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## A peek into China's military mind

By Owen Fletcher  
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BEIJING - China's national defense white paper released last week hinted at Beijing's growing confidence on the world stage while showing firm commitment to further military modernization and to suppressing "splittism" in Taiwan, even at a time of warming ties.

The paper, released on the day of United States President Barack Obama's inauguration, called China's defense strategy "purely defensive", and indeed struck a cooperative tone overall - but it also emphasized China's view that the world is becoming "multipolar", implying a relative decline in American power.

"A profound readjustment is brewing in the international [system](#)," the paper says. "[Major powers] continue to compete with and hold each other in check, and groups of new emerging developing powers are arising."

China's defense white papers have "explained China's military and national defense to the world and displayed China's increasingly open and confident image", Defense Ministry spokesman Hu Changming said at a press conference on the paper's release.

The latest paper, like China's other five since 1995, took small steps toward improving military transparency. The paper described the organization of China's army, navy, air force, paramilitary troops and central nuclear missile unit.

But it left many questions unanswered about the buildup of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and repeated old figures for defense spending that foreign analysts have said could be under-reported by as much as three times. China has not yet announced a defense budget for this year, but in 2008 it said spending would rise by 17.6% that year to about US\$60 billion.

The United States and Japan have pressured China for years to reveal more about the development of its military capabilities, its foreign arms sales and the goals of its military transformation. The new paper tried to deflect further pressure by noting that US military spending dwarfs China's. The US remains by far the world's biggest defense spender, with a budget of \$515 billion for fiscal year 2009, plus tens of billions of dollars in emergency spending for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The white paper used the unyielding language of past papers to condemn moves toward independence in self-governed Taiwan, though it also said "the situation across the Taiwan Strait has taken a significantly positive turn".

China-Taiwan ties have drastically improved since the Kuomintang party's Ma Ying-jeou, an advocate

for economic ties with the mainland, became the island's president last May. China and Taiwan have opened direct air and shipping lines and Taiwan last week gained a communication link with the World Health Organization after years of China blocking its entry.

But the paper still labeled independence movements in Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang as primary threats to national [security](#). "These problems all touch on our nationalities' fundamental interests and core national interests. On this question there can be no compromise and no concessions," Hu, the spokesman, said. Hu evaded the question when asked whether China would remove some of its more than 1,000 missiles pointed at Taiwan.

Beijing has claimed Taiwan as its sovereign territory since the Chinese Communist Party won a civil war in 1949 and the Kuomintang fled to the island. It has repeated promises to achieve reunification, by force if needed.

Indeed, the paper suggests that Taiwan remains the core focus of China's military buildup, at least in the short term. China's "military strategic guideline", it says, "aims at winning local wars in conditions of informationization".

"Local wars," a term Chinese officials use often, likely refers to a potential conflict over Taiwan, though it could also apply to territorial disputes with Japan or over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

"Informationization" is the buzzword for the PLA's modernization. It refers to technical issues such as developing precision-strike missile systems as well as logistical issues such as training officers to direct battle using new [communications systems](#). "Main battle weapon systems are being gradually informationized," the paper says.

The paper emphasizes the PLA's "leapfrog development" of technology, meaning direct upgrades from outdated to state-of-the-art technologies without the intermediate stages.

China has certainly improved what are known as its "C4ISR" capabilities - command, control, communications, computer, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance - through integrative technology. The paper says an "integrated military information [network](#) came into operation in 2006", and that the PLA was building "digital campuses" at its military academies. Advances in China's telecom industry have also contributed to upgrades in PLA communications systems.

Communication between units and command centers is also benefiting from China's Beidou global navigation [satellite system](#), which state media recently quoted an industry source as saying could achieve full global coverage by 2015.

Fan Jianjun of the PLA's General Planning Bureau dismissed this report as a rumor during the white paper briefing, but if true then it would mean enhanced force projection soon for the PLA. Beidou satellites could guide cruise missiles launched, for example, at Taiwan from Chinese ships. Although inferior to America's well-established Global Positioning System technology, the system would also grant China control over its own navigation network, crucial in the event of war.

China expects to "lay a solid foundation" for informationization of the military by 2010, to "make major progress" by 2020, and to "by and large reach the goal" of informationization by mid-century, the paper said.

The white paper also reported growing force projection capability in the air. The PLA Air Force, it says, "now has relatively strong capabilities to conduct air defensive and offensive operations, and certain capabilities to execute long-range precision strikes and strategic projection operations".

That's a step up from China's 2006 defense white paper, which said only that the air force "aims at speeding up its transition" to offensive capabilities and "increasing its capabilities" for air strikes and strategic projection. That, in turn, was a move up from the 2004 defense white paper which never mentioned the word "projection".

The paper's end implication is that the PLA, while still underfunded and only at the beginning of a

transformation, is increasingly confident in its growth and in its war-fighting capability. The paper comes after hints last month by Defense Ministry spokesman Huang Xueping that China may plan to build an aircraft carrier.

But the paper suggested no broad changes to China's main national objectives, including a paramount emphasis on protecting sovereignty. Like past papers, it indirectly criticized American "hegemonism and power politics" and laid responsibility for improving China-US relations at Washington's feet.

China suspended military exchanges with the US last October over American arms sales to Taiwan worth \$6.5 billion.

Spokesman Hu called at the briefing for Washington "to adopt practical policies to terminate the obstacles to developing ties between the two [Chinese and US] militaries".

Under Obama, Hu said, "We hope China and America can work together to create beneficial conditions and push forward unswerving improvement and development in military relations."