

**CHINA'S 2019 NATIONAL DEFENCE
WHITE PAPER: WHAT HAS
CHANGED IN CHINA'S
DEFENCE POLICY?**

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Executive Summary

1. Compared to the 2015 Defence White Paper, China's 2019 White Paper offered a much grimmer assessment of China's security environment, highlighting US policy shift towards great-power competition, Taiwan's movement towards de jure independence and "intelligentisation" of warfare as major challenges to China's security.
2. The concept of "local war", which has driven the development of the strategy, operational doctrines and capabilities of the PLA (People's Liberation Army) since the late 1980s, was conspicuously absent in the 2019 White Paper. This may reflect a rethinking of the most likely type of war that the PLA should make preparations to deter and fight.
3. This rethinking may be attributed to Xi Jinping's ambitious goal of developing the PLA into a world-class military. It may also be attributed to a heightened sense of insecurity of China's military strategists stemming from the shift in US strategic emphasis from combating terrorism to "great-power competition", where China is regarded as the biggest security challenge to the United States.
4. The 2019 White Paper also declared that "China advocates partnerships rather than alliances and does not join any military bloc", thus ending a domestic debate on whether China should develop military alliances in the emerging China-US strategic competition.
5. The underlying rationale for China's preference for "partnerships", however, has more to do with a shrewd calculation of the costs and benefits of alliance management than with lofty moral principles.
6. "Partnerships" offer China the autonomy and flexibility that are absent in tight military alliances, which could be undermined by the critical issues of alliance management including burden-sharing, reciprocity, entrapment and abandonment.

7. The 2019 White Paper also stressed the contributions of China and China's armed forces to world peace, particularly in terms of building what Xi Jinping calls "a community with a shared future for mankind". A scrutiny of China's empirical defence policy behaviour, however, reveals that the primary driver of such behaviour is its national, but not global, security interests.