

# WebMemo



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## Yo-Ho-Ho and a Bottle of...Mao Tai?

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April saw the Chinese navy, formally called the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), conduct one of the largest exercises in its history. Chinese naval combatants operated throughout the Chinese littoral, from the South China Sea to the Bohai Gulf. Subsequently, several Chinese ships transited through the Miyako Straits north of Okinawa from the inshore waters off China's coast into the larger expanse of the Pacific Ocean, where they conducted a variety of additional naval operations.

### **Chinese Military Making Tremendous Strides.**

In and of itself, these exercises should not be surprising. The PLAN has steadily assumed a blue-water nature as part of its decades-long military modernization program. Chinese naval combatants now field advanced radars and surface-to-air missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, and on-board helicopters. At the same time, the PLAN has been expanding its area of operations. Where, in 2002, two Chinese destroyers and an oiler circumnavigating the globe was a major event, Chinese naval forces are now completing a fifth rotation in the Gulf of Aden, marking over a year of continuous PLAN presence in the Indian Ocean.

What is striking about *this* series of exercises, however, is not only its geographic expanse but that the exercise drew upon forces from all three of China's major fleets—the North Sea, East Sea, and South Sea fleets all had units participating in these exercises. This is a major shift from typical Chinese naval operations. Typically, Chinese fleets operate within their assigned military regions—the Jinan, Nanjing, and Guangzhou military regions (MRs), respectively—and rarely interact.

Furthermore, these exercises also reportedly incorporated air assets, including command and control aircraft, bombers, and strike aircraft from the Nanjing and Guangzhou MRs, although it is unclear whether these assets were drawn from the Chinese air force or the naval air arm.

Clearly, great strides have been made in what the Chinese term *kuaqu* (or trans-military region) military operations. Where it was once said that there was not a single People's Liberation Army (PLA) but seven—one for each Chinese military region—the ongoing exercises indicate that the PLA is now able to wield its entire force as a single entity.

Furthermore, these exercises also show that the PLA is increasingly capable of conducting joint operations, i.e., operations involving more than one service. As recently as the early 1990s, the PLA was mostly focused on ground forces, and its ability to conduct combined arms operations (i.e., operations involving multiple branches within a service) was still in its infancy. Since then, the Chinese military has adopted new regulations and reoriented its doctrine toward joint operations. The main impetus for doing so are the lessons the PLA has derived from observing the U.S. military in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Balkans.

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**The PLA's Future Direction.** What is *not* yet known about the PLA is of greater concern. For example, to what extent have these recent exercises allowed the PLA to “test drive” its architecture? Very clearly, the PLA improved its ability to exercise command and control over units drawn from the entire force and to do so over an extended area. But the extent of China's ability to find targets and direct units and weapons against them is less clear.

What is known, however, is that China has fielded ocean surveillance satellites (the *Haiyang* series) and also remote sensing satellites (such as the *Yaogan* series) that may have an ocean surveillance capability as well. At the same time, China has developed over-the-horizon back-scatter radars capable of detecting air activity occurring beyond the horizon of conventional radars. Such systems are essential not only in giving early warning of approaching enemy naval and air forces but also in providing cues and targeting information for China's anti-ship ballistic missiles.

**Chinese Transformation.** What is arguably most worrisome about these exercises, even more than the display of technical capabilities and improved training, is the pace of Chinese military modernization and the lack of transparency on what might be driving this process.

China's military has not fought a war since 1979, when it engaged the Vietnamese. More to the point, China's borders and sovereignty are arguably more secure today than at any point since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. Yet despite the absence of external pressure or the object lessons from a recent war, the PLA seems to be reforming itself into a much more capable force and is doing so in remarkably short order.

Moreover, China, with its millennia-old civilization, helped define the very concept of bureaucracy. Change does not come easily to large organizations, as there are inevitably objections from those who are comfortable with the status quo. To break down the stovepipes and silos among the services, and to do so quickly and not in response to external pressures, is extraordinary. What could be driving this fundamental shift in PLA capabilities?

Until this issue can be clarified, it is clear that the U.S. and its allies are confronted with a potential challenger in the form of the PLA Navy, which is going to be ever more capable in the coming years. This development has distinct implications for U.S. security commitments to the region, as American support is a function of U.S. ability to control the seas. Furthermore, the sustained operation of regional economies is dependent upon the sea lanes of communications. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. Navy faces a robust challenger.

**Policy Recommendations:**

- **Maintain sufficient naval forces.** China's growing naval capabilities, coupled with the end of the assumption that U.S. forces would confront only a part of that navy in any crisis or contingency, highlights the need to revisit the size of the U.S. Navy. In particular, given the long lead times required for the construction of even smaller combatants such as destroyers and nuclear attack submarines, any future growth must be programmed sooner rather than later.
- **Prepare for high-intensity conflict.** While Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has reasonably argued that the first priority should be on the wars in which the U.S. is currently engaged, China's naval growth clearly indicates that there remains a need to prepare for high-intensity conflict. This is especially true for the perishable skills associated with naval warfare, such as open-ocean anti-submarine warfare and strike missions against naval targets. Similarly, the ability to operate in high-threat zones involving advanced air defenses is something that requires constant practice and honing.
- **Cooperate with U.S. regional allies.** The Chinese decision to transit the Miyako straits is as much a message to Tokyo as it was a simple navigational issue. Likewise, its operations in the South China Sea are a not so subtle message to the other claimants to that disputed region—particularly the Philippines and Vietnam. The U.S. cannot control the seas without active cooperation from these nations, not only in terms of equipment interoperability but also in terms of contingency

planning, doctrinal development, and regular exercises. If the Obama Administration is serious about engaging Asia, then enhancing cooperation with U.S. allies in the region must play a role.

- *Push for transparency.* The problem is not that China is building a larger navy. Given its global economic presence and interests, it is inevitable that Beijing should seek the capacity to protect its sea lanes. What is at issue is what China perceives as its maritime goals and what shape China's maritime strategy assumes. These issues can be determined only through interactions with the Chinese navy, including its institutions for doctrinal development. But such engagement requires a concerted effort on the part of the U.S. and a steady push for more than just photo ops

and visits to vessels. The U.S. should be pushing the PRC for greater transparency at sea—and should also have its allies do the same, as they are as much or even more at risk.

**A Potential Adversary.** The PLAN's recent exercises along its coasts and into the open Pacific indicate that the Chinese military has made tremendous strides, particularly in its trans-military region and joint operations capacities. Whether these developments pose a threat to U.S. security tomorrow, however, will depend to a large extent on how the Obama Administration responds today.

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