



How Transparent is the PLA?

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Chinese officials often cite increased transparency as a reason others should not be alarmed by its military modernization. Does this claim hold up?

In recent years, China has accelerated its military modernization, with double-digit increases in official military budgets funding the development and acquisition of a range of new weapons systems. The United States and other Asia-Pacific countries have called for greater transparency about Chinese military capabilities, activities, and intentions. China initially resisted these calls, but eventually responded by releasing its first defense white paper in 1998, with follow-ups every two years.

Although welcomed by both Western and Asian officials, China's defense white papers have not fully addressed concerns. Chinese officials argue that transparency about intentions is more important than transparency about capabilities and assert that China is completely transparent about its peaceful intentions. They also argue that China's transparency has increased over time and that weaker countries should not be expected to meet US standards of transparency. Disputes about Chinese military transparency have become a regular feature of US-China interactions, but the lack of a standardized basis for comparison has inhibited productive dialogue.

Our new study "Assessing Chinese Military Transparency" addresses this issue by developing an objective method to analyze changes in Chinese military transparency over time and to compare China with other regional actors. We used defense white papers as the basis of comparison because they are authoritative and publicly available documents that constitute official statements about a country's defense policies, goals, and capabilities. Most governments in the Asia-Pacific region produce defense white papers of sufficiently similar form and content to allow comparison. (Our study does not include information from other official documents or attempt to verify the validity and reliability of the information presented in defense white papers.)

Using Choi Kang's earlier work on regional defense white papers as a starting point, we developed standardized definitions and a set of criteria to evaluate transparency in 19 categories. We used this method to evaluate China's six defense white papers and thirteen recent defense white papers from other countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Our evaluation reveals a gradual but modest increase in Chinese military transparency over the period from 1998 to 2008. When compared against the most recent defense white papers from eight Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states, China's 2008 paper gets roughly equivalent ratings. Indonesia and the Philippines offered greater overall transparency, but both Chinese and ASEAN white papers generally lack transparency regarding current and future military capabilities and budgets. When compared with the defense white papers of countries such as Australia, Japan, and South Korea, however, China's 2008 version lags significantly behind. Their white papers provide more detailed assessments of the security environment, descriptions of the policies being pursued to address security challenges, and much more detail about current military capabilities, force structure, budgets, and future modernization plans.

Some specific areas where Chinese white paper transparency lags behind other countries in the region or where transparency has not increased over time include:

- **Defense Budget:** China provides basic information, but no specific figures for military service budgets, research and development, or procurement. The quality of information offered in China's white papers has changed little over the last ten years. China could follow the example of other Asia-Pacific countries by releasing more detailed budget information or a separate report on defense expenditure.
- **Nuclear Weapons:** China provides useful information on nuclear doctrine but no information at all about specific delivery systems, modernization programs, or future nuclear force structure. This lack of transparency is of particular concern given that China is modernizing and expanding its nuclear forces at a time when the other declared nuclear weapons states are reducing their arsenals. A clearer sense of approximate future force levels would ease international concerns, even if discussed in terms of conditions that would affect future force levels.
- **Current and Future Weapons Systems:** China's white paper is notable for its lack of specific information on the types and numbers of weapons systems in service, under development, or being considered for acquisition. Some East Asian countries provide detailed information about current inventory and future procurement plans. Lack of

official information fuels speculation and exaggerated projections about future Chinese capabilities.

- **Connecting Security Objectives with Military Capabilities:** China provides a useful discussion of military doctrine but falls short when compared to discussions in some other regional white papers on how current and projected military capabilities will help advance national security objectives. This raises questions about whether China's stated objectives are congruent with its increasing defense spending and expanding military capabilities, potentially undermining the credibility of China's peaceful development rhetoric.

Our study focuses solely on white papers, but China does release some other defense information covering military doctrine, organization, training, and some exercises and operational deployments such as the PLA Navy's counter-piracy deployment to the Gulf of Aden. However, on issues such as defense budgets, force structure, and military modernization, the white paper defines the official Chinese position and contains all the publicly available information. Moreover, some important issues such as China's January 2007 test of a direct ascent anti-satellite (ASAT) weapon and China's ongoing nuclear modernization are not addressed adequately in any official PRC documents.

Although our study emphasizes specific criteria that can be assessed in a comparable and replicable manner, subjective criteria also contribute to assessments of a country's military transparency. In China's case, the consistent emphasis on tight message control on security issues, the reluctance of Chinese officials and experts to answer questions frankly, and the limited availability of information on military capabilities all create doubts about the degree to which China is really being transparent. Some of these factors are artifacts of China's political system, but others could be addressed via policies that provide more information and a greater degree of openness.

Chinese officials frequently argue greater transparency benefits stronger countries at the expense of the weak. But China's growing economic and military power makes major countries such as Australia, India, Japan, and South Korea a much more appropriate basis of comparison than smaller and weaker countries in Southeast Asia. If judged against this standard, China is significantly less transparent than its regional peers, especially in the areas of defense budget, force structure, and future modernization plans. Because China's military capabilities are growing and its defense budget is now the largest in the region, lack of transparency about future capabilities is likely to increase regional concerns and aggravate security dilemma dynamics. It may also reinforce the tendency for others to exaggerate or overstate PRC capabilities due to lack of reliable information.

China's relative lack of transparency also has a negative effect on internal PRC discussions about foreign-policy, defense, and international security issues. Lack of detailed and official defense information inhibits domestic debates and objective analysis from outside military circles. Greater transparency about military budgets and military capabilities would not only help ease foreign concerns, but also support higher quality analysis of defense issues by China's own

analysts and a better informed domestic debate about military issues and spending priorities.

The method developed for our study provides a useful way to explore how countries within the Asia-Pacific region approach military transparency. The findings can help serve as a basis for discussion about transparency in regional security dialogues. Any region or group of countries, including those outside the Asia-Pacific region, could use this study to identify areas where countries could improve transparency by providing more information, and highlight "best practices" that others could emulate. Our hope is that this analysis can be a starting point for a useful discussion about transparency among Asia-Pacific countries and contribute to a more stable and peaceful Asia-Pacific security environment.

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