



Parsing the Translation of China's 2010 Defense White Paper

April 20, 2011

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Executive Summary: The biennial Chinese Defense White Paper (DWP) is written in Chinese then translated into English, and both versions are made available through PRC official media and government agency websites. While the English translation hews to the organization of the original document, the translators are not entirely faithful to the tone, content and vocabulary presented in Chinese. In general, the English text has been massaged to make it more palatable and less threatening to foreign audiences, while the original Chinese document is consistently more strident, stark and assertive. In several cases, there are notable and substantive differences in the information presented. The translators take these liberties in order to tailor their message to varied audiences, but a fine-grained comparison of the documents allows analysts to parse the different messages communicated to domestic and foreign audiences. The following is not intended as a definitive analysis of the white paper, but as an aid for analysts and action officers.

Text: In the English version of the 2010 white paper, stark Chinese judgments of the international security environment, U.S. actions and strategic intentions, and the demands of modern warfare are presented in diluted terms. Unlike the Chinese text, China's rise is not depicted as a *fait accompli*, and self-congratulatory statements about its newfound power, influence and capabilities are muted or even omitted in some cases.

While limits exist on the extent of the conclusions that can be drawn from variation between English and Chinese versions, the messages presented in English are vetted and polished by senior military officers in the PLA's Academy of Military Sciences; any notable differences in the text are likely deliberate and intended to communicate something expressly for foreign consumption.

This comparison of the two versions is useful and instructive because variation between the English and Chinese text reveals the different messages Chinese defense policymakers seek to communicate to different audiences. The following analysis highlights some key distinctions in the messages presented to those different audiences, but generally the Chinese-speaking audience is interested in Chinese prestige and the resources allocated to the Chinese defense apparatus. Foreign readers include military officers and officials who are interested in Chinese transparency and the pace and direction of the PLA's military development.

Below is a representative sample of the differences between the Chinese and English texts, with thematic headings describing what the translators have sought to communicate to foreign audiences:

1. Humbly stating China's place in the global order:

- English: "China has now stood at a new historical point....The international balance is changing....[Asia's] growth as a whole has been sustained" (5).

- Chinese: “中国已经站在新的历史起点上....国际力量对比出现新态势....整体崛起态势进一步巩固” (2); *China is already standing at a new historical starting point....[A] new situation has emerged in the international balance of power....[Asia's] rising status as a whole has been further consolidated/strengthened.*
- *Analysis:* The English text reconfigures the wording and emphasis of declarations about China's augmented status and power in a new global order. The overall effect (consistent with many vocabulary and syntax choices in the preamble) is to dilute the punch of more assertive, confident and possibly objectionable statements in the Chinese text.

2. Masking a pessimistic view of the current global order:

- There is a sentence in Chinese asserting: “天下仍不太平” (2); *there is still no peace under heaven* [in the international system], while no comparable sentence exists in the English. Of course *tianxia* has no direct English analogue, but the idea is a highly significant one in the Chinese text. It reflects a pessimistic assessment of the state of global order – and specifically China's non-paramount role in that order – that is not captured at all in the more sanguine English version. The *tianxia* concept is central to Chinese political thought, and would likely stand out to critical Chinese audiences as one of the most important — and negative — take-aways from the white paper.

3. Downplaying rifts in security architecture in East Asia:

- English: “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is playing a growing role in promoting regional stability and development....The US is reinforcing its

regional military alliances, and increasing its involvement in regional security affairs” (6).

- Chinese: “上海合作组织在促进地区稳定和发展方面影响增强....美国强化亚太军事同盟体系，加大介入地区安全事务力度” (3). *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization exerts strengthened influence on regional stability and development.... America is strengthening its Asia-Pacific military alliance system and enlarging the strength of its intervention/involvement in regional security affairs.*
- *Analysis:* The content is substantively the same, but the choice of vocabulary is telling. The Chinese text puts a much finer point on adverse security dynamics in the region, saying that the SCO has more influence [relative to the United States], but that the United States is actively trying to strengthen its capacity to intervene directly in Asian security affairs. This is a far starker view of American behavior than the English version, and reflects something closer to the mainstream view in Beijing.

4. Muting threatening dynamics in the cyber domain:

- English: “[Some powers have]...enhanced cyber operations capabilities to occupy new strategic commanding heights” (6).
- Chinese: “增强网络作战能力，抢占新的战略制高点” (3); *[Some powers have] strengthened cyber war capabilities in a race to seize strategic commanding heights.*”
- The use of “cyber operations capabilities” in lieu of “cyber war capabilities” in the English text likely marks a deliberate effort to dampen the destabilizing implications of competition in the cyber domain. The verb 抢占, furthermore, has a considerably stronger connotation than the neutral “occupy” in the English text, suggesting

something like “racing to unlawfully seize control.” Again, the Chinese text paints a much starker and more hostile picture of dynamics between China and the international system.

5. Finessing certain worrisome elements of Chinese strategy:

- English: "Attacking only after being attacked" (8)
- Chinese: “战略上后发制人” (4); *Gain mastery in counterattack.*
- *Analysis:* Syntactical issues may have distorted this translation, but the strict *if and only if* conditionality presented in English appears a bit far-fetched. At the very least, that translation overstates the degree of passivity in Chinese strategy. The four characters ending the phrase are a *chengyu* with a basis in traditional Chinese strategic thought. Its meaning is closely related to the English translation, but the Chinese phrase suggests only that counter-attacking after an enemy strike is a viable strategy—without suggesting that this is the only way China operates militarily.
- English: "[China] strengthens the construction of its armed forces and that of its border, territorial sea and territorial air defenses..." (9).
- Chinese: “加强武装力量建设和边防、海防、空防建设” (4); *[China] strengthens the construction of its armed forces and that of its border, maritime and air defenses.*
- The English text inserts the critical adjective “territorial” where none exists in the Chinese. This editorial decision appears designed to reduce the perception that Chinese military modernization is intended to strengthen capabilities beyond immediate territorial and sovereign concerns. The

Chinese text, meanwhile, implies a more expansive view of the range and purpose of the military capabilities China is strengthening.

- English: “[The PLA] strives to enhance its fighting capabilities based on information systems...” (15).
- Chinese: “提高基于信息系统的体系作战能力” (6); *[The PLA’s] information systems improve fighting capabilities.*
- The English text softens the explicit punch of the Chinese text by describing the effects of information systems on PLA fighting capabilities in purely aspirational terms (i.e., strives to enhance). The Chinese text, meanwhile, has no ambivalence about the effects of information systems on Chinese fighting capabilities, baldly asserting that they are improved as a result.

6. Paying lip service to concepts favored by international community:

- English: "Multilateral Approach to Building a Modern Logistics System" (18) [subsection heading].
- Chinese: “全面建设现代后勤”
"Comprehensively build modern logistics"
- *Analysis:* This is a relatively benign case of deliberate manipulation of English text to make it more palatable or attractive to a foreign readership. It is nevertheless indicative of a systematic effort to do exactly that throughout the document.
- Another illustration of this phenomenon: There is no boldface subsection heading in the Chinese text that corresponds to the English "Conducting Escort Operations in the Gulf of Aden and Waters off Somalia." The text on these out of area operations

appears in the Chinese, but is not delineated by its own section. Certainly, it is possible that this is an oversight, but it is also consistent with a pattern of emphasizing different aspects of the English translation that seem likely to appeal to foreign audiences worried about China's behavior as a "responsible stakeholder" footing the bill for public goods.

- English: "The PLA continues to uphold the CPC's leadership in its political and legal work..." (31).
- Chinese: "坚持和加强党对军队政法工作的组织领导..." (19); *[The PLA] upholds and strengthens the CPC's organizational leadership in political and legal work.*
- *Analysis:* The bold-faced words "strengthens" and "organizational" are omitted in the English text, which may therefore be a substantively different claim. If, in fact, the CPC is now exercising its prerogatives more vigorously by implementing legal or political reforms, that is not communicated in the English text. Alternatively, the PLA may be paying tribute to Party leadership to paper over civil-military rifts over authority in legal and political work. The English sentence is also vaguer on what type of leadership is exercised and thus glosses over what may be an important distinction about civil-military dynamics. Perhaps this is an editorial oversight—but it is consistent with the strategic editing of the English text, omitting information that might influence foreign perceptions of civil-military relations.
- English: "China attaches great importance to military transparency" (47).

- Chinese: "中国重视军事透明问题" (30); *China attaches importance to the military transparency question/issue.*"
- *Analysis:* Reference to a transparency "issue/question" implies that transparency is not an end in itself for the PLA—it is a problem to be navigated with sufficient tact to satisfy Western audiences. Given the arguable *decrease* in transparency in this iteration of the Chinese defense white paper, these reservations about transparency are not surprising—but they are telling.

7. Clarifying ambiguity about force structure and army building in a reassuring way:

- The 2008 paper varies in its description of the relative importance of second- and third-generation systems for different PLA services. The 2010 document, however, uses the same language throughout (identical to the PLAN verbiage from 2008), thus implicitly emphasizing the continuing importance of older, second-generation assets in China's force structure and planning. [基本建成以第二代为主体、第三代为骨干的武器装备体系]. In depicting second-generation weapons as the "main body" [主体] and third-generation as the "backbone" or "spine" [骨干] for all forces, the overall message is of a slowly modernizing force. (pp. 6-7 in Chinese, pp. 19-20 in English). Those "spinal" capabilities are described as follows in the 2010 document:
 - PLAA: helicopters, armored assault vehicles, and anti-air and suppression weapons.
 - PLAN: New types of submarines [新型潜艇], surface vessels, and surface attack aircraft.
 - PLAAF: New types of combat aircraft and SAM systems.

- PLASAF: ground-to-ground weaponry system and medium- and long-range missiles.
- *Analysis:* This passage appears to have two nearly unrelated messages for two very distinct audiences in mind. For foreigners, this passage may be interpreted as soft-pedaling the importance of high-technology additions to the PLA's arsenal—or at least highlighting the prevalence of older weapons in PLA force structure rather than describing the more ambitious and varied modernization agendas of different services as was done in the 2008 document. But for Chinese audiences, this depiction of China's force structure is probably also intended for the PLA personnel and defense industrial producers who are tasked to operate and maintain these older weapons platforms. With all of the prestige accruing to personnel and producers working on new hardware, this large class of people may need to be reassured that they are not becoming redundant or under appreciated.

Conclusions:

Two broad, interrelated conclusions are justified by this comparison of the Chinese- and English-language defense white papers. First, and most obvious, this analysis parsed some deliberate translation choices to craft a document that will not unduly alarm foreign audiences. The English version presents a diluted view of the challenges in the international security environment and soft-pedals Chinese military capabilities, strategy and ambitions. Similarly, there is a concerted effort to couch the English text in terms likely to appeal to Western audiences (e.g., adherence to law, commitment to multilateralism, respect for intellectual property rights). Many such references are downplayed or conspicuously absent in the original Chinese text.

Second, and perhaps more interesting, are the strategic reasons that the Chinese text takes such a stark tone. As many analysts have observed over the past decade, the Chinese domestic public debate about defense policy (including procurement, strategy, etc.) has few moderate voices. Typically, any variation from existing policy skews towards the more assertive end of the spectrum, pandering to a hard-line, nationalist domestic audience. There is little or no leeway on the more accommodating side of the spectrum in Chinese defense politics today. Perhaps as a result, all variations in the Chinese text take a more assertive and even defiant tack. There are obvious political rewards for acting tough in China, but only costs for “showing weakness” or understating China's status and ambitions.

Indeed, the leeway afforded by the language barrier has long been a convenient way for PRC officials to “segment the market.” In one document, they are able to speak directly to domestic constituencies — including servicemen and women worried about their career prospects, “angry youth” who demand Chinese glory and assertiveness, military-industrials who want procurement contracts, and taxpayers wondering where their money goes — while tailoring an English translation to address the more generalized anxieties of the international community.

That capacity, however, is eroding. As more international concern is devoted to Chinese military modernization (and more foreign analysts with Chinese-language ability pay more attention), the Chinese leadership's ability to send different messages to domestic and foreign audiences will continue to decline.

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