

The View from the West: Chinese Naval Power in the 21st Century

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Two significant events in 2009 have drawn the world's attention towards China and its increasingly capable maritime forces: the deployment of Chinese naval vessels to the Gulf of Aden to contribute to a multinational armada to combat piracy; and the 60th anniversary of the Chinese Navy, marked by pomp and ceremony at the coastal city of Qingdao. While the evolution of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) may not yet be a topic that pops up at the dinner table, future developments may make the naval arm of one of the world's largest militaries a regular news item.



Chinese destroyer *Taizhou* (138) alongside with 054A Frigate (529) and sister-ship, *Hangzhou* (136).

The PLAN's rapid modernization has occurred for two main reasons: necessity and opportunity. For much of the history of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the national security calculus was focused inwards, towards the countries with which it shared a land border. Whether secessionist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang, border disputes with the Soviet Union and India, or economic considerations stemming from China's agricultural and industrial heartlands, for decades Beijing gave primacy to land forces, to the exclusion of the navy, which was largely a riverine and littoral force. A fundamental shift in attitudes occurred in the 1980s, as China's Maoist leadership was succeeded by a more outward-looking generation of Chinese leaders, led by Deng Xiaoping. Under Deng, China began the momentous shift from a self-sustaining communist state to the globalized behemoth that we

know today. The economic policies that opened China and established economic linkages throughout the world were accompanied by a greater reliance on the oceans to export finished products and to import the vital resources necessary to sustain economic growth.

While economic considerations were certainly a factor behind an expanded navy, strategic considerations played an even greater role. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, Beijing was freed from worrying over its land border disputes, and instead turned its attention towards the seas and its disputes over the status of Taiwan, the Spratly and Paracel Islands, and the Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea. Furthermore, it has been said that Chinese officials were awed by the firepower displayed in the 1991 Gulf War, which made them realize just how lacking their maritime forces were when compared to the United States and its allies. Thus, the 1990s witnessed a fundamental shift in China's strategic thinking, with perhaps the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, when the United States placed two aircraft carriers in the Taiwan Strait, as the crystallizing moment that steered China full-bore towards a rapid naval modernization program.

Since the 1990s, the PLAN has strengthened its forces around four core elements: frigates and destroyers; submarines; naval fighters; and anti-ship missiles. It is unsurprising that these are precisely the systems required to fight a sea battle against an aircraft carrier and its battle group, and there is little doubt that the lessons learned in the mid-1990s spurred the acquisition of this gear. Blessed with both the political will and economic resources to make the concept of a strong blue-water force a reality, China has regularly confounded analysts, producing more highly technical pieces of naval kit faster than the best estimates. US naval analysts have commented in the past that nearly every time they would venture a date by which a Chinese naval system would be created or obtained, the PLAN would beat their best guesses by months, even years.

A look at the numbers is revealing. Between 2002 and 2004, China launched 13 new submarines. In the year 2003 alone, China began construction on no fewer than 70 military ships, mainly coastal defence vessels and

amphibious landing ships. China now has the sea-lift capacity to move 10,000 troops into a war zone. Last year, analysts estimated (modestly) that China has 72 modern frigates and destroyers, 58 submarines, 50 medium and heavy amphibious ships, and roughly 41 missile patrol boats.

While the current Chinese fleet is unquestionably impressive, the question being asked throughout the Asia-Pacific region is what China is going to do with it. Given that it has so many maritime border disputes with its neighbours, few are convinced that Beijing will simply use its new maritime muscle to fight pirates in the Gulf of Aden or conduct fisheries patrols within its exclusive economic zone. Having achieved its goals of establishing a credible blue-water force that can project power beyond its 'first island chain' and into its 'second island chain,' many states are wondering whether an emboldened China will use its naval forces to reclaim Taiwan, or control all or some of the Spratly, Paracel and Senkaku Islands.

While major power plays such as these are relatively rare in an era of multilateral institutions and interwoven regional economic interests, China has not allayed fears of impending Chinese dominance in the South China Sea and beyond. There are several reasons for this. For one, Beijing has been deliberately unclear about many aspects of its expanding military clout, including details of its military budgets, strategic goals and capabilities. The reason for this is simple: keeping your opponents guessing forces them to hedge against a variety of scenarios, and gives the Chinese the element of surprise. In the chess game that is Asia-Pacific security, this gives China an edge.

Domestically, a new generation of Chinese, who have only ever known a rising powerful China, is now coming to occupy positions of power within government and the military, and there is a strong demand from this group for the country to exert its new power in the region and claim China's rightful role (as this group sees it) as a regional hegemon. This attitude was on full display at Qingdao during the navy's 60th anniversary, with the PLAN's Chief, Admiral Wu Shengli, proudly discussing the naval force's upcoming plans, which include more large surface combat ships, supersonic naval aircraft, carrier-killing cruise missiles and high-speed intelligent torpedoes.

While China's political leaders have tried to stress to the world that the PLAN's rise is entirely peaceful, military leaders appear to have skipped over that page in the speaking points. The deployment of PLAN forces to the Gulf of Aden recalls an earlier time when Chinese mariners such as Admiral Zheng He explored the far reaches of the oceans, and nationalist Chinese are remembering

the humiliation that British naval forces imparted on the Qing dynasty following their resounding maritime victories during the two Opium Wars. For these nationalists, China is finally having the last laugh.

Regional states watch developments in Chinese ports nervously. China's political brass, President Hu most prominent among them, have gone to great lengths to stress that China is peaceful and that Beijing does not want to be drawn into an arms race. Notwithstanding this public relations strategy, China's dramatic increase in its naval strength has forced others to bolster their fleets, with billions now being spent to improve blue-water fleets and maritime defences throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Only one week after the anniversary celebrations in Qingdao, Vietnam announced the purchase of six Russian-built *Kilo*-class submarines, as well as 12 Su-30 fighter jets. As well, Australia released its long-awaited defence White Paper, which called for a significant boost to the country's maritime defences, including the construction of 12 new submarines, three air warfare destroyers, eight frigates, naval helicopters and 20 enhanced patrol craft by 2030. Other states, including Malaysia and Indonesia, have bolstered their navies through the acquisition of new submarines and the construction of new surface vessels. The notion of avoiding an arms race in the region seems anachronistic now.

While China is undeniably permitted to have a fleet that befits its standing in the world and one that can protect its increasingly stretched sea lines of communication, Beijing must do more to assuage the concerns of its neighbours. Starting points could be confidence-building measures, such as greater political dialogue through regional bodies such as ASEAN+3, in order to manage disputes in the South China Sea. With several Spratly claimants presenting their case to the United Nations this year, more must be done to mitigate disputes and ensure a peaceful resolution to this matter.

China could also be more forthcoming about its military capabilities and share more information with potential adversaries. No one expects Beijing to throw open the doors to its most secretive facilities, but greater openness in this area could convince would-be rivals that China need not be a threat, and could promote stronger dialogue and military-to-military relations. Peace and stability are in the interests of all states in the Asia-Pacific area, and as the new regional heavyweight, China must take the lead in promoting an atmosphere of dialogue and cooperation. 🇨🇳

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