China’s Maritime Strategy: A Prolonged Period of Formulation

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China’s arrival as a maritime power is an undeniable feature of today’s international system. This is gaining the attention of Westerners who are trying to understand the underlying forces at work, and predict the future trajectory and the degree to which China’s new maritime focus conflicts with the current maritime regime. One of the main concerns is to discover why Beijing is not being transparent about the intentions underpinning the development of its maritime capabilities. Most Westerners assume that China has a well-developed and coherent maritime strategy.

I would like to argue that this is not the case. Instead of having a clear maritime policy, China is in a prolonged period of policy formulation. Unlike what most Westerners seem to assume – i.e., that China is one actor with one voice – this process is characterized by a multi-layered and complex process populated by various domestic actors interacting and sometimes competing over the interests, strategies and overall direction Beijing should pursue.

There are some Chinese interests and activities which are ongoing sources of contestation with the West and regional actors, particularly Taiwan and the South China Sea (SCS). These issues distract investigation of China’s maritime strategy as a whole, and lead to the assumption that it is a finalized product being implemented rather than under construction. A more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary debate within China about its maritime future including key actors, interests and areas of deliberation is needed. In this way the West can engage China not by countering or resisting its rise as a maritime power but by building a relationship of mutually defined interests within the maritime domain.

Shifting Focus: Beijing’s Turn to the Maritime Domain

Over the last three decades the maritime domain has changed from an area of peripheral interest to one of vital importance for Chinese leaders. The most influential facilitators of this shift have been the end of the Cold War and the transformation of the international system to an interconnected globalized world dependent on seaborne trade. For years China had been fixated internally and towards the continent. This was because of tense relations with its land neighbours, the Soviet Union and India, and economics related to China’s command-style system. The disappearance of the Soviet Union, the explosion of export-driven economic growth initiated by the Open Door reforms of the 1980s, and the growth of population centres along the coastline motivated China’s leaders to look to the seas.

With improving relations with land neighbours and a reconfiguration of economic development, Beijing has increasingly tied its success to the world economic system of seaborne trade. For years China had been fixated internally and towards the continent. This was because of tense relations with its land neighbours, the Soviet Union and India, and economics related to China’s command-style system. The disappearance of the Soviet Union, the explosion of export-driven economic growth initiated by the Open Door reforms of the 1980s, and the growth of population centres along the coastline motivated China’s leaders to look to the seas.

The South China Sea is an increasingly contested area, particularly over offshore petroleum and fishing claims.
2010 China briefly became the world’s largest shipbuilder (but has now slipped behind South Korea), creating an industry of massive companies with revenues in the billions, employing hundreds of thousands of people. The problem for China is that economic development is reliant on foreign markets and energy imports. This causes concern in Beijing over the potential vulnerability of China’s extensive sea lines of communications (SLOCs) worldwide.

In addition to securing China’s economic lifelines, the new focus on the maritime domain also incorporates territorial and maritime claims in adjacent waters including Taiwan, and the Paracel and Spratly Islands. Tied to the importance of these disputes is a growing sense of nationalism which promotes the enhancement of Chinese military power at sea not simply in support of economic interests but as a fundamental step towards becoming a great power. For Beijing these dynamics – the products of government reforms, emerging domestic forces and changing international circumstances – have come to be the motivating factors of China’s expanded involvement in the maritime domain.

Despite these pronouncements there is a disconnect between Chinese policy and behaviour, specifically its growing naval power. Many Western commentators highlight discrepancies but they do not analyse the context within which these issues have been constructed or the assumptions underpinning them. In particular, Westerners make several assumptions. First, they assume a Chinese maritime strategy exists but there is a noticeable void as to what this term means. A strategy is a central logic which may or may not be explicit, but which informs and links policies and actions, and through which leaders determine what interests are and how to achieve them with the capabilities available. Analyses of China’s maritime strategy are usually descriptions of China’s maritime activities from an international perspective focused on great power politics. This neglects the roles of various domestic actors in China’s maritime domain who are competing over how to define interests and marry capabilities with objectives. Thus Western analysis focuses on outputs not the inputs that lead to a policy that may depend on the dominance of domestic actors at the time.

Second, there is too much focus on China’s growing naval power to the degree that many assume that naval strategy and maritime strategy are one and the same. Such analyses assume that naval power has become the favoured method to achieve political and economic interests due to the Chinese naval modernization program. Naval developments are interpreted as stemming from a centralized plan without contemplating the possibility that decisions are idiosyncratic and the result of effective framing of the agenda by both military actors and security industries promoting more limited interests. Thus, the perception...
of China as a potential competitor to the United States tends to affect the analysis of Chinese naval power, more so than other developing naval powers. Our biases shape our threat assessments by beginning not with what we think an adversary can do but what we imagine it will do with its power.³

The third assumption is that China is monolithic, that there is no debate within it. Many Westerners overlook growing debate within China itself over its maritime future. Contrary to the days of hegemonic leaders, Chinese decision-making has become more diffused, opening arenas for increasing debate among actors with varying bureaucratic interests which may not align with the interests of leaders. The regime still has a strong authoritarian structure which imposes constraints on policy debates, but in the past few decades there has been an explosion of institutions in China composed of academics, policymakers, business leaders and military officers debating future objectives and strategies.⁴ As well, as we have just recently seen during the turnover of power in China, there are serious strains within the top leadership about the future direction the country should take. Outsiders cannot know exact details of the debate, but it is obvious that there are a number of areas of contestation ranging from specific projects to China’s guiding maritime logic. Just like in other countries these various actors advocate for interests which can overlap and/or conflict. These domestic differences should not be glossed over or seen as mere discussions over tactics, but as real deliberation pertaining to the highest levels of government strategy and planning.

The discussions about the direction of Chinese military developments include political, economic and military elements. Various actors debate, for example, whether to develop littoral or blue-water forces (or both), how to assert maritime claims, how to designate bureaucratic responsibilities for maritime matters, the future of China’s commercial industry, how to ensure continuity of seaborne trade, forging relations with resource partners, the relation of sea power to great power status, and the relationship with the United States. This is not to suggest that everything is up for debate but that there is gradation to the degree to which China has defined certain interests and the measures it favours to achieve them.

Areas of Contestation
Currently there are a number of aspects within Chinese policy and action which are or will be areas of contestation with other maritime actors, specifically the United States, but also Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan and the Philippines. A better understanding of the motivation in these matters will allow a greater appreciation of the intricacies of the disputes.

The first area of contestation is related to China’s increasing assertion that maritime areas are its territory. The 2010 Ocean Development Report refers to China’s “blue soil,” an extension of its land borders and territories. The 1992 Law of the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zones proclaims the entire South China Sea as Chinese territory. It also illustrates that Beijing’s justification is rooted not in scientific claims of geological features but in historic claims which are not recognized under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and reveal a major area of disagreement with maritime neighbours.

This thinking promotes strict control over adjacent waters around politically sensitive areas such as Taiwan and the SCS. The growing nationalism – in China and in neighbouring states – is a powerful force which shapes leaders’ perceptions, and is sometimes fed by Asian leaders for their own political purposes. Specifically this is becoming more apparent in the SCS where Chinese maritime claims have caused hostility with a number of southeast Asian states. It should be noted that on this specific issue there is a desire to paint a simple binary picture of China as the aggressor facing off against the other claimants. This completely distorts and overly simplifies the disputes between the other states such as Taiwan and Japan which became evident in the summer of 2012.

Despite signing the 2003 Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, China has sent police and enforcement units to exercise jurisdiction in disputed areas. This reflects a policy of attempting to portray the issue as not one of competing legal claims but a constabulary matter to maintain authority of its historic waters. The South China Sea provides a clear example of the current jockeying for position and power underway among interested domestic agencies. These agencies include the Chinese Maritime Safety Administration, the Maritime Surveillance Force and the Chinese Coast Guard, not to mention the military/navy and resource-extractive agencies which have an eye on potentially resource-rich areas, and they are all competing to frame this environment for their...
China is increasing production of the Yuan-class air-Independent propulsion diesel/electric submarines.

The second area of contestation relates to the issue of securing resources. To keep its economy running, China has to import a number of key natural resources from steel to oil. The maintenance of these flows is a huge concern for Beijing and is a frequent element of Chinese discourse. Although it may be framed in terms of historic control, the resource potential of the South China Sea, for example, is a motivating factor for Beijing in proclaiming its authority over the area. Because of the global nature of its imports and exports, China’s maritime concerns extend far beyond its neighbourhood. Security not only implies protection and enforcement of trade routes via military means but also employing diplomatic and economic strategies to build warm relations with natural resource producers. We can see this in Beijing’s creation of extensive relations with states in Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. There is concern in the West, and India, about the nature and extent of these relations, the increasingly dominant position in maritime industries of Chinese actors and the possible use of the Chinese navy in some form in protecting these SLOCs abroad.

Changes in Chinese naval strategy and capabilities cannot, however, be reduced to one variable but include a host of factors such as the role of naval leadership, relations with members of the civilian leadership, changing perceptions of the external security environment, availability of funding and technologies, and the institutionalization of naval research. The most important debate in these matters is the framing of the security environment and the ways in which military power can assist state objectives. To this end, it is interesting that the writing of American Alfred Thayer Mahan is an important area of study for Chinese naval strategists.

The Next Steps

While these areas of contestations are real, there are avenues for the West to engage with China regarding maritime matters, and there are already a number of common linkages. The maintenance of economic growth is Beijing’s primordial interest and in pursuance of this the continued free movement of trade by seaborne transport is vital. There are legitimate concerns about China’s increasing naval power and political manoeuvring, but it is the protection of sea trade which represents the greatest arena to foster cooperative and mutually beneficial relations particularly to counteract a number of maritime security threats. Anti-piracy operations are the clearest example of such cooperation but as China becomes a maritime actor, there will likely be a desire to have influence over constructing the politics of the maritime domain. The West, therefore, must acknowledge that in the future Chinese warships will operate more frequently across the maritime domain. China will be increasingly assertive in issues ranging from UNCLOS to environment protection to the opening of the Arctic Ocean, and these arenas will need new frameworks in order to interact with the world’s fastest growing maritime player.
It is China’s naval power which is the greatest cause of concern for its neighbours right now. While there are actors who call for caution, there are many others who are pushing for a more assertive, confrontational posture. To meet the changes in Chinese focus toward the sea, the West must continue to develop a more thorough appreciation of the contemporary Chinese discourse on sea power and in particular Chinese concerns about the preponderance of American naval power. Washington’s foreign policy ‘pivot’ towards the Asia-Pacific region will heighten such concerns in China. Leaders in Beijing, however, are well aware that the continued benefit from seaborne trade – which lies at the root of China’s increased prosperity – has occurred because the US Navy has ensured the security of the global commons. This is an issue the West can emphasize when discussing the maritime arena with China. If it is serious about becoming a major maritime power, China must acknowledge the importance of the free movement of goods through the global commons.

Given rapid change, uncertainty about motivations and competing jurisdictional claims, consultative mechanisms need to be established regarding naval issues to avoid misunderstandings and build trust in the Asia-Pacific region. While it is unlikely that naval relations between the United States and China, and in the region in general, will become close in the immediate future, new partnerships and joint efforts will have to be developed to tackle mutual areas of concern across a spectrum of issues from terrorism to maritime ecological concerns to responding to natural disasters.

Conclusions
China’s maritime strategy is still in a period of formulation – it has not been written in stone as many Western analysts seem to believe. Furthermore, in order to understand this process, China must not be portrayed as a monolithic entity solely reacting to the power realities of the international system. Like any state, it consists of domestic actors competing over the future trajectory of this process, usually attempting to advance bureaucratic interests and influence. This is evident in the continued discussion among Chinese academics, although we don’t know if the debates are genuine or if they are relevant in the making of China’s maritime strategy. However, if the debates are real, and they are increasingly translated and reproduced in English journals, the range and complexity of issues at hand is evident for a regime trying to balance domestic priorities with international ones.

Although the maritime strategy is still being formulated, Beijing has decided on a number of broad priorities including continued use of seaborne trade, the augmentation of its naval power and a desire for growing political influence in maritime issues. We must not assume that China is a benign actor because there are areas of contestation with many other maritime actors, but it is in a period of formulation allowing for portals of influence and engagement from outside actors. Whether the West capitalizes upon them will be dependent on the context through which we interpret China’s maritime rise.

Notes
2. State Oceanic Administration, Ocean Development Strategy Research Group, China’s Ocean Development Report 2010. These reports are now published annually.

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