

# China's Defence Policy and The Establishment of China's First Overseas Naval Base In Djibouti

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## Abstrak

Cina menjadi semakin aktif di dalam sistem global, menempatkan ekonomi dan reputasinya sebagai kegunaan tersendiri. Oleh karena itu, Cina sudah dikonsiderasikan sebagai “pemangku kepentingan yang bertanggung jawab” dalam internasional sistem yang dibuat oleh dunia Barat. Diantara itu, Cina juga sudah berfokus untuk mewujudkan Cina yang makmur dengan kekuatan militer yang kuat untuk mengamankan statusnya sendiri sebagai kekuatan global yang sedang naik daun dengan kekuatan dominan di berbagai wilayah. Dengan demikian, Cina telah memanfaatkan kebijakan pertahanannya di samping kebijakan luar negerinya dengan dukungan perangkat ekonomi dan keamanannya sebagai sarana untuk mewujudkan visi dan tujuan yang berbeda di berbagai sektor, termasuk bagaimana mempertahankan kehadirannya di Samudera Hindia melalui pendirian pangkalan angkatan laut luar negeri pertama Cina di Djibouti dan meningkatnya peran dari Angkatan Laut Cina. Dari satu era ke era lain, Cina telah mengembangkan strategi atau pendekatan militer yang berbeda sebagai bagian dari kebijakan pertahanannya. Ini dirancang berdasarkan keadaan Cina dan keadaan perang di setiap era. Dengan menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif berdasarkan literatur dan analisis data, artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa perubahan signifikan dalam kebijakan pertahanan Cina dengan modernisasi memainkan peran penting dalam keputusan Cina untuk membangun pangkalan angkatan laut di Djibouti dan bagaimana pangkalan angkatan laut itu akan digunakan sesuai dengan fungsinya yang ditetapkan untuk melindungi kepentingan luar negeri China.

**Kata Kunci:** Cina, Djibouti, kebijakan pertahanan, angkatan laut, pangkalan angkatan laut

## Abstract

*China has increasingly become more active in the global system, putting its economy and reputation at benefit. Therefore, China has been considered as a “responsible stakeholder” within the developed Western-style international system. In between, China has also focused on accomplishing the prosperous China with powerful military force to secure its own status as the rising global power with dominant power in different regions. That being said, China has utilized its defence policy aside of its foreign policy with the support of its economic and security tools as a mean to realize such vision and different objectives in different sectors, including how it maintains its presence in the Indian Ocean through the establishment of China’s first overseas naval base in Djibouti and the increasing role of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). From one era to another era, China has developed different military strategies or approaches as a part of its defence policies. It is designed based on China’s state of affairs and the conduct of the warfare in each era. By using qualitative research method based on literature and data analysis, this article concludes that a significant shift in China’s defence policy with the military modernization that follows plays a substantial role in enabling China’s decision to build a naval base in Djibouti and how it will be utilized in accordance with its designated functions to protect China’s overseas interests at best.*

**Keywords:** China, Djibouti, defence policy, navy, naval base

## Introduction.



Considering the geography and the significance of the region, Indian Ocean is categorized as geostrategic region. Geostrategic region is described as a specific area of region where the interests of states lie. Consequently, the location, size, and number of it may vary from one state to another, depending on what their national interests are. To protect such interests, it is reasonable for a state to make use of its economic, political, or military means of power. (Sakhuja, 2008, p. 690) In today's context, it is evident that interests surrounding the Indian Ocean region are on a significant rise. Not only as a region important to international trade and shipping lanes, but it is also an area full of conflicts. Although some conflicts are local and remain internal, but there are also other local conflicts and regional tension which are sensitive to military and political interference from third party. Thus, it also attracts security concern in regards to the region's stability. Not to forget the region's central role in oil production, energy shipments, and as a rich source of natural resources and raw materials. (Potgieter, 2012, p. 2)

Now, the security of Indian Ocean is no longer dominated by colonial states or some particular superpowers. It gradually progresses to be multifaceted and dynamic. New players, such as India and China, have entered the playground as the new emerging powers. In addition to that, national alliances also complicate the dynamics surrounding the

Indian Ocean region. The recent dynamics also offer new kind of maritime security threats where non-state actors also play a part in influencing the region's security, both directly and essentially. For sure, this is something that states cannot take easily, for the Indian Ocean holds great importance just as mentioned before. However, instead of going into a battle like what states used to practice centuries ago, now they start to project power through their navies and take an advantage of their diplomatic role to control a good order at sea. (Potgieter, 2012, p. 1) Out of all transnational and non-traditional threats, maritime piracy is the one that catches international attention the most, making global headlines where it has further invited international response. Numerous cases of pirate attacks and hijackings took place at the Horn of Africa, particularly around the coast of Somalia and Gulf of Aden (GoA) (Potgieter, 2012, p. 6). That circumstance also became the main justification of why China decided to participate in anti-piracy operations in the region as a threat to important sea lanes also means a threat to China's overseas interests through People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). China articulated its military strategy through its annual Defence Paper in May 2015, *China's Military Strategy*, which stated:

*"In response to the new requirement coming from the country's growing strategic interests, the armed forces will actively participate in both regional and international security cooperation and effectively secure China's overseas*

*interests.*" (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2015)

In order for China to do so, another initiative that Beijing took was setting up a naval base in Djibouti, a small and strategic African country with close proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and GoA. As stated by the PLA Navy, China's naval base in Djibouti was established based on "*friendly negotiations*" and it went in line with "*the common interest of the people from both sides*" (Xinhua, 2017). The location of Djibouti offers a better opportunity to defend and to watch over ships passing through Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Not to forget that it is also a neighboring country to Somalia where the majority cases of piracy tend to occur along its shores. (Chung, 2015) Djibouti itself has become a critical point for China's longstanding anti-piracy operations in the Horn of Africa. It is reported that Chinese vessels have consistently visited the country's port for more than 50 times, counted from the first time China began such mission in 2008 (Collins & Erickson, 2015).

Apart from those operations and port visits, security relations between China and Djibouti were focused on visits from senior military personnel. Not only that, the relevance of Djibouti for China became more evident and precise when Chinese navy did the evacuation of roughly around 800 foreign and People's Republic of China (PRC) nationals combined from Yemen in 2015, by taking them from the conflicted area to Djibouti before boarding

them to flights to their home countries. (Downs et al., 2017, p. 23) With that being mentioned, it was convenient for China to justify the purpose of its newly-built naval base in Djibouti as a supply port for naval missions, especially in the coasts of Somalia and Yemen, despite of the incoming concern from other countries particularly the West.

Beijing has been avoiding the term "military" to address the said base and rather called it as a supply port to support the peacekeeping operations and humanitarian assistance that China has committed to do. (Perlez & Buckley, 2015) General Fang Fenghui as the Director of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Staff Department paid a brief visit to Djibouti. (M. Singh, 2016)

*"The base will ensure China's performance of [additional] missions, such as escorting, peacekeeping and humanitarian aid in Africa and west Asia... will also be conducive to overseas tasks including military cooperation, joint exercises, evacuating and protecting overseas Chinese and emergency rescue, as well as jointly maintaining security of international strategic seaways."* (Xinhua, 2017)

Based on the mentioned remark, it can be assumed that China believed that the establishment of naval base was considered necessary to maintain Beijing's naval power abroad in accordance with the purpose of security operations which are aimed to protect China's overseas interests further.

As a country realizes its own national interest, such realization also results in a different assessment of certain aspects such

as its geostrategic, geopolitical, geo-economic status, security threats and major vectors of these threats, an approach to realize the interests, and resources utilized for it. Each of it provides distinct definitions and categories that eventually become a major driver of a country's specific policy. (Gaiduchok, 2019, p. 3) China's leaders identified a conjunction of several aspects which guided China to extend the scope and pace of its armed forces, including the navy. It consists of China's thriving international political and economic interest, modern and swift changes in technology-driven warfare, awareness of a growing external threats on strategic level, involving China's maritime interests. Therefore, it also led China to recognize a "*period of strategic opportunity*" where the country seemingly would not participate nor be included in a main military conflict before 2020 to allow the country to flourish with military and economic development. As an outcome, China has launched some practical methods in modernizing its armed forces from 1990s to early 2000s. (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019, p. 3) That being stated, this article believes that it shows China's brand new shift of defence policy that goes along with its growing overseas interest. In other words, what China has done can be categorized as a breakthrough from its initial military practices, in which China used to refuse a scenario where it would build a foreign military presence outside the country. All was done to

protect what China considers as its overseas interest. (Chaziza, 2018, p. 7) This latest development can be traced back from China's first defence white paper in 1998, where China used to insist that China "*does not station troops or set up military bases in any foreign country*" (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019, p. 4).

While China attempts to foster its economic growth, protect its overseas interests as a new global power, and develop a strong military force to support it, it is important to take China's defence policy into account as a mean to explain China's behavior. That being said, this article seeks to analyze the shift of China's defence policy based on the explained situation of the establishment of China's first overseas naval base in Djibouti.

### **Research Method**

This article utilizes qualitative research method to analyze the data collected. It involves primary and secondary data collection as well as literature studies. Primary data is generally obtained from official website of respective state government that contains official remarks, statements, or stance, whereas the latter is mainly retrieved from literary sources, ranging from books, scientific journals, academic articles, mass media or news articles, online articles, and anything along that kind. The data is compiled before it is further combined with existing theories and concepts to generate certain interpretations

upon explaining certain occurrences in this study.

## Theoretical Framework

### National Interest

It is argued that national interest still becomes the preeminent reason of why a state does what it does in international system. Therefore, it is also argued that foreign policy is a reflection of what a state has in its national interest. In other words, national interest is often incorporated with the making of foreign policy. (Manan, 2017, p. 176) From national interest, one may see a representation of a state's aspiration where it can be a base to an actual policy and programme application. In addition to that, it can also be used to rationalize, justify, or explain a political argument. (Bion, 1963, p. 121)

As China faces a significant rise and growth, its national interest has drawn attention where it also becomes a beginning to identify Beijing's foreign policy. Back in the 1980s, China used to hold the saying of "*Keep a low profile and do something*" (韬光养晦,有所作为) as its principle of foreign policy. However, that principle has changed, to "*Strive for achievement*" (奋发有为), as President Xi Jinping took over the office. It is argued that what China desires is much more than only an accumulation of material capability and a share of its growing gain. In general, China's national interest involves securing territorial integrity and sovereignty, managing political rules and internal stability, preserving

economic growth, and defending China's position to be a country of a great power. The transition in China's national interest occurs not only because of its status as a rising power, but it also comes down to strategic choices made by Beijing, as well as responses from other countries as a feedback to those mentioned choices. He and Feng (2012) elaborated such notion by arguing that as a state starts to gain power, its interest to security will also expand. There are two dimensions to describe such notion, horizontally and vertically.

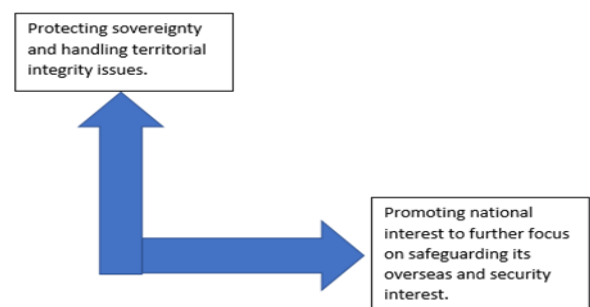


Figure 1: Representation of China's expanding national interest from He and Feng (2012), made by the authors.

From that point, it is further argued that what China has done may pave the way for Beijing to challenge the balance of power, or the current power structure. It allows China to provide itself with more strategic choices in order to create a space of favourable or secure external surrounding, based on its relative capability, for its expanding national interest. (Ye, 2019, pp. 2–5)

### Defence Policy

Similar with foreign policy, defence policy also owns its ways, means, and ends. The

making of defence policy is motivated by how a state tries to pursue its values and interests which underlie any security strategy that incorporates military aspect as one of the instruments in its national power which also helps formulating a state's defence objectives. It is also influenced by how a state perceives security environment, it may consist of risks, threats, and challenges. (Tagarev, 2006, p. 19)

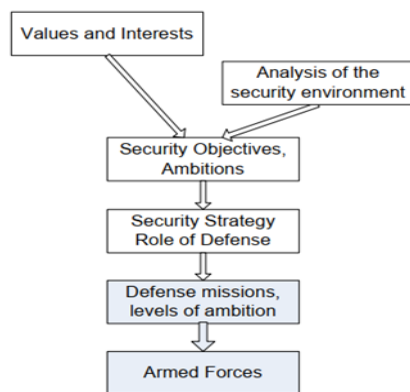


Figure 2: The flow of defence policy-making process (Tagarev, 2006, p. 19).

Based on the figure above, the security objectives do not reflect only a state's values and interests but also its ambitions in a sphere of international security arena. From that point, it produces a security strategy which encompasses a practical, realistic, and efficient concept in military, economic, diplomatic, or other means of power. Depending how a state assesses any security environment with its risks, threats, opponent's possible weakness and strength, and opportunities, a proper security strategy may also envisage a clear concept that is able to encompass the effective roles of armed forces. The mentioned roles are translated into

missions often times, different assigned roles also influence the levels of ambition that armed forces get. How ambitious a defence policy that a country possibly has can be assessed from a scale, number, and a nature of those missions. It is referred as *operational tempo*. (Tagarev, 2006, pp. 20–24)

In doing so, what matters is the capabilities provided by the state's available resources to obtain a specific standard laid out in defence objectives. In that sense, capability is described as capacity which is backed up by a series of abilities and resources, to accomplish a determinable outcome in carrying out specific task under particularized situations and to reach a definite standard of performing such task itself. What determines capability used also depends on specific scenario which armed forces may be deployed. In planning such scenario, it is a process of designating force structure and defence plans, rather than predicting future outcomes or situations. All combined, the mentioned scenario in defence policy generally explains potential missions, assumptions in relation to a state's ambitions and what it aims to obtain, as well as possible challenges and threats. In short, a defence policy contains a combination of a state's full range of operations, missions, objectives, and notably its national interests. (Tagarev, 2006, pp. 25–26)

Relating it to the case brought in this article, China has re-organized and modernized its efforts in military capabilities, which is referred

as “informatized warfare” with big priority placed on maritime forces through large-scale investments and initiatives towards PLAN as well as the People’s Liberation Army Navy Marine Corps (PLANMC). (Heath, 2018, p. 5) In addition to that, the 2015 Chinese Defence White Paper stands out in a way that it focuses on China’s modernization effort of its navy, emphasizing its international responsibility to protect the country’s global economic and energy interests (Cole, 2016, p. 5), where it happens to be on the same year where China also officially announced its plan to build the naval base in Djibouti.

### **Sea Power**

Maritime security is associated with economic development as many economic activities occur via the ocean. Not to forget that the majority of trade takes place throughout the ocean. In addition to that, many economic activities have resulted into various industries worth multi-billion, like global shipping, fishery, and coastal tourism industries. Resources kept in ocean, such as fossil energy and mining, have also caused the commercial value of ocean to be re-evaluated for the good. The concept of blue economy is also akin with maritime security as a management of resources in the ocean requires not only a proper enforcement of laws and regulations, but also a secure maritime environment. It is also substantial to note that the role of naval forces and the way strategies are used for it are particularly important as it is one of the

major players in maritime security. It is based on the classical understanding of national security in securing a state’s survival and the concept of sea power to determine how far state should engage outside its territorial maritime domain and to make its presence noticeable around international water in general. (Bueger, 2015, pp. 160–161) Alfred T. Mahan as the U.S. naval strategist first emphasized the theory of modern naval strategy and its correlation with sea power in 1900s. The main aspects of Mahan’s theory fall onto the importance of naval strategy and geopolitics, which further relates to the command of the sea. According to him, there is a close and certain connection between navy, command of the sea, and maritime power. In that sense, navy holds various purposes.

Not only navy is utilized to guarantee a maritime transportation system to function, but it is also a strategic tool in times of war to go against an opponent. More importantly, navy is also diplomatic tool to implement a state’s foreign policy in expanding a state’s national interests and political influence outside the country as much as it bears a responsibility to expand a state’s sea power throughout the world. In short, to have a strong navy is a requirement for a country to become a maritime power and to have a strong basis of command of the sea. However, it should be accompanied with a correct naval strategy as it aims to safeguard and to bolster a state’s



sea power. Furthermore, it should also involve a suitable geographical condition where navy can practice its influence. Overseas military bases or ports close to important sea routes which a state's economy and military actors rely on are included into some of the key determinants to see whether a state's formulated naval strategy works best to realize a sea power as its goal. (Ju, 2015, pp. 21–22, 24)

According to Mahan (1900), a state's interests will thrive with its development in international communication. As a result, the sea command of any maritime power should exceed beyond offshore waters in accordance with the expanding national interests. In other words, as a state's national interests reach a certain space, its sea power with its command of the sea should also be present there. That being said, a state should also strive to build strategic overseas bases to enhance a state's capability in realizing sea power and to safeguard the security of sea-based transportation. With expanding national interests as a basis for a maritime power, a typical and strategic duty of navy is to protect and to control crucial locations in sea routes. Once a state is capable of controlling particular spots that consist of multiple important sea lanes, then it is safe to say that a state's sea power is strong enough to have a control over everything. (Ju, 2015, pp. 26–27)

Combined together, China's efforts in maritime security is visible by seeing how

Beijing continuously deployed its naval forces to the Indian Ocean region, particularly around the regional water which is vulnerable to piracy and other possible threats for maritime security. By establishing a naval base in Djibouti, which is considered strategic and close to some major sea lanes, it also allows China to be more involved in maritime security operations at the same time it gives China the chance to boost its sea power in the Indian Ocean and to protect Beijing's other national interests in the region. It is important to note that such practices are also a product of China's formulation of foreign policy and naval strategy contained in its defence policy as elaborated in the next concepts of theoretical framework.

## **Discussion**

Chinese military strategy with its variety of dimensions and features have gone through a continuous process of study. In 2015, China released its Defence White Paper under the title of "China's Military Strategy" through its State Council Information Office. It was the first White Paper to be issued under President Xi's administration. The White Paper itself presents clue of China's future developments in its military as well as strategic affairs to international community. (P. K. Singh, 2016, p. 9) China has also released a new White Paper in 2019 titled "China's National Defence in the New Era" which provides more cues on the aims, actions, and significances in China's efforts to construct a guarded national defence

and strong military in general. Mostly, although not always, China has issued its National Defence Strategy in a form of White Paper once in two years. In addition to that, most of the White Papers previously were titled only “China’s National Defence” whereas the last two White Papers in 2015 and 2019 have turned to be theme-based. (Malik, 2019, pp. 4–5)

Between 2008 and 2018 alone, China’s military spending in real terms has faced a significant increase by 83% which becomes the biggest spurge of spending of a country by far. This goes back to Xi’s proposed Chinese Dream. In relation to the Chinese Dream, President Xi has stated that it incorporates a “dream of a strong armed forces” which further involves “modernizing” China’s armed forces or its PLA by 2035 and transforming it to be “world-class” military. (The Economist, 2019) Quoting the founding father of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Mao Zedong, and repeating his call for China’s modernization of armed forces as well as China’s defense, Xi stated that “Without a strong army, there can

be no strong motherland...Let the world know that ‘the people of China are now organized, and are not to be trifled with.’ (NBC News, 2020) With such ambitious vision and goals, it is reasonable that the budget allocated for defence spending grows constantly. According to the data compiled by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) which records China’s annual defence budget in local currency, it shows that there has been a consistent increase in its nominal budget each year. Although it should be noted that this is not a full representative of the resources available to the PLA, considering that it is archived only by what the Chinese leadership reports and the limitation of transparency from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) itself, the said consistency is a good beginning to illustrate the emphasis allocated by China towards its military force. (Bartels, 2020, pp. 3–5) The graphic chart below shows the moderate increase in its military spending based on what China officially published and how many percentage that it takes from the total of China’s GDP.

*China’s Official Defense Spending 2007-2018 (billions of 2018 dollars)*



Figure 3.1: China’s growth of military spending from 2007 to 2018 (Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019, p. 21).

In chronological order, the mindset of China's technology-based military modernization had been set up since the beginning of 1990s where China had also raised its defence spending around 12% to 15% in each year to purchase various modern and sophisticated weapon systems, acquisitions of more equipment, and development programs which never ceased to attract continuous attention from other countries and deeper study or observation on it. Way before Xi took office, Hu Jintao had also stated that China:

*“will... ensure that our armed forces are capable of winning a war in the information age, modernization of weapons and equipment should be accelerated and personnel training enhanced. We will gradually increase spending on national defense as the economy grows and continue to modernize national defense and the armed forces.”*

The official statement has signaled China's persistence to displace China's traditional and ground-based military practice with modern and technology-based armed forces in protecting China's national interests in a changing and dynamic 21<sup>st</sup> century's geopolitical and security environment. Such intention and dedication to pursue tech-based and modern armed forces are underscored through China's defence policy and its evolving strategy military that follows. (Yang, 2008, p. 188) Among other areas of China's military modernization, the expansion of China's naval capabilities holds

a crucial position. Not only developing capabilities based on its methods, from coastal defence to blue water navy, but the Chinese navy has also made improvements in surface and subsurface domains of its fleet. Prominently, the gains in China's submarine are particularly the by-products of units designed by Russia. In addition to that, the acquisition of carriers powered by nuclear is also included into the navy's ambition. As a result, it generates two groups of carrier strike which operate in the Western Pacific with two other groups added in the Indian Ocean.

### **Overview of China's Defence Policy**

From one era to another era, China has developed different military strategies or approaches as a part of its defence policies. It is designed based on China's state of affairs and the conduct of the warfare in each era. Under Mao Zedong, China's military strategy fell on the theory of People's War which advocated an extensive and long war against stronger oppositions, such as Japan, the Soviet Union, as well as the U.S which evoked those opponents into Chinese territory. Meanwhile, in contrary to the People's War under Mao Zedong, China under Deng Xiaoping utilized a strategy of "People's War under Modern Conditions" which placed an emphasis on defence practices of the homeland outside its national borders. After the end of Cold War, under the administration of Jiang Zemin,

PLA was evaluating the effect of advancing high technology on war as lessons from the U.S armed forces primarily in the Gulf War and explored certain strategies to counteract it. As China started its country reforms and full-fledged opening up, strategy was needed to avoid wars and to respond to local conflicts while still being able to focus on economic development. Hence, the PLA introduced the concept of “local wars under high-tech conditions” which underline the usage of high-tech weapons and its deployments. The focus somehow turned to the rapid and phenomenal development of information and technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century under Hu Jintao in which information systems were highlighted as a main component to link every military equipment, military branches, with commands and control systems where it led to PLA being promoted and constructed for “limited local wars under conditions of informatization”. (Yatsuzuka, 2019, p. 1) It underscored flexibility, mobility, strikes with precision, joint operation through five-dimensional warfare (throughout land, air, sea, space, and electromagnetic war ground), and power projection (Char & Bitzinger, 2017) which is a related aspect in this study.

The definition of China’s defence policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been defined previously through China’s National Defence Report issued in December 2006. There are 4

important main points to take into account out of 5 in relation to this study.

1. The main purpose of forming national defence is to support national security and unity, as well as to assure the interests of national development.

2. China’s defence modernization is aimed to pursue a well-coordinated and sustainable advancement of China’s national defence and armed forces. To obtain those aims, this modernization operates in an extensive method which is capable to assure that China’s armed forces are modernized in a revolutionary nature. Further, this modernization also needs a deepening adjustment and reformation in China’s military structures, policies, and systems.

3. Another aim of China’s military modernization is to improve the performance of China’s armed forces through “informationization” as the predominant aspect. The promotion of such “informationization” in China’s PLA owns another purpose which is an improvement in overall capability of protection, information, mobility, assault, and firepower. Tech-based fighting capability can be pursued only by sustainable advancement of technological and scientific creations.

4. Modernization is also executed on the basis of active defence strategy in the new era. The fundamental modes of it

includes participating in joint operation, progressing from regional defence to mobility in trans-regional level, and capabilities in other various operations and maneuvers.

This defence policy put China's strategic objectives and interests which became the rationale behind China's continuous support for its military modernization. In a long range, Chinese leadership has recognized that achieving recognition as great power and to receive equal treatment with respect due to that great power status itself from other big powers has become Beijing's objective to pursue. Two main aspects constitute a status of big power, those are strong economy and suitable military force. (Yang, 2008, p. 189) Under Xi Jinping, it is clear that China has progressively shifted itself from "keeping a low profile" in China's foreign and security policy unlike his predecessors, although the themes of "peace" and "development" remain to take root. In that capacity, the role of PLA as China's military force has also become Xi's domestic powerbase personally and a tool for China's foreign policy which is paired with Beijing's hard economic assets. (Char & Bitzinger, 2017)

In a recent context, particularly noted from China's 2019 White Paper, the central factors which drive China's defence policy depend on how Chinese policymakers perceive both threats and opportunities

which encounter Beijing's comprehensive development. In 2019, through newly-issued new White Paper titled "China's National Defense in the New Era", China laid out its views in regards to the security landscape in international and Asia-Pacific level which also further showed more insights of China's defence policy and its military strategy. In accordance with what is written on the paper, China perceives and sees the international environment as going through "*profound changes unseen in century*". In addition to that, China shares a positive assessment which states that:

*"...the configuration of strategic power is becoming more balanced. The pursuit of peace, stability and development has become a universal aspiration of the international community with forces for peace predominating over elements of war."*

However, China also comes to a conclusion that "*international strategic competition is on the rise*" before showcasing serious concern that such competition becomes additional emerging source of instability in the near future. In similar tone, China also argues that global military competition is deepening and that further causes "major countries" to adapt or adjust their own military and security strategies, rearranging their militaries, and establishing new kinds of forces to "*seize the strategic commanding heights in military competition.*" (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 25)

## Chinese Military Strategy

China's White Papers and the Reports from the Party Congress and the National People's Congress (NPC) are useful in informing any change in China's military doctrine and strategy. In contrast with the U.S which owns different meanings for various terms such as strategy, national defence strategy, national security strategy, national military strategy, and strategy in general, China utilizes those terms interchangeably and unite it in one single term which is 'military strategy' where it is further embodied in the official China's Military Strategic Guidelines which is equivalent to a basic 'national military strategy' of other countries. It governs how a country's military means as a national power should contribute to the achievement of bigger national objectives for a specific time period, ranging from near-, mid-, and long-term. In Chinese perspective, it mainly encompasses two big themes which are the nature or essence of future warfare and how China should prepare for it. Posen (1984) describes military doctrine as a part of a state's grand strategy or national security policy which specifically and explicitly handles military means. In that sense, military doctrine has a core function to picture the most possible war scenario in a comprehensive manner which is accompanied by political, economic, social, technological, or larger international logics

that a state's military has to deal or need more information about. In Chinese military doctrine, Godwin (1987) argues that it is a set of guidance designed for war preparations (*Zhanbei*) in the military line of the CCP (*junshi luxian*) through China's definition on the nature of war and its possible origin or kind of future war. All explained, military doctrine mirrors a country's general strategic orientation, such as defensive, offensive, or deterrence before it further leads a construction of compatible defence abilities. Military doctrine may be originated from formal documents or military speeches, actions, statements, and writings. Similarly, military doctrine may not always specify definite military situations, but a simple assertion of certain ambition may also do. (P. K. Singh, 2016, pp. 16, 18, 25–26)

Active defence as China's military strategy refers to the concept that comprises strategic defence with a mixture of offensive acts which are put in practice for both operational and tactical positions. In that sense, China's active defence is not entirely a defensive strategy in its nature and yet it is not restricted only to territorial defence either. In its root, active defence is the foundation of refraining initiation of possible armed conflict, but China will counter if it is challenged. This particular military strategy was first adopted in the 1930s by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and has provided China with the essential of military

strategy since 1949 as its first founding. As time progresses, China has been making adjustments on the details of the active defence principle which typically depend on different strategic circumstances, whereas its main principles in general have lasted in consistent manner. (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 27)

In conceptualizing a state's military strategy, there are two aspects which should be addressed. It is the defence or offense nature in military operations and the geography which bound those operations. Historically, China's naval military strategy went through major changes which had started from the "near-coast defence" (*"jin'an fangyu"*) to "near-seas active defence" (*"jinhai jiji fangyu"*) before the advancement of "far-seas operations" (*"yuanhai zuozhan"*). The main purpose of the near-coast defence was ensuring the national survival against the Soviet Union where it was essentially defensive in its nature, despite the fact that it involved attacks from guerrilla warfare through smaller ships and boats, without big emphasis on protecting disputed territories, or safeguarding maritime resources in important Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) for traded goods and imported oil. Meanwhile, the near-seas active defence which was proposed by Deng Xiaoping around 2000s covered wider sea areas which eventually required more naval capabilities. It started to aim in restoring any

lost or disputed maritime territories and securing China's maritime resources. Nonetheless, it still had not reached out to the larger area of the south Pacific and the Indian Ocean.

It is in China's far-seas operations strategy that it has started to expand its naval operational reach from the northwest Pacific to the Indian Ocean on the east side. As a consequence, PLAN gradually has begun to be in need of more naval platforms for long-range operations and sustainable logistics. China's economic integration with the world's economy through traded goods, imported materials and foreign oil by the sea plays a part on why China has started labelling far-seas area as crucial security aspect due to the important maritime chokepoints and SLOCs. The shift or changes in China's naval military strategy as well as its capabilities are generated not only from one factor or variable, but a combination of more important factors or variables, such as the function of naval leadership, the changing understanding of external security environment, funding and technologies. (Li, 2009, pp. 146–163)

Under Xi Jinping, his vision in the Chinese Dream, New Type of Major Power Relations, and BRI project displays China's extensive ideological and security outlook where new and rising trends of its military thinking should be positioned. China's new perception of threat and changing dynamics

of the Party-Military relations, which is evident in the President's anti-corruption efforts within the PLA, also play a role in recognizing the changes in China's strategic thinking. In addition to that, the security scenario that China considers alarming in Asia Pacific has contributed in shaping the strategic changes of China's military recently. (P. K. Singh, 2016, p. 133) China's latest trends in its military strategy and doctrine which are related to the theme of this thesis can be observed from the 2015 White Paper, China's Military Strategy, and the 2019 White Paper, China's National Defence in the New Era, which will be elaborated further in the next section.

### **China's Defence White Papers (2015-2019)**

In the 2015 White Paper, not many fundamental military principles have changed, but there are several substantial aspects which depict China's departure from its old themes in China's military strategy. Strategic guidelines of active defence still remain to take place with certain missions, principles, and tasks to carry out. Gen Wei Fenghe as China's Minister of National Defence reaffirmed the consistency of active defence principle in 2019 through his speech at the Ninth Beijing Xiangshan Forum where China "*will not attack unless attacked, but will surely counterattack if attacked*" (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 27). In relation to this article, those strategic

missions and tasks include protecting the security of China's overseas interests; taking participation in both regional and international security cooperation to further manage both regional and world peace; carrying out emergency rescue tasks and disaster relief, protection of rights and interests; duties and support to guard national economic and social development. In active defence strategic guidelines, it includes supporting strategic attitude which is suitable for China's peaceful development; conforming to national defence policy which is defensive in its own essence, keeping a tight coordination of work between military, political, economic, and diplomatic aspect; coping with possible security threat that the country probably has to deal with in a comprehensive way; extending military and security cooperation proactively; enhancing military relations with other major powers, developing countries, and neighboring countries around; advocating the development of regional foundation for cooperation and security. All explained, it reflects China's integrated view on how the country views traditional and non-traditional, security, political and economic issues, overseas interests in addition to the home ones, as well as emerging concerns and commitments. The duty to protect "*China's security and interests in new domains*" is forcing the boundaries of the country's maritime, space, and cyber security to



respond to the so-called “*new situations*”. That being said, the 2015 White Paper also recognizes China’s ambition in the far seas. In that context, China’s maritime dimension does not only concern China’s maritime sovereignty around China’s near seas, but also the security and safety of China’s overseas interests which take place in far seas.

Within the White Paper, it is stated that Compared to the previous White Papers that China issued, “*maritime military struggle*” and “*preparations for maritime military struggle*” has gained formal acknowledgement and bigger clarity aside of China’s traditional land-based operations. In other words, China’s naval strategy has transitioned from only “*near seas defence*” to “*near seas defence*” accompanied with “*far seas protection*”. It is marked through major event where China sent its surface combatants of the navy to the Gulf of Aden under the United Nations (UN) approval. Since then, China has begun its overseas naval operations in its true sense. Previously, it was concentrated only in ports visits, joint search, and rescue exercises. After the naval operations in 2008, it consequently reinforced more urgency of access to port facilities, surface combatants, replenishment ships, advanced satellite communication, and more medical care or food readiness in overseas naval operations. As a result, China has allocated more

reasonable attention to its overseas bases where Djibouti is included among other bases in several parts of the globe with facilities and logistics which are dual use in its nature. (P. K. Singh, 2016, pp. 133–140) All explained, there are several points which are worth to take note to pinpoint the shift in China’s defence policy. First, it is China’s vision of security which has included all policy domains which comprise ocean, cyberspace, and space domains. Second, China has called for closer coordination between its military and non-military actors as a form of requirements which also has urged the necessity to have a centralized decision-making process of security and defence policy. The latter is due to China’s changing view towards security which has also caused more security responsibilities to bear. In order to support the expanding security requirements, China’s military is necessary to execute both war and non-war missions at the same time that the significance of non-military actors in certain missions has also been elevated. (Heath et al., 2016, p. 10)

In the 2019 White Paper, China describes its military expansion and modernization as something defensive for the most part in order to fulfil the demands of its own national security by stating that:

*“China’s military security is confronted by risks from technology surprise and growing technological generation gap. Greater efforts have to be invested in military modernization to meet national*

*security demands. The PLA still lags far behind the world's leading militaries."*

In addition to that, China also describes its modernization effort to be related precisely with China's leadership and to "comprehensively implement Xi Jinping's thinking on strengthening the military." What is worth noting from the 2019 White Paper is the way China explains its military role to protect its overseas interests. More importantly, it explicitly states the importance of its naval base in Djibouti and its functions by the moment it has started operating in August 2017.

*"The PLA actively promotes international security and military cooperation and refines relevant mechanisms for protecting China's overseas interests. To address deficiencies in overseas operations and support, it builds far seas forces, develops overseas logistical facilities, and enhances capabilities in accomplishing diversified military tasks. The PLA conducts vessel protection operations, maintains the security of strategic SLOCs, and carries out overseas evacuation and maritime rights protection operations...In August 2017, the PLA Djibouti Support Base entered service. The base has provided equipment for the maintenance of four escort task groups, offered medical services for over 100 officers and sailors on board, conducted joint medical exercises with foreign militaries, and donated over 600 teaching aids to local schools...When the*

*security situation in Yemen deteriorated in March 2015, a PLAN escort task group sailed to the Gulf of Aden, berthed for the first time directly in an engagement area."* (Cordesman, 2019, pp. 2–3)

Within the 2019 White Paper, China informs how its military forces are still in the process of modernization, although it may come out slower and face a delay in contrary with China's first expectation, with considerable efforts spent to catch up with its reform targets by 2020, 2035 and 2050 respectively. While 2015 White Paper emphasizes the modernization in technologies to match the "Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese Characteristics", the 2019 White Paper also refers the modernization to be the improvement made to govern PLA through leadership and military institutions reformation, new command systems which include the ones to improve joint operations, and enhancing the capacity-building of the party. (Nouwens, 2019)

## **Conclusion**

This article concludes that through a period of strategic opportunity, China has expanded its comprehensive national power which has benefited Beijing's profile as the new emerging responsible stakeholder. In that process, China has also gradually shifted its defence policy to achieve its expanding interests and visions as well as different objectives. Historically, China had

utilized different defence policies with different purposes, means, and capabilities. It has become a recent trend for China to utilize more instruments of statecraft, from military resources to geo-economic means, in pursuing its expanding interests. With China's rapid growth and expanding interests overseas to be protected, it is deemed necessary for China to build a strong military, in which it further justifies China's shift in defence policy, military reforms and modernization. Considering China's strategic military strategy, China has moved from ground-based military practice to modern and technology-based armed forces with bigger domains, which include maritime domain.

Therefore, China has also enlarged its naval military strategy from near-coast defence and near-seas active defence to far-seas protection. It is reflected in China's continuous participation for peacekeeping operations in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean in general which becomes a primary reason of why China initiated the establishment of its first naval base in Djibouti due to its strategic location. Since the naval base first operated in 2017, the importance of overseas base and its functions are explicitly stated in China's 2019 White Paper. In that capacity, China has also demonstrated its navy's strategic power projection and expeditionary capability as a foreign policy and defence policy tool.

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