



China's Growing Naval Power

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This is the third installment in a three-part series investigating the state of China's military.

On September 7, 2010, the Japanese coast guard arrested the captain of a Chinese fishing boat for ramming two of its patrol vessels near disputed islands in the East China Sea. The collision took place around the Senkaku Islands, which Japan administers but China claims (and calls the Diaoyu Islands). The incident sparked a major diplomatic confrontation between Beijing and Tokyo: China demanded the captain's release and canceled high-level meetings with Japan. Beijing also suspended exports of crucial minerals that Japan uses in high-tech products like hybrid cars. Finally, in late September, Japan released the detained Chinese captain in an apparent attempt to resolve the standoff, but tensions lingered.

U.S. officials urged China and Japan to resolve the dispute through negotiations. Because the Senkaku Islands are covered by the U.S.-Japan defense treaty, and are administered by Japan, the U.S. could be drawn into a war with China

if the diplomatic dispute escalated into a conflict between the Chinese and Japanese navies.

This incident reflects Beijing's overarching maritime issues. China claims sovereignty over the whole South China Sea, something Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines obviously protest. The Obama administration has articulated Washington's support for peacefully resolving any maritime territorial disputes between China and its neighbors, and asserted America's interest in maintaining freedom of navigation in the area.¹

While Sino-American friction over maritime security issues isn't new, China's regional assertiveness marks a strategic shift, one that I outlined in a previous PPI Policy Memo on Beijing's "Emerging Anti Access Strategy"². In that paper, I argued China's military strategy was not to best America in a force-on-force battle, but, rather, to develop asymmetric

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war-fighting capacities that deter American military intervention by driving up its cost. With that in mind, the implications of China's growing maritime assertiveness go far beyond tensions over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and Beijing's frustration with Washington's response to claims on the South China Sea.

Since naval forces have access to the largest global commons—the high seas—it is only natural that as China emerges as a global power, it would emphasize a more vigorous naval strategy, with modern naval hardware and a force trained to operate it effectively. A more powerful Chinese Navy will not only bolster China's anti-access and area denial capabilities³, but also enable Beijing to defend China's expanding global economic interests.

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It's clear that China's Navy is growing in size and quality. Not only does China have the largest navy in East Asia, it has an increasingly modern and capable force of imported and indigenously produced destroyers, frigates, missile patrol craft, and submarines. Beijing is even planning to deploy its own aircraft carriers, a development sure to alarm neighbors such as Japan, Vietnam, and India.

But what does it mean for American policy makers? Should the United States increase its own maritime power in response to Beijing's growing strength? Are there diplomatic levers that Washington might pull to forestall potential Chinese aggression?

Below, I explore these issues, first by giving a brief history of China's evolving naval strategies since the People's Republic began in 1949. (It's critical that U.S. policy makers understand the evolution of China's thinking about the roles and missions of its navy.) Then, I provide a full accounting of recent Chinese naval hardware developments. Finally, I draw policy recommendations designed to help American policy makers manage the challenges that have arisen as a result of China's improving capabilities, regional assertiveness and expanding global interests.

In short, the U.S. will need to strengthen its ties to key countries in East Asia and develop strategic and tactical military concepts and capabilities that would allow it to counter China's growing military power. Meanwhile, U.S. policy makers must seek collaboration with the Chinese military in an effort to highlight the benefits of being a global stakeholder to Beijing.

China's Evolving Naval Strategy

China's naval strategy has gone through two major changes since the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. Until the 1980s, Beijing was interested in little more than protecting its coastline from invasion; its naval strategy during those 30-plus years was appropriately known as "near-coast defense." China possessed only small ships that had limited capabilities, dependent on land-based air defense and firepower support that was vulnerable to enemy aircraft, surface ships, and submarines.

This strategy emphasized guarding waters about 12 nautical miles from China's coast, in part because its main focus during the 1950s was contending with Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang forces, which fled to Taiwan after losing the Chinese Civil War to the Communists.

In the late 1960s, as the Sino-Soviet relationship deteriorated, Beijing sensed its primary threat was actually from Moscow. Consequently, China's Navy, formally known as the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), was mainly responsible for supporting land operations in the event of a war between China and the USSR.

FIGURE 1: CHINA'S EXPANDING SPHERES OF NAVAL INFLUENCE



Following Deng Xiaoping's 1978 economic reform and opening policy, China's coastal regions grew in economic importance and prestige. This meant that the PLAN's strategy had to shift in a new direction.

Admiral Liu Huaqing is frequently credited with spearheading the PLAN's modernization efforts. He served as the commander of China's Navy from 1982 to 1988 and advocated developing the Navy to keep pace with China's rapid economic growth and changes in modern naval warfare. Transitioning to "near seas active defense" in the 1980s, China set its sights on a much larger area than before, covering the waters within and around the "first

island chain," from Japan to the Ryukyu Islands to Taiwan to the Philippines to Borneo. Thus, the PLAN was now responsible for the Yellow Sea, East China Sea and South China Sea, as well as areas adjacent to the outer rims of that chain of islands.

The new strategy carried new missions as well: Instead of simply supporting the army's land operations, the Navy was to focus on reunification with Taiwan, maritime territorial disputes, securing sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and deterring or defending against enemy attack from the sea. Following the 1995-96 Taiwan

Strait crisis, the PLAN became mainly focused on potential Taiwan scenarios, such as a blockade or invasion of the island and countering U.S. intervention in a cross-Strait conflict.

Yet the strategy did not cover independent operations in more distant regions. As China has become a focal point of the global economy, its naval missions have followed suit. Today the PLAN appears to be moving toward a new strategy of “far-seas operations,” with responsibilities extending out to the “second island chain” – running from northern Japan to the Northern Mariana Islands to Guam – and additional duties beyond when required.

The increased responsibilities follow President Hu Jintao’s 2004 enunciation of the Chinese military’s “New Historic Missions” and the subsequent development of the concept of “Diversified Military Tasks.” This approach requires the military not only to enhance its combat capabilities, but also to respond to nontraditional security challenges by participating in “nonwar military operations.”

The Navy won’t have an operational modern SSBN until the new JL-2 submarine-launched ballistic missile is fully developed; the latest Pentagon report indicates that it has failed the final round of flight tests.

Most prominently, President Hu underscored the need “to build a powerful People’s Navy that can adapt to its historical mission during a new century and a new period.” PLAN Commander Wu Shengli and Political Commissar Hu Yanlin similarly stressed the importance of modernizing the Navy in the authoritative Chinese Communist Party journal *Seeking Truth*.

TABLE 1. THE PLA NAVY’S IMPROVING ANTI-AIR WARFARE CAPABILITIES

Platform	SAM System and Range
Sovremenny I/II DDG (Imported from Russia)	SA-N-7 (Russian), about 12-20nm
LUYANG I DDG (Domestically produced)	SA-N-7 (Russian), about 12-20nm
LUYANG II DDG (Domestically produced)	HHQ-9 (Domestically produced), about 55nm
LUZHOU DDG (Domestically produced)	SA-N-20 (Russian), about 80nm
JIANGKAI II FFG (Domestically produced)	HHQ-16 (Domestically produced), about 20-40nm

Source: Office of Naval Intelligence, *The People’s Liberation Army Navy: A Modern Navy With Chinese Characteristics*, August 2009, p. 18.

Modernization now means that Beijing could call upon its Navy to defend China’s regional maritime interests, protect SLOCs, evacuate Chinese citizens from trouble spots overseas, provide international humanitarian assistance and disaster relief activities and participate in operations such as the anti-piracy deployment currently underway off of Somalia.

That does not mean, however, that the PLAN will forgo missions closer to home. According to the Office of Naval Intelligence, “Despite increased consideration of missions farther from China, the Navy’s primary focus will remain on preparing for operations within the ‘first and second island chains’...with emphasis on a potential conflict with U.S. forces over Taiwan.” Even though China’s relationship with Taiwan has improved dramatically over the past two years, the Navy will continue to maintain a strong focus on Taiwan scenarios until the issue is resolved on terms acceptable to China.

New Naval Hardware

China’s Navy was once a minimally capable force of mostly small and outdated ships, relegated largely to coastal defense operations. Today

Beijing sails a larger and more capable navy of imported and domestically produced surface ships and submarines. What's more, high-ranking Chinese military officers have revealed Beijing's intention to deploy its first aircraft carrier—a symbol of the Chinese military's limited but growing power projection capability.¹³

American policy makers should be able to talk specifics when describing China's growing naval power. To that end, what follows is an extensive list of new Chinese naval capabilities.

China has made the crucial decision to shift from large numbers of low-capability, single-mission platforms to a smaller force of highly capable, multi-mission systems.

In recent years, regional military powers Japan and South Korea have upgraded their navies, but China's force, including an estimated 75 destroyers and frigates, 54 diesel submarines and six nuclear-powered attack submarines, 55 medium and large amphibious ships and 85 missile patrol boats, is the largest in Asia.¹⁴

Much more important than the numbers, however, are recent improvements in the quality of China's platforms—an eclectic mix of modern and legacy hardware.¹⁵ It has made the crucial decision to shift from large numbers of low-capability, single-mission platforms to a smaller force of highly capable, multi-mission systems.¹⁶ As a result, according to the Department of Defense's most recent report on Chinese military developments, the percentage of modern, multi-mission surface ships in China's inventory increased from less than 10 percent in 2004 to about 25 percent in 2009. Even more striking, the percentage of modern submarines (defined as those capable of firing anti-ship cruise missiles) climbed from

less than 10 percent in 2004 to about 50 percent last year.¹⁷

Specifically, the PLAN has had particularly noteworthy developments in a number of types of platforms, including destroyers, frigates, missile patrol craft, replenishment ships, amphibious ships, and hospital ships. As a note of warning, the following section is a bit technical and readers may choose to skim it and jump to the policy recommendations.

Destroyers and Frigates: The new ships carry surface-to-air missile systems that reflect Beijing's emphasis on improving anti-air warfare capability, helping to address a longstanding weakness (See table 1). Its most advanced combatants include *Sovremenny I* and *II* destroyers imported from Russia, equipped with SS-N-22 Sunburn supersonic antiship cruise missiles, as well as several types of new domestically produced surface ships.

The domestically produced surface combatants all feature improved air defense capabilities and include two *Luyang II*-class (Type 052C) destroyers, featuring a sophisticated phased radar system similar to the advanced Western AEGIS platform.¹⁸ Further, Beijing possesses two *Luzhou*-class (Type 051C) destroyers, and four *Jiangkai II*-class (Type 054A) frigates.¹⁹

Missile Patrol Craft: The PLAN has significantly upgraded its coastal and littoral warfare capabilities, deploying about 60 *Houbei*-class (Type 022) missile patrol boats, which feature a wave-piercing catamaran hull and antiship cruise missiles.²⁰ Beijing has also deployed new vessels capable of supporting amphibious combat operations as well as participating humanitarian assistance and disaster relief missions, such as a new landing platform dock (LPD), an amphibious ship, and a new hospital ship.²¹

Submarines: The submarine force has been one of the most closely watched components of China's military modernization program since the mid-1990s.²² Continuing the general theme, China is transitioning from the large but less capable



submarine fleet it had in the 1980s to a more modern one.²³ Specifically, older submarines, such as the *Romeo SS*, *Ming SS* and *Han SSN* might still be useful in a conflict over Taiwan, but newer, more capable submarines such as the Russian *Kilo SS* and Chinese *Yuan SS*, *Shang SSN* and Type 095 SSN are the wave of the future.²⁴

The *Yuan SS* is China's most modern diesel submarine. The *Yuan* may feature air independent propulsion, which allows a conventional submarine to stay submerged for longer periods of time without having to surface to recharge its batteries.²⁵ The *Song SS*, *Yuan SS* and *Shang SSN* are capable of firing torpedoes and mines in addition to antiship cruise missiles, which allows them to pose a greater threat to an adversary's surface ships.²⁶ In addition, China is expected to deploy five new Type 095 SSNs in the coming years.²⁷

China has long aspired to deploy nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) to create a mobile, sea-based nuclear deterrence capability and place its Navy on par with those of the other nations that operate SSBNs—the United States, Russia, France and Britain. The results have been disappointing: Launched in the early 1980s, China's single *Xia*-class SSBN has never conducted a nuclear deterrence patrol.²⁸ Today, however,

Beijing is focused on enhancing its nuclear strike capability with the emergence of the *Jin*-class, or Type-094, China's second-generation and improved SSBN.^{29 30}

Chinese sources suggest that the PLAN may eventually deploy six Type-094 SSBNs,³¹ enough to conduct near-continuous deterrent patrols.³² But the Navy won't have an operational modern SSBN until the new *JL-2* submarine-launched ballistic missile is fully developed; the latest Pentagon report indicates that it has failed the final round of flight tests.³³ Consequently, the timeframe for a full upgrade of China's sea-based nuclear deterrent remains unclear.³⁴

Naval aviation: As the first major upgrade, China is refurbishing a former Soviet *Kuznetsov*-class aircraft carrier that it will likely employ for training purposes beginning in the next few years. The next step will be the development and deployment of an indigenous aircraft carrier, which is expected to enter into service sometime between 2015 and 2020.³⁵

Once primarily responsible for providing air cover to its Navy, the PLA Naval Air Force (PLANAF) is focusing on maritime strike missions now that the Navy's surface ships are increasingly capable of providing their own air defense. Although the PLANAF is currently land-based (apart from a small number of ship-borne helicopters), that will change once China begins operating its own aircraft carriers.³⁶

PLAN Training and Operations

In line with China's evolving strategy and its growing capabilities to conduct operations at greater distances from its coast, the PLAN is engaging in more complex and realistic training and exercises, including long-range patrols by submarines and surface ships that enable its military to practice the skills required to operate in wartime.³⁷

Routine patrols within the Sea of Japan, South China Sea and Philippine Sea reflect Beijing's designs on regional influence as described in the beginning of this paper. According to the Office of

Naval Intelligence, its long-range patrols emphasize “greater realism and complexity in operations that include tactical training while underway.”³⁸ Within that context, the PLAN is increasing its submarine patrols, which are more regularly venturing into the Philippine Sea, and Western Pacific in an effort to understand potential wartime navigation routes.³⁹

Military Operations Other Than War: China deployed ships to participate in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden beginning in December 2008. The PLAN has sent seven task forces to the area so far, with each remaining on station to conduct ship escort operations for several months.⁴⁰ The first five task forces escorted more than 2,200 Chinese and foreign ships, according to official Chinese media reports.⁴¹ The sixth task force, which left China for the Gulf of Aden in late June, was composed of the amphibious landing ship *Kunlunshan*, the destroyer *Lanzhou* and the supply ship *Weishanhu* (the supply ship was also part of the fifth task force).⁴² The seventh task force, which includes the frigates *Zhoushan* and *Xuzhou* and the supply ship *Qiandaohu*, left for the Gulf of Aden in November. Apart from ship visits, this marks the PLAN’s first series of operational deployments beyond the Western Pacific.⁴³

Humanitarian assistance is another important nonwar mission and one that can contribute to diplomatic efforts to enhance China’s “soft power” in regions of growing importance to Beijing, such as South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The first overseas deployment of China’s *Peace Ark* hospital ship, which began at the end of August, suggests one way in which the PLAN can help advance China’s global interests. During the nearly three-month deployment, medical diplomacy was clearly the main mission. According to official Chinese media reports, the hospital ship made stops in Djibouti, Kenya, Tanzania, the Seychelles, and Bangladesh, where members of the crew provided medical assistance and participated in exchange programs with local medical personnel.⁴⁴

Implications

Decision-makers in Tokyo, Seoul, Washington and elsewhere are now facing a highly capable

Chinese Navy determined not only to deal with China’s traditional regional security challenges, but also to protect what Beijing sees as its growing global interests. China’s Navy is significantly more powerful than it was a decade ago, and will likely be even more so a decade from now.

The central problem in dealing with China’s growing maritime power is that it requires U.S. policymakers to strike a balance between deterrence on the one hand and cooperation and reassurance on the other.

The United States should be particularly mindful of Chinese naval platforms like submarines, coastal patrol vessels and destroyers armed with antiship cruise missiles, which, along with land-based ballistic missiles and other capabilities, are key parts of an “anti access/area denial” strategy that seeks to deter American intervention in a regional military confrontation by driving up the cost of entry.

Recommendations for the United States

Recommendation 1: The U.S. should counter Chinese anti-access/area denial strategies by aggressively developing new operational concepts such as “air sea battle”⁴⁵ and advanced capabilities such as unmanned air and undersea vehicles.

Recommendation 2: The U.S. should maintain a strong submarine force to offset significant Chinese anti-access/area denial developments that threaten regional bases and aircraft carriers—the traditional symbols of U.S. presence and power projection.

Diplomatically, China should be under no illusions that the West is prepared to defer to Chinese dominance of Asian waters. The

U.S. must consider the potential influence of China's growing naval capability on political and diplomatic issues in the Asia Pacific region and beyond.⁴⁶

Recommendation 3: U.S. policy makers should continue to insist on freedom of navigation and open international waterways in line with established international law.

China's growing naval power creates possible military and political challenges for the United States, but those challenges can be at least partly mitigated by building trust between governments in maritime security when new opportunities present themselves. With the recent reestablishment of U.S.-China military ties, which China had previously suspended in response to U.S. arms sales to Taiwan, cooperation is possible on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief,

counter-piracy operations and other nontraditional security missions.

Recommendation 4: The U.S. Navy should seek greater collaboration with the Chinese Navy in response to natural disasters and humanitarian crises, as well as in maritime law-enforcement activities.

Conclusion

The central problem in dealing with China's growing maritime power is that it requires U.S. policymakers to strike a balance between deterrence on the one hand and cooperation and reassurance on the other. This is a daunting challenge, but if met successfully, it will promote a stable and constructive U.S.-China relationship while also defending America's interests and those of our allies and friends.

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