

# Threat Perceptions and Security Concepts in China – The Development of China's Strategy White Papers

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Security in China combines strong beliefs with big uncertainty. Whereas in the People's Republic of the 20th century threats were predominantly perceived as stemming from military forces outside of china borders, over the last 30 years we a threat perception shifting over to national vulnerability. Its peaks show up in economic, socio-political and meanwhile economic dimension. Security as absence of threat has changed from a property of national territory to a relationship between multiple players outside of the state.

China prepares for conflict on its way to peace. In this essay's first part we analyse the historical development of nowadays witnessed threat perceptions. The second part beholds threat scenarios as narrated in these days – and how China plans to safeguard its citizens' security.

## 1. How China thinks Security

### 1.1 Historical Development

Although China's speed of development in these days remains unequalled, its thousands years of history cannot be neglected and still influence society and decision makers to a remarkable degree. A culture sets assumptions about the order of the universe and defines causalities, who is admitted on the (political) stage, which kinds of events, activities and institutions are relevant, who is trustful and who poses a threat. Culture affects security and security strategies on two levels:

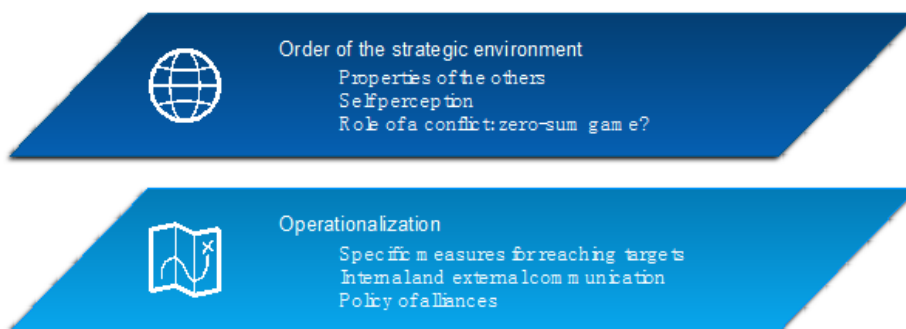


Figure 1: Effects of China's security culture

*Over the last few years threat responses in China shifted from territorial integrity concerns to vulnerability reduction and risk containment. On the other side, Chinese Armed Forces are preparing for an uncertain war. This paper analyses threat perceptions and narratives in China in order to better understand the country's security policies and responses. Historical strategy culture forms up to a specific tradition of threat perception and therefore needs to be respected for a better understanding of actual operations. From 1998 on China publishes its Strategy White Papers that serve both as internally aligning guidelines and externally appeasing agenda-setters. This paper analyses frequency and intensity of threat perceptions and countermeasures across nine White Papers.*

China's cultural background in security consists of the so-called Seven Military Classics, which origin from the 5th century BC to the 10th century AD. They were written under highly different social, intellectual, political and strategic circumstances. Not only military decision-makers, but also political institutions and its members, who availed of strategic responsibilities, were influenced. Numerous evidence shows how political elites vividly shared and discussed the content of the Classics.

The Classics show – to different degrees – an evident tendency towards the policy *si vis pacem, para bellum* (“if you want peace, prepare war”). When seeking long-term peace – so this paradigm – a state should be ready to take military actions. These are historically grown recommendations for political and security-related behaviour and focusing on real politics. China's strategic behaviour balances two culturally dominating poles: Confucian pacifism and the *para bellum*-paradigm. The content of the Seven Classics shows a stark contrast between Confucian principles of a harmonious together and the tendencies of Chinese military science. In six of the seven books we discern a dichotomy between the “declared” strategic doctrine along communicated Confucian state polity and the operational politics along offensive strategies, that understand security as zero-sum game. How does China solve this contradiction?

China's ancient and proven strategy mechanism can be summed up to *Quanjian*. This principle puts strategic flexibility on first place. Its meaning „adjust to change“ translates into playing a military dominant role in times of power supremacy and forging pacts and alliances, trade, subversion and marriage in times of inferiority. This flexibility steers Chinese strategies and operations till today and makes them hard to discern for a linear-analytical viewpoint. Basically every Chinese strategy therefore depends on the balance of power. At the same time it is the main ingredient to each strategy to foster opportunities in many ways – also non-conventional ones – for coining and exploiting own advantages and manoeuvring opponents into adverse situations. The reality of Chinese security politics draws its parallels to this intellectual background: especially in times of relative power its emperors decided for an offensive strategy. In history, confucianism did not fully make its way into foreign (security) politics in real life.

The stronger China was, the more forceful it reacted in crises and for “active defence”. How often military conflicts with an involvement of China took place, can be seen in Fig. 2. It is important to remark, that in this graphic we do not see all those situations, where China defused conflicts and avoided military clashes. That means, from the number of conflicts alone we cannot conclude to a general behaviour of China. The

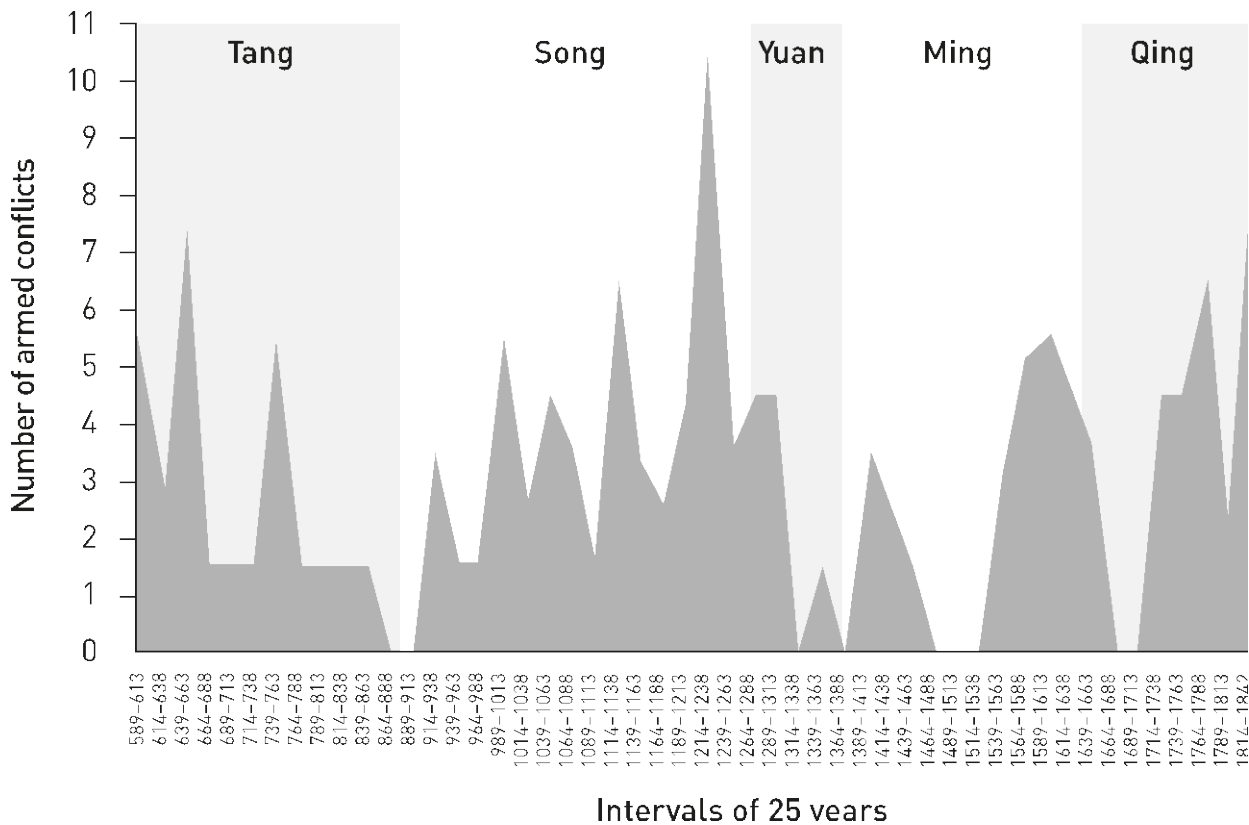


Figure 2: Armed conflicts in Chinese history

Chinese War Chronicles, published by the Press of the PLA, the number of 921 military conflicts can be found, of which 181 were started by foreign forces.

With this glance at China's old history and its state-philosophical fundament we can conclude, its elites cultivate a "cult of defence". Military deployments are performed under the title of a "just war" which results in a mechanism of choosing military solutions in case of conflicts and at the same time being convinced of being a peace-loving nation. Additionally China (rightfully) developed the self-perception of being a victim of foreign forces – starting with nomadic invasion, but especially with the onset of the colonial age and the decline of the Qing dynasty in 19th century. As a conclusion, compensatory measures would be just by this time.

Also historically China was afraid of internal tensions. In order to keep its legitimation of leading the nation well respected, China favoured the aforementioned Confucian pacifistic culture in its communications. This narrative till today dominates China's communiqués on internal and external security.

### 1.2 China becoming a global player

PR China was born in war in 1949, survived its adolescence in the Korean War, rehearsed war with the Soviet Union, led wars in Vietnam and India and prepared for a clash with Taiwan. War as lingering threat, but also as preventive measure, coined China's industrial planning, its diplomatic relations and by that also its internal communication to its citizens. When China adds a "with Chinese characteristics" to its actions, ideologies or philosophies, it often immerses into an intricate history of armed conflicts.

Mao Zedong regarded the international struggle for dominance by armed conflicts as unavoidable. His policies concentrated on ramping up military power and war-resistant industries from the 1960s on. So he ordered the Central Military Commission, the highest military institution, to prepare planning a "fast war, total mobilization and nuclear war". Industries were relocated to the core of the country, in many cities tunnel systems were built, emergency plans for nuclear strikes were developed and mass mobilizations were exercised. Starting with the border conflicts with Soviet Union in 1969 the PLA set its focus in building up resources and training in tank- and aircraft-defence for warding off first waves of soviet attack.

Deng Xiaoping saw armed conflicts with China's opponents rather in the far future. The collapse of the Soviet Union and unrest in 1989 added a new facet to threat perception: China's internal vulnerability which is tightly connected to the satisfaction of 1.4 billion citizens. This results in a striking dichotomy between *para bellum*-polity for safeguarding the heartland's security and the internal (economical) politics, which must stabilize society. This combination is China's leading thought when interacting with foreign countries – and is becoming more and more pointed.

## ***2. Actual perception of dangers, risks and threats***

### **2.1 How China communicates Security**

Whereas till Mao's demise main threats were located outside of Chinese borders, China's leaders assigned highest priority to internal stability from the late 1980s on. Internal unrest resulting from social imbalances became more prominent and could disrupt economic upturn – which would cause further dissatisfaction and could finally subvert leadership and lead to civil war.

In order to grant security in the country, China understands, it must take care of its external relations, as they both influence the internal perception of the national position and also are of highest importance for protecting China's own interests. Therefore Beijing understands, an increasingly clear position within the international community is of high importance.

From 1998 on China publishes its so-called “Strategy White Papers” biannually and under changing titles. In these official documents both internal stakeholders and international players are informed, how China perceives security, its threats, and plans to safeguard it. Besides leveraging internal legitimation – already Confucius stated, an emperor who does not take care about its people’s well-being, shouldn’t be such one – these documents can facilitate international cooperation and conflict management – and increasingly strategic deterrence.

China’s Strategy White Papers not only represent the position of the PLA, but are fully steered by Central Communist Party (CCP) and government. Therefore they not only cover military topics, but also political, economic and diplomatic issues. In several fields, these white papers are amended by additional documents, such as in “The Science of Military Strategy”, the PLA Daily, official documents published by the Ministry of Defence, speeches and magazines. Other topics are solely covered in the White Papers in a broad sense.

An Analysis of threat perceptions in the best case can induce future developments and eventually can conclude to recommendations. Therefore a sound understanding of dynamics of perceptions and consecutive strategic answers is important. For China we can approach such an understanding by examining the development of its White Papers.

Therefore we have to evaluate the validity of China’s White Papers. Seeing these publications as “deception” by incorrect elements of any kind would lead nowhere: the documents are formulated in a broad sense and specific numbers are not given for critical points. However, still a strategic heavyweight on intended areas is possible. Anyhow, China would encounter severe problems, in case it did not align its strategy execution along these papers. Distrust into China’s official communications would hamper future international collaboration. In the country itself these documents justify and explain the reasons of eventually even powerful measures and actions. To renounce this medium of legitimation would put government and party under severe stress in explaining its behaviour.

When China is writing about its perception of dangers, risks, threats and its planned countermeasures in its White Papers, we want to examine them over time. The importance of certain aspects can show up in quantitative and qualitative ways. In order to track quantities, we will examine how often certain notions appear in the texts (in the original Chinese version). We will analyse the quality of a notion by assigning a number from zero to ten that reflects, how much importance the selected White Paper assigns to this word. Additionally we mark years, when a notion gets positioned in a new or remarkably prominent way.

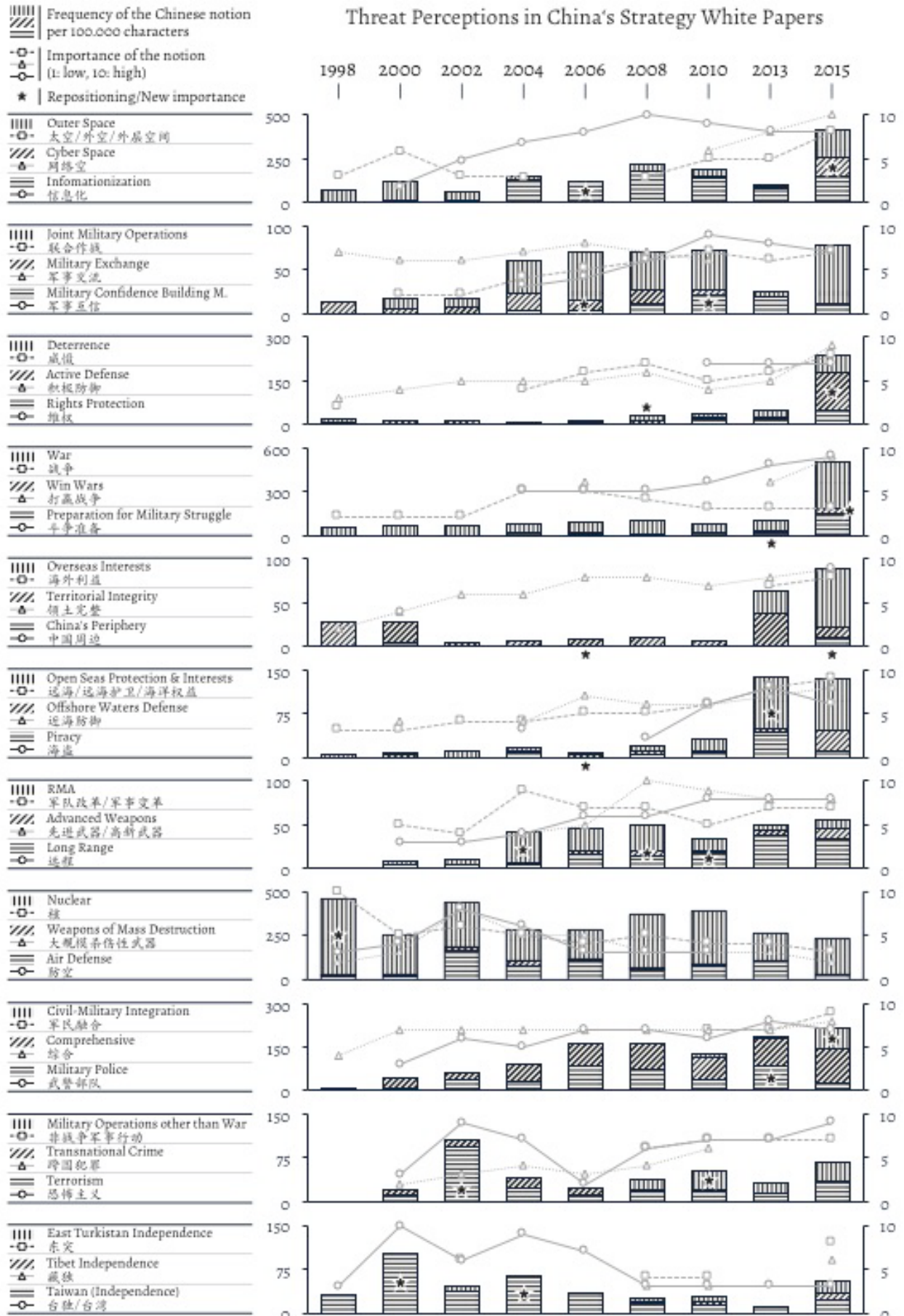


Figure 3: Threat perceptions in China's Strategy White Papers

## 2.2 What threatens China?

### International Powers and Security of the Periphery

China's often diffuse positions in the interaction of international powers on one hand stem from Deng Xiaoping's strategy of representing a "low profile" and on the other hand from the still ongoing integration China's into multilateral cooperations. Beijing's still low experience in exerting "soft power" as well as newly targeted spaces of power projection let China progress at a careful pace – but as we will see later, with a more decisive profile meanwhile. At the moment, China cannot afford becoming an uttered enemy to any economy due to its comprehensive economic ties. Simultaneously the country wants to roll out its interests more and more internationally. Since 2015 the US are declared as an opposing power in the West Pacific. For Russia a new model of collaboration has to be invented. Being the enemy's enemy does not suffice any longer for a positive forecast along the axis Beijing–Moscow. China's engagement in Central Asia via the "One Belt, One Road"-initiative regional power distributions get shifted and nobody expects Russia to play a passive role there. A common rehabilitation with Japan is still standing out and makes the country still to a hostile force. But how exactly do dangers, risks and threats look like for China – and how does it plan to react?

From the 1990s on China remarks in its Strategy White Papers, that major wars are out of expectation. Hegemonial tendencies still pose a threat, but they still were balanced by multipolar cooperation. This viewpoint gets reviewed in 2015: this is the first year when China accuses the US of building up its military presence in the Asian Pacific region and driving a strategy of rebalancing. Herein we can see, how China advances from its cautious culture to a clearer opposing stance. This shift from a "Harmonious World", so the state narrative till 2014 to the "Chinese Dream" testifies a growing self confidence of China.

From 2008 on China sets its agenda on strategic deterrence and from 2015 on (in clear accordance to Mao's thoughts and the Seven Military Classics) it pronounces the adjective "active" in its defence. Defence relates to proceeding in a diplomatic way that saves resources, and uses stratagems in an astute way to avoid conflicts and creates global harmony (respecting its own targets). Active will be the actions of China as soon as non-military measures seem not to reach their targets. In upcoming conflicts we can – also according to its military history – expect China to act more actively, as far as its capacities allow to. The strategic fundament is crafted so far, that also preventive strikes in countries of potentially hostile forces are regarded as meaningful and justified. From 2006 on China formulates its targets as follows:

*"The country must possess powerful defensive capabilities and counterattack capabilities that should be able to deter enemy, play an important role in maintaining global equilibrium, and ensure the implementation of our independent and peaceful foreign policy."*

Whereas in the 1990s China assessed conflicts with India or Vietnam as the most probable ones, the following years the Taiwan conflict overthrew this perception totally. The target setting of these years sounded: control the emergence of war diplomatically, win the war if necessary and resort to a favourable peace as fast as possible. From 1993 on, China concluded from findings from the Gulf War that less massive troop deployments but rather local operations and precise weaponry would be the preferred military measure of the future. For the PLA this meant upgrading its Navy (including amphibious troops), Air Force and the so called Second Artillery, the rocket troops. The increased importance of the topic Taiwan in the years 2002 and 2004 moved the perceived future theatres of conflicts from neighbouring countries to the maritime area. An armed conflict with Taiwan from a certain level of intensity on would have involved the US, what explains China's armament in this direction. China's anti-aircraft powers in this context were pronounced stronger in 2002, what hasn't been surpassed till now. A defensive position in potential air attacks would have to be avoided at any cost, as it would have resulted in a critical disadvantage, what led to an intensified armament of the PLA Air Force (PLAAF).

Since 2014 China works on increasing combat readiness of its armed forces ("preparation for military struggle"). This readiness should be amplified from 2015 on: now the PLA should not be solely ready – but especially capable of winning wars explicitly. In the year 2006 China still pronounced the capability of controlling conflicts – but this feature has been moved to the background by offensive competencies.

*"Winning war is the prerequisite for checking war, but checking war is something more difficult and more complicated and requires a higher level of stratagem employment and greater strategic patience. To check war, we must react actively check and cope with crises."*

At the same time China does not intend to pull the international community into a weapons race. For this reason, but also for gaining hands-on military expertise from international military mission contributions, we witness a continuous increase of China's involvement in joint military operations (UN). From 2010 China adds the aspect of confidence building measures (CBMs), what sums up to troop visits, exercises and treaties. China mentions high-ranking mutual visits, but also operational troops exchange with Russia and the EU as well as dialogues



with the US. Latter will become increasingly important for creating acceptance of China's international engagements.

We found an extremely remarkable emphasis of "overseas interests" for the first time in the year 2015. China's international investments rise exponentially and bring opportunities for converting cash and overcapacities to power and benefit. Especially South-East and Central Asia, East Europe, Africa and nowadays Central America are investment targets, that should be protected against political and economic disruptions:

*"With the growth of China's national interests, its national security is more vulnerable to international and regional turmoil, terrorism, piracy, serious natural disasters and epidemics, and the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), as well as institutions, personnel and assets abroad, has become an imminent issue."*

### **Open Seas Protection**

Beijing's fleet is tightly connected to an answer on potential threats from foreign forces – its incapability to ward off colonial powers, especially England, in the 19th century was the onset of a century of humiliation, which ending Beijing intends to show very clearly. Especially in 2000, as Taiwan's quest for independence got critical, China ramped up its fleet investments with a strong increase of the military budget. After successfully deescalating the Taiwan topic, China increases its range of influence: „shift its focus from „offshore waters defence“ to the combination of „offshore waters defence“ with „open seas protection““. The maritime space is regarded as risk area from 2010 on, if hostile forces would get hold of it. China would be menaced first by military posts and bases close to its own shoreline and consecutively control over trade routes (such as the new maritime silk road) and access denial to natural resources. 2013 China states „Japan is making trouble over the issue of the Diaoyu Island“ and proceeds with constructing reefs to islands and military posts – and therefore regular state territory in the South Chinese Sea. This puts China in an open discourse with the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia. China's growing fleet will play a decisive role in the next frictions in this region.

As strategic outpost for increasing its range, Beijing already constructed a 3,000 m long airstrip on Fiery Cross Reef of the Spratly Islands, which will enable any airplane to land and take off. After buying its first aircraft carrier Liaoning from Russia, it is in the midst of building an own second one with increased capacity. It will be secured even over high distances by frigates and submarines, which also are a development focus. Another

element of increased reach is coming from the Second Artillery Force, which from 1st January 2016 on will be restructured to the “Rocket Force” (PLARF). This force already avails of a rocket arsenal that affects more than 12,000 km.

One more maritime risk and from 2008 on explicitly stated as security threat is piracy. China actively secures with several vessels the trading routes east of the Horn of Africa.

Also in the maritime realm China now realizes what it missed compared to a colonializing Europe: securing its overseas interests via a navy with relevant range and power.

### **Technology**

2004 the “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA) gets fully acknowledged to force China to an adaption of the PLA in the areas of technology and readiness. 2006 the content of RMA focuses on “Informationization”, which should be achieved by all branches of the PLA as fast as possible. Chinas outspoken target is to „win local wars under informationization“ from 2015 on. For this purpose Beijing on the 1st January 2016 installed the Strategic Support Force (SSF) on the highest level of the Chinese Armed Forces. Its area of responsibility will be cyberspace and outer space. Exactly those two topics became a salient point in China’s Security Strategy, as the country discovered how foreign powers invested in these capabilities whereas China thinks to still lag behind.

### **Nuclear Weapons**

China in 1964 affirmed its non-first use (NFU) policy of nuclear weapons. Nuclear threat scenarios from the 1990s on got de-prioritized with a certain relief of the planning troops, because Russia assured its NFU bilaterally with China in 1994. Realistic answers to nuclear threats overwhelmed (not only) China’s strategists. Nonetheless the geopolitical framework for futures scenarios was understood as “information war under nuclear deterrence”. Under this title China reacts on the US-American shift from deterrence to pre-emptive strikes with military means, which was the US answer to the events from 11th of September. For such a extensive scenario China also reckons with a deployment of tactical nuclear weapons of comparably low yield. In times of high tensions in the Taiwan conflict, China assessed possibilities of a nuclear first strike. It was reasoned, that a potential first strike of China would reduce US-American interests of intervening in this conflict and from that on reduce the probability of a further nuclear strike. We hold it as very remarkable, that the US-American policy of the “New Triad” already became obsolete in this context. The combination of conventional weapons with nuclear

scenarios for China was less deterring than motivating to revert to a well-proven strategy: in ancient times, when China was under military pressure from barbarians, the state chose preventive strikes as solution – as far as its capacities allowed so. Para Bellum was when dealing with barbarians as well as when assessing nuclear scenarios a solution of choice. After 2004 the nuclear scenarios lost significance in China's Strategy White Papers. Only in 2013 NFU is not referred to explicitly, but its meaning can be found in the description of the PLASAF's strategy.

### **Hybrid threats and MOOTW**

Beijing started in 2010 to communicate, how non-traditional threats are increasing. For China this means hybrid threat scenarios such as cyber warfare and sabotage, economic downturns and social unrest. In the beginning of 2016 Beijing for instance had to peg the Renminbi very actively for countering a devaluation, which was classified as attack on the national economy.

Besides hybrid scenarios China also acknowledges how the increasing complexity caused by the interlinkage of national with international and traditional with non-traditional risks is posing new dangers. China accounts here terrorism, climate change, nuclear proliferation, information insecurity, natural disasters, health threats and transnational crime. A heavyweight was put on terrorism countermeasures in 2002, that led to an increase of (military) police forces and non-military national security organs.

These new threats get a response since 2010 by a focus on “Military operations other than war”, but from 2015 on also by an ameliorated civil-military collaboration and a more comprehensive notion of security. For China this results in a deep-going military reform, as the PLA might be involved in simple daily civil activities, but a potent collaboration between military and administration on a top-level would be a novelty.

### **3. Conclusion**

China's threat perceptions showed a strong change in 2015. The country emphasized its international interests significantly higher than before and counters hybrid scenarios – still in an organizationally fragmented, but increasingly integrated way. Xi Jinping's Military Reform will be the decisive step to achieve effective responses. Five “battle zones” will integrate ground forces, navy and air force as well as the strategic support force and the party will lead the military commission more directly. Doing so will develop a modern military force that can act swiftly and efficiently. With this evolution China will be capable of responding forcefully with oncoming threats – but also it will create new critical situations. Beijing's

gain in power will not only reduce threats, but by self-consciously projecting its power, China will also reap some whirlwind.

Foreign forces can only be advised to step together with China into comprehensive and constructive cooperation. A violation of these should have not only diplomatic consequences, but also – far more important – well pondered economic shifts. If the international community manages an open-minded attitude of strategic reassurance and resolve, the rise of China can become a multilateral development to new stability and acceptance.