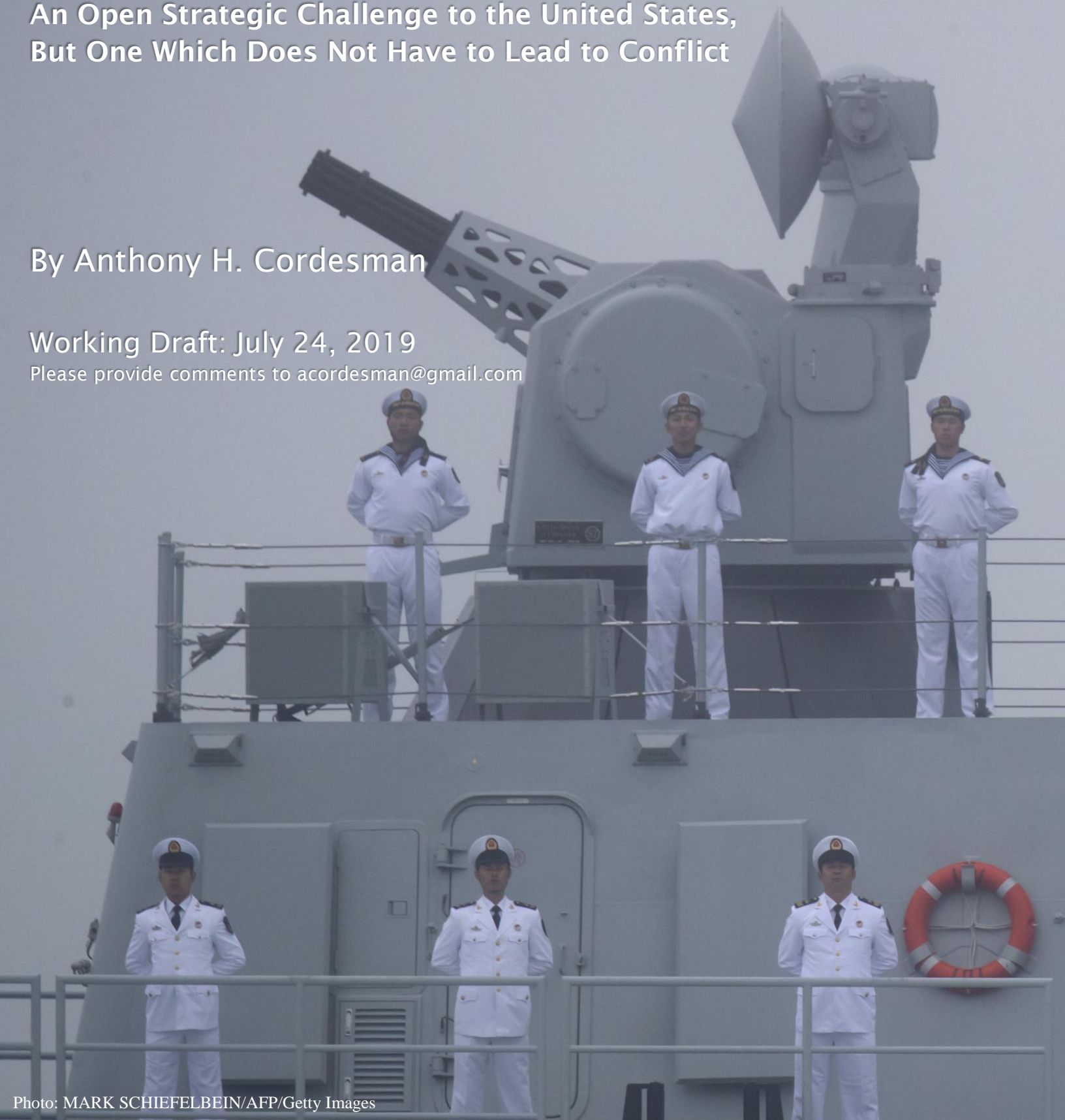
China's New 2019 Defense White Paper:

An Open Strategic Challenge to the United States,
But One Which Does Not Have to Lead to Conflict

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China's New 2019 Defense White Paper: An Open Strategic Challenge to the United States, But One Which Does Not Have to Lead to Conflict

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For all the furor over Iran and the Gulf, or Britain and Brexit, the most important foreign news of the month is what would normally be a relatively obscure Chinese official document: *China's National Defense in the New Era*. This White Paper was issued on July 22nd in both Chinese and English. Unlike China's previous defense white papers — the most recent of which came out in 2015 and was blandly reassuring to the point of being vacuous — the new White Paper picks up the gauntlet that the U.S. threw down in its 2017 *National Security Strategy* and in 2018 *National Defense Strategy*. Both of these documents effectively made China the key objective in strengthening U.S. military forces and single it out as America's primary strategic competitor.

China's National Defense in the New Era is a clear and detailed 51-page response to the massive shift in U.S. strategy from a focus on counterterrorism and extremism to competition and possible conflict with China and Russia. It flags the fact that America and China are now competing superpowers, and that China's growing military forces are developing to the point where they will be able to challenge the United States. More than that, the detailed contents of the White Paper are a direct response to the official U.S. reports on *Chinese Military Power* issued by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and by the Defense Intelligence Agency.

The new Chinese White Paper touches on every key point in the 2019 versions of these two U.S. reports, and portrays the Chinese actions they describe as threats as just and peaceful. The White Paper summarizes the overall character of United States defense efforts by declaring that,

International strategic competition is on the rise. The US has adjusted its national security and defense strategies, and adopted unilateral policies. It has provoked and intensified competition among major countries, significantly increased its defense expenditure, pushed for additional capacity in nuclear, outer space, cyber and missile defense, and undermined global strategic stability. NATO has continued its enlargement, stepped up military deployment in Central and Eastern Europe, and conducted frequent military exercises.

It describes China as trying to bring Asia together in peaceful cooperation through organization like the Shanghai Cooperation Council, the China-ASEAN Defense Ministers' Informal Meeting, and the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus). In contrast, the Chinese White Paper states that,

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 Defense (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.

It describes Taiwan, Tibetan, and Turkistan separatists as threats, the dangers of disputes over territory, and again highlights the U.S. by noting that, "Countries from outside the region conduct frequent close-in reconnaissance on China by air and sea, and illegally enter China's territorial waters and the waters and airspace near China's islands and reefs, undermining China's national security."

The Chinese White Paper also describes the modernization and expansion of Chinese military forces as being almost totally defensive: “China’s military security is confronted by risks from technology surprise and growing technological generation gap. Greater efforts have to be invested in military modernization to meet national security demands. The PLA still lags far behind the world’s leading militaries.” It also declares that,

Though a country may become strong, bellicosity will lead to its ruin. The Chinese nation has always loved peace. Since the beginning of modern times, the Chinese people have suffered from aggressions and wars, and have learned the value of peace and the pressing need for development. Therefore, China will never inflict such sufferings on any other country. Since its founding 70 years ago, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has never started any war or conflict. Since the introduction of reform and opening-up, China has been committed to promoting world peace, and has voluntarily downsized the PLA by over 4 million troops. China has grown from a poor and weak country to be the world’s second largest economy neither by receiving handouts from others nor by engaging in military expansion or colonial plunder. Instead, it has developed through its people’s hard work and its efforts to maintain peace. China has made every effort to create favorable conditions for its development through maintaining world peace, and has equally endeavored to promote world peace through its own development. China sincerely hopes that all countries will choose the path of peaceful development and jointly prevent conflicts and wars.

The White Paper ignores the comparative rises in U.S. and Chinese military expenditures, and directly implies that U.S. spending makes the U.S. the more aggressive power. It does not address the actual rates of spending by each country, or the fact that the fact that China only reports a limited part of its true military expenditures. It instead claims that the U.S. is spending 2.7 times more of its economy (3.5% of GDP vs. 1.3%) on military forces, and nearly twice the percentage of its total government expenditures (9.8% vs. 5.3%).

At the same time, the defense White Paper goes on to address virtually every major aspect of Chinese military activity and development as peaceful. For example, it deals with the South China Sea issue by stating that,

China’s armed forces defend important waters, islands and reefs in the East China Sea, the South China Sea and the Yellow Sea, acquire full situation awareness of adjacent waters, conduct joint rights protection and law enforcement operations, properly handle maritime and air situations, and resolutely respond to security threats, infringements and provocations on the sea. Since 2012, China’s armed forces have deployed vessels on over 4,600 maritime security patrols and 72,000 rights protection and law enforcement operations, and safeguarded maritime peace, stability and order...China’s armed forces conduct air defense, reconnaissance and early warning, monitor China’s territorial air and peripheral air space, carry out alert patrols and combat takeoff, and effectively respond to emergencies and threats to maintain order and security in the air...Aiming at safeguarding national unity, China’s armed forces strengthen military preparedness with emphasis on the sea. By sailing ships and flying aircraft around Taiwan, the armed forces send a stern warning to the “Taiwan independence” separatist forces.

Unlike past Chinese White Papers, which focused blandly on China’s broad peaceful intentions and simplistic views of ‘win win’ cooperation, this one goes on to at least touch upon virtually every aspect of China’s actual military development that is highlighted in the U.S. reports on *Chinese Military Power*. It also does so in ways that explain that all forms of modernization are directly tied to China’s top leadership and, “comprehensively implement Xi Jinping’s thinking on strengthening the military.” The White Paper’s long section on “Reform in China’s National Defense and Armed Forces” may go far beyond the one-page attention span of some U.S. decision makers, but it should be compulsory reading for anyone who is seriously interested in China’s evolving capabilities and any real-world aspect of U.S. defense policy.

The White Paper also highlights a new Chinese emphasis on “combat readiness and military training in real combat conditions” and China’s new warfighting capabilities in the Western Pacific and South China Sea,

Military training in real combat conditions across the armed forces is in full swing. Since 2012, China’s armed forces have carried out extensive mission-oriented training tailored to the specific needs of different strategic directions and exercises of all services and arms, including 80 joint exercises at and above brigade/division level.... The Theater Commands have strengthened their leading role in joint training and organized serial joint exercises codenamed *the East, the South, the West, the North* and *the Central*, to improve joint combat capabilities. The PLA Army (PLAA) has organized training competitions and conducted live exercises codenamed *Stride* and *Firepower*. The PLA Navy (PLAN) has extended training to the far seas and deployed the aircraft carrier task group for its first far seas combat exercise in the West Pacific. It has organized naval parades in the South China Sea ... and conducted a series of live force-on-force exercises ... The PLA Air Force (PLAAF) has ... has conducted combat patrols in the South China Sea and security patrols in the East China Sea, and operated in the West Pacific... The PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) has organized force-on-force evaluation-oriented training and training based on operational plans at brigade and regiment levels, strengthened training for joint strikes, and completed regular exercises such as *Heavenly Sword*.

It also looks well beyond China’s military role in the Pacific. The White Paper notes that,

The PLA actively promotes international security and military cooperation and refines relevant mechanisms for protecting China’s overseas interests. To address deficiencies in overseas operations and support, it builds far seas forces, develops overseas logistical facilities, and enhances capabilities in accomplishing diversified military tasks. The PLA conducts vessel protection operations, maintains the security of strategic SLOCs, and carries out overseas evacuation and maritime rights protection operations... In August 2017, the PLA Djibouti Support Base entered service. The base has provided equipment for the maintenance of four escort task groups, offered medical services for over 100 officers and sailors on board, conducted joint medical exercises with foreign militaries, and donated over 600 teaching aids to local schools... When the security situation in Yemen deteriorated in March 2015, a PLAN escort task group sailed to the Gulf of Aden, berthed for the first time directly in an engagement area.

The White Paper only indirectly addresses the U.S. reports of developments in China’s strategic and dual capable theater missile, air, and naval forces – although it does at least mention the DF-26 intermediate and long-range ballistic missiles. It does, however, indirectly criticize both the lack of U.S. support for nuclear arms control and the U.S. nuclear modernization program, and states that,

China is always committed to a nuclear policy of no first use of nuclear weapons at any time and under any circumstances, and not using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states or nuclear-weapon-free zones unconditionally. China advocates the ultimate complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons. China does not engage in any nuclear arms race with any other country and keeps its nuclear capabilities at the minimum level required for national security. China pursues a nuclear strategy of self-defense, the goal of which is to maintain national strategic security by deterring other countries from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against China.

U.S. and other outside national security and foreign policy analysts may find the even the title of White Paper’s final section — “Actively Contributing to Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind” – to be a bit overblown. It summarizes the role of China’s emerging military strength by stating that, “China’s armed forces have responded faithfully to the call for a community with a shared future for mankind. They are actively fulfilling the international obligations of the armed forces of a major country, comprehensively promoting international military cooperation for the new era, and striving for a better world of lasting peace and common security.”

At the same time, it is important to note that in some ways, the Chinese White Paper is more moderate in its treatment of the U.S. than U.S. strategy papers have been in discussing military developments in China,

China actively and properly handles its military relationship with the US in accordance with the principles of non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation. It strives to make the military-to-military relationship a stabilizer for the relations between the two countries and hence contribute to the China-US relationship based on coordination, cooperation and stability. In 2014, China's Ministry of National Defense (MND) and the US Department of Defense signed the *Memorandum of Understanding on Notification of Major Military Activities and Confidence-Building Measures Mechanism* and the *Memorandum of Understanding Regarding the Rules of Behavior for Safety of Air and Maritime Encounters*. In 2015, the two countries agreed on the annexes on the military crisis notification mechanism and the rules of behavior for safety in air-to-air encounters. In 2017, the two countries established a diplomatic and security dialogue and joint staff dialogue mechanism with a view to actively strengthening strategic communication and managing risks and differences. The two militaries carry out institutionalized exchanges between the defense authorities, armies, navies and air forces, as well as practical cooperation in HADR, counter-piracy, and exchanges between academic institutions. China resolutely opposes the wrong practices and provocative activities of the US side regarding arms sales to Taiwan, sanctions on the CMC Equipment Development Department and its leadership, illegal entry into China's territorial waters and maritime and air spaces near relevant islands and reefs, and wide-range and frequent close-in reconnaissance. However, in China-US relations, the military-to-military relationship remains the generally stable one.

One does not have to read between the lines of the White Paper to see that *China's National Defense in a New Era* clearly does identify China as a major strategic competitor to the United States. The text is very careful, however, to limit the level of this competition, and its wording makes it clear that China understands the risks involved.

While no major policy document issued by any country has ever been able to fully separate rhetoric from reality, the Chinese White Paper does spend the last five pages of its text describing Chinese efforts to improve regional cooperation, and some are clearly real. The White Paper does not even hint at the level of ideological competition that drove the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the West. And, as important as many security issues are between the U.S. and China, no issue other than Taiwan is discussed in ways that approach the point of being so critical in terms of Chinese strategic interests that it indicates a willingness to escalate to any form of serious conflict.

Seen from this perspective, the Chinese White Paper — like the two recent U.S. national strategy documents cited at the start of this commentary — is a clear warning of growing strategic rivalry between an existing and emerging super power that already is stronger than Russia in virtually every respect other than its number of nuclear weapons. It is a warning that will shape the future of both the China and the U.S. for decades to come.

The White Paper is not, however, an indication that some mix of U.S. and Chinese cooperation and competition has to evolve into major conflict. As such, the U.S. should respond by strengthening its level of deterrence and its strategic partnerships in Asia, but it should also find every possible opportunity for cooperation with China and to limit the military and civil competition between the two countries to peaceful forms where the end result can benefit both powers to at least some extent. If nothing else, *China's National Defense in a New Era* is a clear warning that a failure to do so will increase the level of risk to both powers indefinitely into the future.

Further Reading:

The full official English translation of the 2019 Chinese Defense White Paper, *China's National Defense in a New Era*, can be found at

<http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/whitepaperonnationaldefenseinnewera.doc>.

The President's new National Strategy of the United States, December 18, 2017, can be found at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf>.

The unclassified Summary of the *National Defense Strategy of the United States, Sharpening America's Competitive Edge*, February 2018, can be found at...

<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

The 2019 edition of the Office of the Secretary of Defense report on Chinese Military Power, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019*, May 2, 2019, can be found at https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf.

The 2019 edition of the Defense Intelligence Agency report on Chinese Military Power, *Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*, May 2, 2019, can be found at www.dia.mil/Military-Power-Publications.

A detailed Burke Chair analysis of the trends in Chinese military forces entitled *Chinese Strategy, Military Forces, and Economics: The Metrics of Cooperation, Competition and/or Conflict*, September 18, 2019. It can be found at https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180919_China_Strategy_Metrics_Report.pdf. Another study, *China and the New Strategic Nuclear Arms Race*, November 18, 2019, is available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-and-new-strategic-nuclear-arms-race>.