

Background

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Sea Power and the Chinese State: China's Maritime Ambitions

Dean Cheng

Abstract: *The expansion of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is in many ways a logical and even forgone conclusion. China is the world's second-largest economy; its heavy dependence on trade inevitably makes the seas of growing importance to national well-being. Yet as China's maritime ambitions continue to expand, the U.S. is faced with a challenging task: recognizing Chinese interests without acceding to Chinese demands. How America meets this challenge will determine the future of the Asia-Pacific region and whether America's maritime dominance will continue through the next century.*

For the past several decades, the Chinese military has been steadily improving its operational capabilities. Based in part on lessons learned from observing foreign militaries and foreign wars, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has expanded some of its forces (e.g., the number of ballistic missiles), improved its command and control, and begun implementing joint operations. It has also moved from being centered primarily on ground operations to improving its air and, increasingly, its naval forces.

The expansion of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is in many ways a logical and even forgone conclusion. China is the world's second-largest economy; its heavy dependence on trade, both for raw materials to fuel that economy and to ship its exports abroad, inevitably makes the seas of growing importance to national well-being. Moreover, throughout the period of "Reform and Opening,"

Talking Points

- Given its dependence on global sea lanes for its economic development, China will develop its maritime capabilities, civilian and military, in the coming decades.
- At the same time, China is likely to expand its maritime forces, which not only patrol Chinese waters, but also assert Chinese maritime claims.
- Chinese maritime expansion, in and of itself, does not constitute a threat to the United States, but the Chinese are pursuing systems that appear to be focused on countering specific American capabilities.
- The United States should respect China's growing use of the seas but not accede to Chinese demands. In particular, the United States should hold firm on freedom of navigation and sustain its regular military activities throughout the western Pacific.
- It is essential that the United States maintain a strong forward posture in East Asia, including modernizing its forces and supporting its friends and allies in the region.

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begun under Deng Xiaoping, growing emphasis on international trade has shifted China's economic center of gravity to the coast.¹ Maritime defenses are also of increasing importance to the Chinese leadership in a manner that was not true during much of the Cold War.

Not all navies are created equal. Intentions matter as much as—if not more than—capabilities. China's maritime development may simply be aimed at safeguarding its economic lifelines, or it may be intended also to coerce and compel China's neighbors, many of which are also dependent on the seas. China's naval expansion must therefore be carefully and soberly appraised.

China and the Seas: A Growing Dependence

China is often thought of as a continental or land power. Historically, this has generally been the case, although there have been periods of Chinese interest in the seas. The most recent occurred in the 1400s, during the late Ming Dynasty, when Admiral Zheng He (or Cheng Ho) led "treasure fleets" on several expeditions that explored the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean as far as modern-day Mogadishu on the East African coast. When Zheng He returned from his final voyage, though, China turned its back on the seas.

Today's China is far more dependent on the seas than Imperial China ever was. The Chinese note that, since joining the World Trade Organization (WTO), Chinese trade with other nations has steadily expanded as a proportion of national economic activity, to the point where it affects some 60 percent–70 percent of China's economy.² Without trade, China could not sustain its economy, let

alone maintain the growth rates necessary to maintain high employment figures, a key justification used by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to retain power.

Seaborne commerce is an essential part of Chinese trade. According to recent Chinese statistics published in the 2010 *China's Ocean Development Report*, ocean commerce alone in 2008 represented 9.87 percent of China's gross domestic product, with a valuation of nearly 3 trillion RMB (approximately \$456 billion). Moreover, some 85 percent of its international trade moves by the sea lanes.³

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A key part of this ocean commerce is China's increasing reliance on oil imports to sustain its economy. China imported over half of the oil it consumed in 2009 and is expected to import some 65 percent of its oil consumption by 2020.⁴ Much of that oil comes from the Middle East, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, requiring a steady flow of tankers to Chinese ports. Recent problems in Kazakhstan, including the withdrawal of Western oil companies from development of the major Kashagan oil fields on the Caspian Sea, will exacerbate this reliance on Middle East oil and maritime shipping.⁵

China's Maritime Development Strategy

Given this growing reliance on the sea, the Chinese have concluded that they must develop a strategy to govern their maritime development.

1. "Reform and Opening (*gaige yu kaifang*)" refers to the changes begun by Deng Xiaoping after he assumed power in 1978. This includes the major economic reforms of agricultural decollectivization, reduced emphasis on state planning, and opening to the outside world (especially the West), both economically and politically.
2. State Oceanic Administration, Ocean Development Strategy Research Study Group, *China's Ocean Development Report* (Beijing, PRC: Maritime Publishing House, 2010), p. 227.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 224, 466.
4. Wang Qian, "Oil Imports Hit Alarming Level in China: Study," *China Daily*, January 14, 2010, at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2010-01/14/content_9317926.htm (June 26, 2011).
5. Richard Orange, "Shell Shuts Caspian Office, \$50bn Kashagan Project on Ice," *Daily Telegraph*, May 24, 2011, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/energy/oilandgas/8530144/Shell-shuts-Caspian-office-50bn-Kashagan-project-on-ice.html> (June 26, 2011).

According to Chinese analysts, any such strategy must address three considerations:

- The broad maritime interests of the People's Republic of China (PRC), which include its growing reliance on the global sea lanes for its trade;
- The national security interests of the PRC including access to ocean resources, countering “hegemonic” interference in Chinese affairs, security of the sea lanes, potential for military conflict arising from conflicting claims over maritime frontiers or islands, and the Taiwan issue; and
- The need to build a “harmonious society” at sea that recognizes the inevitability of increased global competition for the sea's resources.⁶

With these interests in mind, Chinese maritime strategy is grounded in certain guiding thoughts (*zhidao sixiang*) and basic principles (*jiben yuanze*). These begin with the importance of maintaining national control of territory and supporting national interests while staying on Deng Xiaoping's path of “Peace and Development” (i.e., expecting that there will not be a major war any time soon).

Key maritime mission areas for future Chinese development include:

- Protecting China's maritime authority over relevant waters;
- Developing China's maritime economy;
- Strengthening ocean use and island management;
- Sustaining the ocean environment;
- Developing maritime industries and oceanographic sciences; and
- Improving China's contributions to global oceanography.⁷

There are ways China can pursue these missions without being aggressive. The *Ocean Development Report*, for example, notes the importance of engaging in cooperative international ventures. At the

same time, though, it also notes that China should not concede its maritime claims or interests in order to avoid charges of a “China threat” or to appease major powers. Instead, the report emphasizes that China's broad national interests require that it pursue maritime development. In short, China is prepared to pursue an assertive set of national policies to control its littoral waters and nearby seas—even if such policies might antagonize other maritime powers and neighboring states.

Instruments of China's Maritime Power

To help fulfill these missions and support these interests, China has steadily expanded all of its instruments of maritime power, including its shipbuilding industry, shipping companies, and maritime and naval forces.

As China's trade has grown, Chinese goods are often carried to their destinations aboard Chinese-owned hulls. Two of the 10 largest container-shiping companies in the world are Chinese state-owned enterprises: China Ocean Shipping (Group) Corporation, or COSCO, and China Shipping Container Lines, LTD, or CSCL.⁸

Many of these ships are built in Chinese shipyards. China became the world's largest shipbuilder in 2010, eclipsing long-time leader South Korea; “China built ships with a total deadweight capacity of 65.6 million tons, accounting for 43 percent of the deadweight capacity of ships built in the world.”⁹ Chinese shipbuilders are not simply servicing Chinese companies, however. In 2010, Chinese shipyards also captured a majority of new orders for ships worldwide.

China's shipbuilding industry includes a range of smaller private shipyards but is mostly centered on two major shipbuilding conglomerates, China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC) and China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation (CSIC). These are also both state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

6. State Oceanic Administration, Ocean Development Strategy Research Study Group, *China's Ocean Development Report*, pp. 466–467.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 472–474.

8. Alphaliner, “Top 100: 100 Largest Container/Liner Operators,” at <http://www.alphaliner.com/top100/index.php> (June 29, 2011).

9. Wang Guangqun, “China Rises to Top in Ranks of Ship Makers,” Xinhua News Agency, May 9, 2011, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-05/09/c_13865547.htm (June 27, 2011).

CSIC has 140,000 employees and \$27.5 billion in assets. The company's product line includes a range of vessels, such as tankers, bulk carriers, containerships, roll-on/roll-off (RO/RO) transports, and specialized vessels. It also builds warships for the Chinese military. Like many other Chinese SOEs, the company is in effect a vertically integrated entity and includes not only dockyards and ship repair facilities, but also design institutes, research centers, and laboratories, which employ some 30,000 engineers. Similarly, CSIC produces not only ship hulls, but also diesel engines, electronic instruments, and a variety of marine equipment including port machinery.¹⁰

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With about 95,000 employees, CSSC is slightly smaller than CSIC. Like CSIC, it produces both military and civilian ships and engages in a broad array of research and design efforts. CSSC produces a wide range of vessels for civilian customers, but its primary focus is the military. The company's Web site describes CSSC as "the backbone forces backing up the Chinese navy in terms of its construction."¹¹

Several different forces safeguard these growing Chinese maritime interests. One is the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command (FLEC), an arm of the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture's Fisheries Management Bureau, which is responsible for patrolling Chinese fisheries. It has three flotilla headquarters as well as control of local units established in major cities and each coastal province. The FLEC fields

between 10 and 20 larger vessels, which range from 1,000-ton patrol boats to a former submarine salvage vessel displacing nearly 5,000 tons. The FLEC has been interacting regularly with the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG), including the Ship-rider program, under which FLEC officers traveled aboard USCG vessels during driftnet fishing season.¹²

The PRC Ministry of Transport controls the China Maritime Safety Administration (MSA). Analogous to the U.S. Coast Guard, the MSA is responsible for maritime safety issues and pollution monitoring and control on China's major rivers as well as its coast. It also manages navigational aids and control measures. The MSA oversees 20 provincial-level MSA subordinates, including in the coastal provinces and along the Yangtze, Pearl, and Heilongjiang Rivers, which in turn control 97 local branches. The MSA controls its own fleet of cutters, including at least three that displace more than 1,000 tons.

Another part of China's maritime forces is the China Marine Surveillance (CMS) force of the State Oceanic Administration. It also has three main flotillas and controls "300 cutters, including 30 with a displacement over 1,000 tons."¹³ None of these appear to be armed. The CMS is responsible for surveillance in what China calls its "near seas" (*jinhai*). It also monitors for pollution, environmental damage, and resource exploitation and conducts oceanographic surveys.¹⁴

Like the FLEC, the CMS has conducted patrols in disputed waters in such places as the South China Sea, thereby asserting Chinese sovereignty while keeping disputes "civilianized." Recently, for instance, a Vietnamese-contracted survey ship exploring for oil 80 miles off Vietnam's coast had its

10. China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation, "Introduction," at <http://www.csic.com.cn/en/Survey.htm> (June 27, 2011).

11. China Shipbuilding Industry Corporation, "Groups Profile," at http://www.cssc.net.cn/en/component_general_situation (June 27, 2011).

12. "United States–People's Republic of China Bilateral Fisheries Consultation," National Marine Fisheries Service, 2007, at http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/ia/bilateral/docs/US-China_IA_Book_2007.pdf, and press release, "U.S. Coast Guard, Chinese Law Enforcement Officer Interdict 28 Illegal Fishermen on High Seas," U.S. Coast Guard Office of Public Affairs, October 28, 2008, at <http://www.uscgalaska.com/go/doc/780/236101/U-S-Coast-Guard-Chinese-Law-Enforcement-Officer-Interdict-28-Illegal-Fishermen-on-High-Seas> (June 29, 2011).

13. J. Michael Cole, "China to Bolster Paramilitary Fleet," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, May 11, 2011, p. 15.

14. Xinhua News Agency, "China Adds Patrol Ships to Safeguard Maritime Interests," January 6, 2011, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-01/06/c_13679587.htm (June 27, 2011).

The China Marine Surveillance force has conducted patrols in disputed waters in such places as the South China Sea, thereby asserting Chinese sovereignty while keeping disputes “civilianized.”

cables snapped by Chinese patrol vessels—an incident that apparently involved units of the CMS.¹⁵ At the same time, CMS vessels have been reported in Philippine waters, with Manila claiming that the Chinese are erecting structures in the area—a clear violation of China’s 2002 understanding with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) regarding conduct in the South China Sea.¹⁶

A fourth maritime force is the China Coast Guard (CCG), a paramilitary force that operates under the Ministry of Public Security but is manned by members of the People’s Armed Police (PAP). The China Coast Guard is organized into some 20 flotillas, each comparable to a regimental-level organization within the PLA. Its vessels range from 130–1,500 tons with many of them armed. In some cases, CCG vessels are former frigates, transferred from the PLAN. It is expected that, like the PAP, the CCG would have a wartime role, relieving PLA forces of rear-area duties.

The PLAN: An Overview

The most important guarantor of Chinese maritime power, however, is the People’s Liberation Army Navy. Indeed, the evolution of the PLAN reflects China’s growing dependence on the seas.

For much of the Cold War, the Chinese navy was primarily a coastal defense force. It had few major surface combatants (frigates or larger) or modern submarines and instead appeared to rely on plans to conduct a “People’s War” at sea, using masses of torpedo and missile attack craft as well as older-design submarines to overwhelm more sophisticated opponents. For much of the 1970s and 1980s, these forces’ perceived “main strategic direction” was the eastern shore and the northern border, as the Chinese worried about conflict with the USSR.¹⁷ The North Sea Fleet was therefore the main Chinese naval force.

Since the end of the Cold War, there have been several fundamental shifts in Chinese thinking. Most important, the Chinese navy, like the rest of the PLA, has moved away from a reliance on mass. Consistent with the “Two Transformations” enunciated by Jiang Zemin, the PLAN has been preparing to fight and win “Local Wars under Modern, High-Tech Conditions.”¹⁸ It has also shifted toward emphasizing quality and technological sophistication rather than quantity but limited capability.

These trends are reflected in the recent changes in the PLAN’s fleet. Over the course of the past decade, the absolute size of China’s navy has shrunk as many obsolete vessels have been decommissioned. Scores of older, missile-armed, fast attack craft—many of which carried 1960s vintage Styx-class anti-ship missiles—have been retired. China has continued to produce missile-armed fast attack craft, however. The most numerous single ship class has been the Type 022 *Houbei* missile-armed catamaran. The PLAN has deployed over 60 of

15. Alex Watts, “Vietnam Accuses China of Sabotage,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 2, 2011, at <http://www.smh.com.au/world/vietnam-accuses-china-of-sabotage-20110601-1fgec.html> (June 27, 2011).

16. Jun Pasaylo, “China Surveillance Ships Roam Phl Waters,” *Philippine Star*, June 1, 2011, at <http://www.philstar.com/nation/article.aspx?publicationSubCategoryId=63&articleId=691947> (June 27, 2011).

17. Chen Zhou, “On the Development of China’s Defensive National Defense Policy in the New Situation,” *China Military Science*, Vol. 6 (2009).

18. In 1995, Jiang Zemin called for the PLA to implement the “Two Transformations (*liangge zhuanbian*),” involving a shift from “an army preparing to fight local wars under ordinary conditions to an army preparing to fight and win local wars under modern, high-tech conditions” and a shift from “an army based on quantity to an army based on quality.” In short, it entailed shifting both how the PLA thought about future wars and how it equipped itself. Kristen Gunness and Fred Vellucci, “Reforming the Officer Corps: Keeping the College Grads In, the Peasants Out, and the Incompetent Down,” in *The People in the PLA: Recruitment, Training, and Education in China’s Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen, Andrew Scobell, and Travis Tanner (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2008), p. 192.

these 022s since 2007. These vessels, carrying the sea-skimming YJ-82 supersonic anti-ship cruise missile, are far more capable than the vessels they are replacing.

Consistent with the “Two Transformations” enunciated by Jiang Zemin, the People’s Liberation Army Navy has been preparing to fight and win local wars under modern, high-tech conditions.

Similarly, China has reduced the number of larger combatants in its navy, choosing instead platforms with much greater individual capabilities. The Type-052C *Luyang-II* destroyer, for example, is equipped with a phased-array radar for its HQ-9 surface-to-air missile (SAM) system. The HQ-9 is believed to be comparable to early-model Patriot missiles with its ability to combat most air-breathing systems and a limited anti-ballistic missile capability. Similarly, the Type 054A *Jiangkai-II* frigate is equipped with the HQ-16 SAM system, which is much more effective than previous Chinese naval air defense systems. Although these new ships are not replacing older Chinese surface combatants on a one-for-one basis, the overall capability of the PLAN surface force is nonetheless steadily improving.

It should be noted, however, that the PLAN has been building only a handful of each new class of destroyer and frigate (typically, between two and four). It is quite possible that the Chinese have been using each new class as an opportunity to test different weapons and electronics suites, as well as to improve habitability, until they find an optimal design for larger-scale production.

By contrast, the PLAN has been maintaining the size of its submarine force while it modernizes its fleet. Since 2000, the PLAN has consistently fielded between 50 and 60 diesel-electric submarines, but the age and capability of the force has been improving as older boats, especially 1950s-vintage *Romeo-*

class boats, are replaced with newer designs. These new designs include a dozen *Kilo*-class submarines purchased from Russia, as well as domestically designed and manufactured *Song* and *Yuan* class, with 16 and four boats, respectively.¹⁹ All of these are believed capable of firing not only torpedoes, but also anti-ship cruise missiles. The Chinese have also developed variants of the *Yuan* with an air-independent propulsion (AIP) system, which reduces the boats’ vulnerability by removing the need to use noisy diesel engines to recharge batteries.

In addition, the PLAN has been augmenting its aerial maritime strike capability. Along with more modern versions of the H-6 twin-engine bombers (a version of the Soviet/Russian Tu-16 Badger), the PLAN Air Force (PLANAF) has introduced a range of other strike aircraft into the inventory. These include the JH-7/FBC-1 Flying Leopard, which can carry between two and four YJ-82 anti-ship cruise missiles, and the Su-30 strike fighter. Within Chinese littoral waters, the PLANAF can bring a significant amount of firepower to bear.

The PLAN has also been working to improve its “fleet train,” and the 2010 defense white paper, *China’s National Defense in 2010*, notes the accelerated construction of “large support vessels.”²⁰ It also specifically notes that the navy is exploring “new methods of logistics support for sustaining long-time maritime missions.”

The PLAN has been augmenting its aerial maritime strike capability and is exploring “new methods of logistics support for sustaining long-time maritime missions.”

As with other aspects of PLA modernization, even as the PLAN is upgrading its weapons, it is also improving its doctrine and training, including increased emphasis on joint operations and the incorporation of electronic warfare into its training regimen. Such improvements, for example, suggest

19. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2011* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011), pp. 231–232.

20. Information Office of the State Council, *China’s National Defense in 2010* (Beijing, PRC: State Council Information Office, 2011), at http://www.gov.cn/english/official/2011-03/31/content_1835499.htm.

that PLA Air Force assets, space and cyber operations, and even Second Artillery forces might support PLANAF strikes. The new anti-ship ballistic missile forces, centered on the DF-21D (which is now reportedly at initial operational capability), should be seen as part of joint Chinese efforts to control the seas, complementing PLAAF and PLAN air, surface, and sub-surface forces.²¹

Change in Strategic Direction

Since the end of the Cold War, the PLAN's main strategic direction—which focuses on the most likely area of conflict—has also undergone a fundamental shift. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Pacific Fleet was no longer the main concern for PLAN planners. Instead, the main concern became the possibility of Taiwan's seeking independence. As a result, the “main strategic direction” shifted from the North to the East. During the 1990s, the East Sea Fleet, part of the Nanjing Military Region opposite Taiwan, became the priority.

Today, the South Sea Fleet, which is responsible for the South China Sea, seems to be gaining resources, suggesting perhaps a further shift in the main strategic direction toward the South and East. However, the East Sea Fleet remains well funded, and even the North Sea Fleet has been modernizing.

In this regard, it is possible that the main strategic direction for the PLAN is no longer focused on a particular contingency (e.g., Taiwan or the South China Sea) and instead has turned its attention to securing Chinese littoral waters up to the “first island chain.”²² This “first island chain” runs roughly from the Japanese Home Islands, along

Another indication that the PLAN is focusing on global capability rather than on specific contingencies is China's decision to acquire an aircraft carrier.

the Ryukyus chain, through Taiwan and the Philippines, to the Strait of Malacca. This shift toward a capabilities-oriented planning framework would be consistent with the “Military Strategic Guidelines for the New Period” enunciated by Jiang Zemin and the PLA's “New Historic Missions” as set forth by Hu Jintao.²³

The 2010 Chinese defense white paper would seem to support this view, as it provides unprecedented detail regarding not only ongoing naval construction efforts, but also the PLAN's missions.²⁴ Besides playing a role in maintaining strategic deterrence with ballistic missile submarines, the 2010 white paper notes that the Chinese navy is also responsible for conducting operations in distant waters (*yuanhai*) and countering non-traditional security threats.

Another indication that the PLAN is focusing on global capability rather than on specific contingencies is China's decision—often derided and doubted by some Western analysts—to acquire an aircraft carrier. When the *Shi Lang*—named for the Manchu-era Chinese admiral who conquered Taiwan in 1681—launches later this year, the PLAN will extend its reach beyond the limits of Chinese land-based naval air power. This is an essential step if the PLAN is to be a navy that is capable of extended operations at sea—what is sometimes termed a blue-water navy.

21. The Dong Feng-21 (DF-21) is a solid-fueled, two-stage, medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM), also known as the CSS-5. The DF-21D variant is a modified version, designed to target large warships such as aircraft carriers. U.S. Naval Institute, “Report: Chinese Develop Special ‘Kill Weapon’ to Destroy U.S. Aircraft Carriers,” March 31, 2009, at <http://www.usni.org/news-and-features/chinese-kill-weapon> (July 1, 2011), and U.S. Department of Defense, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2008* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2008), p. 23.

22. Chinese commentators regularly note that the term “first island chain” is a Western one and that the Chinese do not use this term in their own writings and analyses.

23. David Finkelstein, “China's National Military Strategy: An Overview of the ‘Military Strategic Guidelines,’” in *Right-Sizing the People's Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China's Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007), pp. 109, 110–112.

24. Information Office of the State Council, *China's National Defense in 2010*.

Future Chinese Directions

As the PLA has steadily modernized its fleet, some have posited that the world is on the verge of a naval arms race, comparable to that between the United Kingdom and Imperial Germany at the turn of the 19th century or between the U.S. and Imperial Japan in the 1930s. In each case, the two sides built comparable fleets, centered on battleships and aircraft carriers, and focused on decisive “fleet actions” between their respective battle lines.

Chinese naval development, however, does not fit this pattern. For one thing, the PLAN today is hardly on the verge of challenging the U.S. for maritime dominance. The Chinese acquisition of an aircraft carrier does not, in and of itself, make China a sea power comparable to the United States. The *Shi Lang* is a former Ukrainian carrier that has been refitted in Chinese yards—an economical approach toward rapidly fielding an aircraft carrier—but even after it is launched, the *Shi Lang* will still have to engage in harbor trials, sea trials, and a shakedown cruise. The ship itself is unlikely to be ready for normal operations for at least six months to a year.

It is increasingly clear that the People’s Liberation Army Navy will join the ranks of major maritime powers, not only in number of major naval combatants, but also in missions it can undertake.

Moreover, the Chinese will also have to spend time training a core group of pilots capable of conducting flight operations from a rolling, pitching deck. In addition, they will have to assemble the supplementary support ships, including escorts and replenishment vessels, in order to allow a carrier to operate with a modicum of safety while going in harm’s way. It is this intricate ballet of ships and aircraft that allows an aircraft carrier group to exert the influence and power; such a dance, however, cannot be mastered overnight.

Equally as important is the fact that the PLAN does not resemble the U.S. Navy. Beijing has been building fast attack craft and submarines in large numbers, but only a handful of each of its surface

combatant designs. At present, the PLAN does not look like a navy designed to exercise sea control across vast distances for extended periods of time. What the substantial numbers of submarines and fast attack craft, coupled with development of the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile and anti-ship cruise missiles, do suggest is that the PLA may be pursuing an asymmetric strategy at sea: one of anti-access/area denial (A2AD). It may be that the PLAN’s first priority is to keep the U.S. Navy at arm’s length, away from China’s coasts and the waters within the first island chain, rather than challenging the U.S. from the Pacific to the Atlantic.

The PLAN’s present limitations will not prevent China from ultimately becoming a major maritime power; nor do they mean that it does not intend to build a substantial navy. Indeed, even before the *Shi Lang* launches, it is increasingly clear that the People’s Liberation Army Navy will join the ranks of major maritime powers, not only in number of major naval combatants, but also in missions it can undertake. The PLAN has already been expanding its operational sphere ever farther from its own shores. Its Gulf of Aden anti-piracy task force, now in its eighth rotation, epitomizes China’s growing ability to operate at sea for extended periods of time. China is also building a fleet of hospital ships so that it can project Chinese power from the sea in peacetime.

Moreover, a Chinese navy that can dominate the waters within the first island chain is not necessarily a defensive one. Control of the sea lanes that pass within the first island chain would also allow China to coerce such states as Japan and South Korea, which also depend on the seas for their national survival. A Chinese navy that could dominate the waters within the first island chain could also overpower the far smaller forces of Southeast Asia and pose a threat to Taiwan.

What is far less certain is whether the Chinese navy will ultimately look like the American navy. Perhaps the most important divergence between these two navies is the extent to which Chinese analysts and planners have a continental land power’s view of the sea. Chinese writings suggest that Chinese strategists perceive the sea not as a broad highway for international commerce and military

deployment, but as an extension of a nation's land borders and territories.

China's concerns with sovereignty over its maritime waters, for example, are analogous to its views of territorial integrity. The *China's Ocean Development Report* specifically states that the oceans are a nation's "blue soil" and emphasizes that the sea and land should be seen as having comparable strategic value.²⁵ Similarly, China's concerns about controlling the waters within the first island chain reflect a more static view of control of the oceans that is akin to creating fortified lines on land. That ground forces continue to dominate the Chinese military (although less so than in decades past) may also be a factor influencing PLA and PLAN thinking.

If the Chinese military is to fulfill its "new historic missions," including defense of the nation's maritime interests, it will have to extend protection along the entire length of its sea lines of communication.

Geographic reality is another important consideration influencing future Chinese naval development. The first island chain represents both a shield and an obstruction: So long as the islands are in the hands of "hostile" states, China's navy and merchant marine will find it difficult to reach the open sea in time of conflict. Militarily, this difficulty would limit the PLAN's ability to project power; economically, it raises the possibility of strangling the Chinese economy. Conversely, if one or more of the islands were under Chinese control, Beijing would find it much easier to prevent opponents from reaching China's coastal cities, the nation's economic center of gravity. Furthermore, Chinese naval and air forces could then penetrate into the central Pacific, not only affecting hostile naval forces, but also potentially wreaking havoc on enemy sea lines of communication.

However, even if Beijing were to secure control of the first island chain, or at least portions of it, China's maritime lifeline would not automatically be secured. If the Chinese military is to fulfill its

"new historic missions," including defense of the nation's maritime interests, it will have to extend protection along the entire length of its sea lines of communication. Sea lanes can be threatened on the high seas as much or more as they can near the final destination; interdiction can occur anywhere along its length. China's ability to dominate the first island chain would therefore represent only a first step toward achieving maritime security rather than an ultimate solution.

In short, if it is to protect its seaborne interests, China has to operate in two distinct maritime environments. One is within the littoral waters bounded by the first island chain. Chinese strategists believe China needs to dominate these waters, if only to minimize the threat to its coastal economic centers. Such dominance may be achievable through a combination of submarines, fast attack craft, strike aircraft, and anti-ship ballistic and cruise missiles.

The other environment is the network of global waterways beyond China's "near seas." This is likely to demand a comprehensive set of capabilities including not only an expanded number of naval combatants, but also the ability to conduct power projection, maintain global surveillance and communications, and provide logistical support. These global waterways will be "*mare incognita*" for the Chinese, who have never had to operate in a sustained manner in such an environment.

America's Response to China's Maritime Expansion

Although China's maritime ambitions do not yet pose a dire threat to the United States, the situation does demand a very specific response: careful, sober policymaking. Sino-American conflict at sea is not a foregone conclusion, but conflicting claims and legal interpretations, lack of agreed terms of engagement, aggressive behavior by China on behalf of its claims, and lack of official transparency regarding Chinese capabilities and aims all increase the potential for miscalculation.

It is essential to recognize that China will be a maritime power. Given the importance of the world's oceans to sustaining China's economic development

25. State Oceanic Administration, Ocean Development Strategy Research Study Group, *China's Ocean Development Report*, p. 469.

and its position as the world's second-largest economy, the Chinese leadership undoubtedly views the seas as essential both to national survival and to their own hold on power. Opposing Chinese development in this regard would be futile and antagonistic. Therefore, the United States should accept China as a major sea power with significant maritime interests. In some cases, such as the anti-piracy efforts off Somalia or enforcement of fishing limits, those interests may even converge and offer opportunities for Sino-American cooperation.

Recognizing Chinese interests, however, is not the same as acceding to Chinese demands; there are many areas in which acquiescence to Chinese maritime policy would run contrary to America's interests. For instance, American and Chinese interests rapidly diverge over what China calls its "near seas." China wants to dominate the waters within the first island chain, which it views as its own territory. It therefore seeks to coerce other states into limiting or abandoning their own claims (e.g., Vietnam and the Philippines) and activities (e.g., interfering with U.S. air and naval operations in what China claims is its exclusive economic zone [EEZ]).

In particular, Beijing has employed idiosyncratic interpretations of the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea to argue that U.S. naval vessels and auxiliaries should restrict their operations when operating in China's EEZ. It is not in America's national interest to surrender to such tactics. Any congressional consideration of the Law of the Sea Treaty should include a thorough discussion of these Chinese interpretations as well as efforts by China to employ legal warfare, or "lawfare," to achieve through international law what it cannot achieve through overt pressure.

In this regard, even as it recognizes China's maritime interests, the United States must also protect its own maritime interests. Such protection will require action in several different areas of U.S. defense policy.

First, America must sustain a strong set of maritime forces. The United States Navy and Marine

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Corps are the ultimate guarantors of U.S. maritime interests around the world. Unlike the PLAN, U.S. naval forces must operate far from their own shores, which increases wear and tear on ships while extending transit time from home ports to patrol areas. Consequently, the U.S. must maintain robust and substantial naval forces in the Asia-Pacific region, as well as the Indian Ocean, if it is to be able to dissuade and deter potential opponents and support national interests.

This, in turn, means that reductions in the size of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps and their operational tempo will have a disproportionate effect not only on actual abilities to operate in the region, but also on perceptions of American commitment and credibility. Far from reducing Navy and Marine resources, it may be that additional resources are necessary. The U.S. cannot afford to see its navy shrink further.

At the same time, training must be strengthened and, in some cases, revived. When the Cold War ended, certain missions—including anti-shipping strikes and open-ocean anti-submarine warfare—were seen as no longer important; certain capabilities, such as the ability to launch anti-ship cruise missiles from submarines, were also abandoned.²⁶ Those missions and capabilities are likely to become important once again as the Chinese navy presents the first blue-water challenge since the late 1980s. Regaining proficiency will require not just shifts in priorities, but also increases in funds for training and for operations and maintenance.

The rise of the Chinese navy also means that the U.S. Navy must reinvigorate its research and development efforts. Currently, there are no new surface or subsurface combatants in the design phase—an

26. Norman Polmar, *The Naval Institute Guide to the Ships and Aircraft of the U.S. Fleet* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2005), p. 514; "UGM-84 Sub Harpoon," Jane's Underwater Warfare Systems, January 17, 2011, at <http://articles.janes.com/articles/Janes-Underwater-Warfare-Systems/UGM-84-Sub-Harpoon-United-States.html> (June 28, 2011).

unprecedented situation that could result in the Navy's having to respond to a Chinese challenge with outdated combatants or, even worse, face a PLAN that has more advanced capabilities. To avoid such a scenario, Congress should require the development of a comprehensive naval research and development plan that exploits advances in such technologies as unmanned aerial vehicles, unmanned submersibles, and space systems.²⁷

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The U.S. military operates jointly, so careful attention must also be paid to Air Force and Army operations throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Given that both Chinese naval air capabilities and PLA Air Force systems are being modernized—including the proliferation of advanced SAM systems such as the S-400 and HQ-9—the U.S. Pacific Air Force cannot afford to fall behind in its own modernization program.

Low observable aircraft and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are especially important, as are electronic warfare capabilities. It is essential that the U.S. Air Force sustain funding for the F-35, especially in light of the shortsighted decision to end the F-22 program. Meanwhile, Congress should consider acquiring additional E/A-18 Growler electronic warfare aircraft and advanced UAV systems to facilitate air operations within the Chinese air defense envelope. Similarly, special operations forces and space forces can play a role in effecting deterrence and presence. The United States should also seek to expand its already robust interactions in these areas with allied and selected other Asian militaries.

All of these elements should be employed not only to maintain, but also to strengthen the network of American alliances and relationships throughout the western Pacific and Indian Ocean—a region

where the United States is more welcome than the PRC. Unlike China, the U.S. has no outstanding territorial disputes with regional states. Similarly, the U.S. provides maritime security for sea lanes globally, which benefits local states—including, whether the PRC acknowledges it or not, China—as much as the U.S. itself. Asian states therefore look to the U.S. as a provider of key “public goods” as well as an essential balancing element against burgeoning Chinese power.

By supporting regional states that are seeking to ensure their own sovereignty and rights, the United States can leverage its role in the region. For example, at last year's ASEAN regional forum meeting in Hanoi, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's offer to help mediate the South China Sea disputes was a useful way to assert an American diplomatic presence that is consistent with a constructive and peaceful U.S. military presence.

Active participation in regional meetings and conferences underscores American leadership and presence. It also strengthens America's ties to the region. Specifically, free trade agreements with East Asian states and with ASEAN as a whole, as well as the Trans-Pacific Partnership program, would reinforce U.S. economic links across the Pacific.

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A withdrawal of U.S. naval forces from the western Pacific to Guam, by contrast, would likely be seen not as a cost-cutting measure or way to mitigate conflict, but as a *de facto* concession of the western Pacific to Chinese dominance. The importance of maintaining regional presence should be a factor in any discussion of altering the U.S. basing structure on Okinawa.

Nor is preservation of maritime interests solely a military concern. The U.S. Coast Guard interacts with many maritime law enforcement organi-

27. For further discussion of some of these issues and options, see Mackenzie Eaglen and Bryan McGrath, “Thinking About a Day Without Sea Power: Implications for U.S. Defense Policy,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2555, May 16, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/05/thinking-about-a-day-without-sea-power-implications-for-us-defense-policy>.

zations throughout the region. Consequently, the Coast Guard is particularly familiar with the needs and concerns of the region's smaller maritime powers. This familiarity is an essential part of U.S. soft power, and such soft power can greatly enhance U.S. military operations.

The United States should also provide allies and friends, such as the Philippines and Taiwan, with modern arms.²⁸ This might include the sale of additional advanced combat aircraft and the transfer of retired U.S. Navy warships—something that would especially benefit the Philippines. Coupled with a regular schedule of joint and combined exercises with local militaries, sales of these arms would not only strengthen local capabilities for self-defense, but also ensure that, in the event of a regional contingency (including natural disasters), there would be structural interoperability and familiarity between the U.S. and its allies' tactics and procedures.

Conclusion

Given the growth of China's economy and its attendant dependence on the seas, it is inevitable that China will have a growing presence on the world's oceans. As a result, the Chinese naval presence will naturally increase.

Although a larger naval presence does not mean that China will necessarily challenge the U.S. Navy's preeminence, certain Chinese military developments, such as anti-access/area denial capabilities, suggest a less optimistic appraisal of China's growing maritime operations. It is therefore ultimately in America's interest to pursue a consistent policy of maritime strength—a policy that reminds China that while the United States can afford to be a friendly maritime power, America will also be an undefeatable maritime opponent.

—*Dean Cheng is Research Fellow in Chinese Political and Security Affairs in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*

28. Renato C. De Castro and Walter Lohman, "Empowering a New Era in the United States–Philippines Security Alliance," Heritage Foundation *Background*, No. 2431, June 28, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/06/Empowering-a-New-Era-in-the-United-States-Philippines-Security-Alliance>.