

China's Far Sea's Navy: The Implications of the "Open Seas Protection" Mission

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Arlington, Virginia

Michael McDevitt

Senior Fellow

Introduction

China has not yet revealed the details of how large a navy it feels it needs, but Beijing has been remarkably transparent in disclosing its overall maritime ambitions, which depend first and foremost on a strong PLAN. Three years ago, the PLA explicitly addressed the issue of becoming a "maritime power":

China is a major maritime as well as land country. The seas and oceans provide immense space and abundant resources for China's sustainable development, and thus are of vital importance to the people's well-being and China's future. It is an essential national development strategy to exploit, utilize and protect the seas and oceans, **and build China into a maritime power. It is an important duty for the PLA to resolutely safeguard China's maritime rights and interests.** (Emphasis added.)¹

Two years later, the PLA was even more specific in addressing its far seas ambitions. These ambitions were dictated by Beijing's belief that it must be able to protect its vital sea lanes and its many political and economic overseas interests—including, of course, the millions of Chinese citizens working or travelling abroad.

This was explicitly spelled out in the 2015 Chinese Defense White Paper, entitled *China's Military Strategy*.² According to the white paper:³

¹ See State Council Information Office, *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces*, April 2013, Beijing. The official English translation is available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c_132312681.htm.

² The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*, May 2015, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/index.htm>.

With the growth of China's national interests...the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), as well as institutions, personnel and assets abroad, has become an imminent issue. ...

In line with the strategic requirement of offshore waters defense and open seas protection, the PLA Navy (PLAN) will gradually shift its focus from "offshore waters defense" to the combination of "offshore waters defense" with "open seas protection," and build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure.

It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests, safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power.

Offshore Waters Defense--the PLANs role in defending China proper

While this chapter will focus primarily on PLAN "far seas" capability, the defense of China itself, what the latest white paper calls "offshore waters defense" remains the PLANs most important mission. In practical terms, "off-shore waters defense" refers to the area between China's coast line and the second island chain—think the Philippine Sea—including, of course, the East and South China Seas—the area where US forces would encounter China's attempts to keep the United States from interfering with its offshore military operations.⁴ "Offshore waters defense" seems to be a new Chinese formulation for what has traditionally been called "active defense," or as it has been dubbed by the Pentagon A2/AD. It is a joint campaign that involves the PLA Navy, Air Force and Strategic Rocket Force that has the operational objective of keeping an approaching hostile forces at bay by attacking them far from China (A2, anti-access) or if that fails, or if hostile forces are already within striking range of China, such as much the

³ Ibid., pp. 3, 8, 9.

⁴ The maritime space to be defended is based on PLA estimates of the range of weapons carried by an attacking force, and is not determined by island-chain boundaries. For example, according to a PLA open source assessment, the refueled combat radius of an F/A-18 is 1200 nautical miles. Whether this is accurate or not is not the point. What is germane is that the article gives a hint at what range the PLA starts to worry about an approaching aircraft carrier. Li Xinqi, Tan Shoulin, Li Hongxia (The Second Artillery Engineering College, Xian, China.): "Precaution Model and Simulation Actualization on Threat of Maneuver Target Group on the Sea", August 1, 2005, in authors possession.

US 7th Fleet would likely be in case of conflict, attempt to deny them freedom of operational and tactical action (AD, area-denial).⁵

The fact that China wants to be able to control, or at least deny control of its near seas, should not be a surprise; 12 years ago this objective was spelled out. Its 2004 Defense White Paper China is clear about the goal of being able achieving command of the sea:

While continuing to attach importance to the building of the Army, the PLA gives priority to the building of the Navy, Air Force and Second Artillery force to seek balanced development of the combat force structure, *in order to strengthen the capabilities for winning both command of the sea and command of the air, and conducting strategic counter strikes* (emphasis added).⁶

The PLA Navy's main contribution to defending against an from the sea is its submarine force and land based naval air forces. These units would operate in concert with the Strategic Rocket Force's conventionally armed ballistic missile force, especially the DF-21D, which carries a maneuverable warhead that purportedly can hit a moving ship. (It is not clear that this capability has ever been tested at sea). The PLA Air Force also plays a crucial role. Aircraft launched from land bases carrying long range anti-ship cruise missiles are a potent threat; particularly as the PLAAF continues to improve it's over water operational skill, and its ASCMs improve in range and sophistication.

But beyond capable platforms operated by competent submariners and airmen, the success in any off-shore waters defense operation depends finding ships on the high seas, which means the maintaining an up-to-date surveillance picture of the thousands of square miles of the Pacific Ocean that constitute the seaward approaches to China. Surveillance is absolutely essential for locating approaching warships and then targeting ballistic missiles, as well providing an attack vector to slower moving aircraft and submarines on where to go to intercept approaching naval strike forces.

The PLA Navy's surface warships are not likely to play a major offensive role in such a campaign because once they venture out beyond Chinese land based air cover, perhaps 200-300 NM miles, they become vulnerable to hostile air attack, or become easier pickings for submarines. They do have a role in providing close-in anti-submarine protection, and possibly as seaward extensions of China mainland air-defenses, in the waters very near to China; specifically the East China Sea and in the vicinity of important Chinese bases in the northern portions of the South China Sea. The PLAN surface navy does have another important role, of

⁵ From the perspective of the approaching "blue" naval force what China's "offshore waters defense" means in practical terms is that it will have to *fight to gain* "sea control" that is essential to conduct operations, and will have to *fight to sustain* "sea control" if the naval campaign is envisioned as lasting longer than a hit and run raid.

⁶ PRC Defense White Paper, December 2004, Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, December 2004, Beijing. <http://english.people.com.cn/whitepaper/defense2004>

course, if the conflict involves an invasion of Taiwan. It would be its job to get the PLA army to Taiwan, keep it re-supplied, as well as dealing the Taiwan navy.

Very Important New Tasks Related to Far Seas Operations

It is significant that the white paper indicates that “the PLA Navy (PLAN) will gradually *shift its focus from* ‘offshore waters defense’ to *the combination of* ‘offshore waters defense’ with ‘open seas protection,’ and build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure.”⁷ This passage suggests that protecting overseas interests and sea lanes is forecast to become as important to China’s leadership as defending China itself.

It is too soon to judge whether the overseas interests alluded to in the white paper could be characterized as “core” interests; however, in terms of PLA strategic thinking, it is clear that they are very significant. They are also of budgetary significance since the bulk of the “open seas protection” effort falls to the navy and air force, not the army or the newly renamed Strategic Rocket Force.⁸

This chapter focuses on the PLAN, because of the importance the white paper placed on protecting sea lanes. This emphasis is new and is different from the now almost decade old guidance found in earlier white papers, which focused on the *peacetime*, or “military operations other than war” (MOOTW), uses of the navy.⁹

But, in the 2015 white paper, the enumeration of peacetime MOOTW missions no longer includes any reference to the sea lanes on which China relies. These are addressed in separate sections within the context of “protection,” which indicates that thinking about open seas has shifted from conceptually framing those operations as strictly peacetime, to considering a broader framework that takes into account the need to protect “strategic SLOCs” in wartime. This has obvious long-term implications for PLAN force structure: the protection of crucial sea lanes which originate in the far western Indian Ocean requires a mix of ships, aircraft, and submarines that can credibly accomplish such a mission thousands of miles from Chinese home territory.

“Open Seas Protection”... on the road to a global navy

⁷ Ibid., p. 8. “Open seas protection” essentially focuses on other missions that would include protection of China’s sea lanes that cross the Indian Ocean enroute to or from China. But, to be clear, SLOC protection operations can take place in both China’s near seas as well as far seas; it is not an exclusively far seas mission.

⁸ David M. Finkelstein, *Initial Thoughts on the Reorganization and Reform of the PLA*, CNA China Studies, January 15, 2016, p.13, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2014livisitafrica/2014-05/10/content_17497900.htm.

⁹ The term MOOTW is yet another thing that the PLA has “borrowed” from the U.S. military. See *Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other than War* (Joint Pub 3-07), 16 June 1995, http://www.bits.de/NRANEU/others/jp-doctrine/jp3_07.pdf.

It is important to appreciate that the mission of “open seas protection” did not materialize overnight; it represents an evolution in Chinese thinking about how to use the PLAN beyond China’s seaward approaches. It can be traced in official pronouncements to 2004,¹⁰ when the PLA was for the first time assigned responsibilities well beyond China and proximate waters. This was official recognition that China’s national interests now extended beyond its borders and that the PLA’s missions were to be based on those expanding interests, not just geography.¹¹ For instance, the 2008 defense white paper states that China continues to develop its ability to conduct “offshore” operations *while gradually building* its ability to conduct operations in “distant seas.”¹² As we shall see, the injunction to “gradually build” capability has been taken to heart by the PLA Navy.

The “open seas protection” mission also makes sense within the context of Xi’s much-ballyhooed 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which will run from China’s major ports through the Indonesian Straits, and then proceed along the Indian Ocean’s northern littoral, grazing East Africa, before transiting the Red Sea and Suez Canal into the Eastern Mediterranean. This “road” is already heavily traveled by China’s shipping, but if China does invest in infrastructure along the route, as it has promised to do, it will need to look after those investments as well as its shipping.¹³

Finally, we cannot overlook the influence that outside voices have had on the generation of the “open seas protection” mission. If China has had doubts about the dependence of its economy—and, as a result, the survival of the regime—on its sea lanes, that uncertainty has long since been removed by a number of Western “strategists” writing that in time of conflict the way to bring China to its knees is to cut its sea lanes.¹⁴

¹⁰ Hu Jintao, “Understand the New Historic Missions of our Military in the New Period of the New Century,” available on the National Defense Education website of Jiangxi Province, <http://gfjy.jiangxi.gov.cn/yl.asp?did+11349.htm>.

¹¹ The “New Historic Missions” speech triggered a discussion among Chinese strategists, both in and out of uniform, over security interests well beyond China’s near seas. The geographical characterization of this emerging issue was *yuanhai* in Chinese, translated as either “open seas” or “distant seas.” The term *yuanhai* can also be translated as “distant oceans.” Some English sources translate the term as “blue water.”

¹² *China’s National Defense in 2008* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, 2009). (Emphasis added.) Available at: http://www.china.org.cn/government/central_government/2009-01/20/content_17155577.htm.

¹³ Bert Hoffman, “China’s One Belt One Road Initiative: What we know so far,” The World Bank East Asia and Pacific on the Rise blog, December 4, 2015, <http://blogs.worldbank.org/eastasiapacific/china-one-belt-one-road-initiative-what-we-know-thus-far>

¹⁴ See for example, Douglas C. Peifer, “China, the German Analogy, and the New Air-Sea Operational Concept,” *Orbis* 55, no. 1 (Winter 2001); T.X. Hammes, “Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict,” *Strategic Forum* 278 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, June 2012); Geoff Dyer, *The Contest of the Century: The New Era of Competition with China and How America Can Win* (New York: Knopf, 2014), chapter 2; and Sean Mirski, “Stranglehold: Context, Conduct and Consequences of an American Blockade of China,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 3 (2013).

The “Open Seas Protection” Force Structure is Already Being Built

China does not need a “far seas” (what the U.S. might term a Blue Water) navy to execute near seas “offshore waters protection” operation, but it does need one if it hopes to accomplish the mission set associated with “open seas protection.”¹⁵ This requires a different mix of naval capabilities from what is needed for wartime defense of China proper. Far seas operations demand multi-product logistics support ships, amphibious ships with helicopter facilities, larger multi-mission destroyers and frigates with better endurance and reliable propulsion systems, helicopter facilities, improved anti-submarine systems, and, especially, longer-range air defenses.

Nuclear-powered submarines also have an important role to play. These classes of submarines (SSNs) are best suited for far seas deployments because of their long range, high underwater speed, and ability to stay submerged for very long periods of time. But even with these advantages, as the USN has long realized, even SSNs require logistic support and voyage repair when on sustained deployments thousands of miles from a traditional support base. That is why it maintains a forward-deploying submarine tender in either Guam or Diego Garcia. China is likely to make similar support arrangements for far-seas-deploying SSNs.

Operating thousands of miles away from its land-based air cover, a credible Chinese distant-seas navy must be able to defend itself from air attack. Destroyers with long-range surface-to-air missiles can provide such defense where the air threat is limited, but most of China’s most important SLOCs—e.g., in the Northern Arabian Sea/Gulf of Aden—face a more substantial air threat. This was a very important (although not the only) factor in China’s decision to build a modest aircraft carrier force.¹⁶ Although the ski-jump take-off used on China’s carrier, *Liaoning*, imposes weight penalties on the type and amount of ordnance the aircraft can launch with, its jets can provide air cover for the PLAN’s open-seas protection operations. Looking ahead, all indications are that around the years 2020-22, the PLAN will likely operate two *Liaoning*-style aircraft carriers.

The air wing is, of course, the reason for having an aircraft carrier. Details regarding the composition of *Liaoning*’s air wing remain sketchy, probably because the PLAN itself has not made a final decision on them. Informed speculation suggests that the air wing will include twenty-four J-15 fighters, four to six ASW helicopters, four helicopters dedicated to airborne

¹⁵ Needed capabilities shift to surface ships rather than land-based air and submarines that are the mainstay of the PLAN contribution to A2/AD. Recent PLAN submarine deployments to the Indian Ocean do indicate that submarines, especially nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) and modern AIP-equipped conventional submarines, also factor into PLAN calculations regarding open seas protection. For an Indian perspective, see P.K. Ghosh, “Game Changers? Chinese Submarines in the Indian Ocean,” *The Diplomat*, July 6, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/game-changers-chinese-submarines-in-the-indian-ocean/>.

¹⁶ Nan Li and Christopher Weuve, “China’s Aircraft Carrier Ambitions: An Update,” *Naval War College Review*, Winter 2010, p. 15. www.usnwc.edu/publications/Naval-War-College-Review/2010---Winter.aspx.

early warning (putting an air-search radar in the sky), and two helicopters dedicated to pilot rescue in case of an accident during flight operations.¹⁷

The backbone of these “distant seas” forces will be the multi-mission *Luyang II/III* (type 052C and 052D) class destroyers (DDGs). They are likely to form the bulk of the warship escorts for *Liaoning*, any follow-on carriers, and expeditionary amphibious forces. These 8,000-ton destroyers are also formidable warships when operating independently; they are roughly the size of the U.S. DDG-51 class, and will have phased-array radars and a long-range SAM system which provides the PLAN with its first credible *area* air-defense capability (the ability to defend more than just oneself). Because these ships are fitted with a multi-purpose 64-cell vertical launch system, they will also be able to load land-attack cruise missiles.

On paper, these are state-of-the-art multi-mission warships; the phased-array radar, also known as active electronically scanned array (AESA), is similar in technical approach to the radar in the USN-developed AEGIS combat system. When combined with long-range surface-to-air missiles housed in vertical launch cells, this radar system provides the ship with tremendous anti-air firepower—the ability to engage multiple targets simultaneously. These types of destroyers are expensive to build; only a few navies in the world can afford them. Japan, for example, has 6 and will have 8 by 2020—whereas China already has 10 built or being built and will likely have 18-20 by 2020.¹⁸

If the Type 052D is intended as the backbone, the Type 054A guided-missile frigate (FFG) has for the past six years been the workhorse for the PLAN’s far seas anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and its follow-on presence operations spanning the Indian Ocean littoral, Eastern Mediterranean, and Black Sea. At 4,100 tons, this large frigate is well armed, with long-range ASCMs, a 32-cell VLS launcher with medium-range SAMs, and a helicopter with hangar. Its ASW suite is likely to be improved with the addition of a towed array and variable-depth sonar that is already being fitted on China’s Type 56 corvettes.¹⁹ China operates 22 of these ships today, and by 2020 is expected to have approximately 24 Type 54A and around 6 of the improved Type 054B frigates in commission.

The PLAN has mastered the logistics of sustaining small task groups on distant stations. The existence of a state-owned enterprise that is in the logistics services business worldwide (China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO)) enables China to enjoy built-in shore-based support structures at virtually all the major ports along the Pacific and Indian Oceans. When combined

¹⁷ See <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/chinas-got-an-aircraft-carrier-what-about-the-air-wing-c95283bc0279>.

¹⁸ ONI, *The PLA Navy*, pp. 15-16; Andrew Tate, “China Commissions second Type 052D DDG, pushes ahead with frigate, corvette launches,” *IHS Jane’s 360*, 21 July 2015, <http://www.janes.com/article/53139/china-commissions-second-type-052d-ddg-pushes-ahead-with-frigate-corvette-launches>; and Deagel.com, Type 052D, http://www.deagel.com/Destroyers-and-Cruisers/Type-052D_a001828004.aspx.

¹⁹ Andrew Tate, “China commissions fourth ASW-capable Type 056 corvette,” *IHS Jane’s 360*, 11 May 2015, <http://www.janes.com/article/51341/china-commissions-fourth-asw-capable-type-056-corvette>.

with its modern multi-product replenishment ships, which have developed significant skill in at-sea support, this has become a successful approach to logistic sustainment halfway around the world from Chinese homeports. One of the main lessons the PLAN has learned from its anti-piracy deployments is the absolute importance of having enough multi-purpose replenishment ships. American experts have long opined that the most important indication of PLAN's out-of-area ambitions would be construction of replenishment ships. That is exactly what China is doing. The PLAN's inventory of 22,000-ton *Fuchi*-class AORs is being increased to seven today, and by 2020 it will probably have as many as 10 major replenishment ships—more than enough to support continuous far seas operations in addition to the counter-piracy patrols.²⁰

For years, PLAN amphibious shipping has focused on assessing the PLA's ability to invade Taiwan. While that contingency requires continued attention, the PLAN is in the process of assembling an impressive “far seas” expeditionary capability. It now has four 20,000-ton amphibious ships classified as LPDs (Type 071). Each ship can embark around 800 marines or soldiers; four air-cushion landing craft; and several helicopters. Forecasts suggest that even more of these ships, as well as perhaps a larger LHA-type ship, will be built.²¹

China's submarine force has correctly been seen as focused on “near seas defense.” As mentioned, nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) are considered the most suitable type of submarine for long-range, long-endurance, out-of-area operations for any navy. The PLAN has long had a small SSN force, but in the past few years it has created the embryo of a modern SSN force with the commissioning of six *Shang*-class (Type 093) boats. It is expected to introduce a new class that could result in a 2020 inventory of seven to eight SSNs, which would exceed the UK and French SSN forces, and place China third globally in operational nuclear-powered attack submarines, behind the United States and Russia.

The PLAN's most modern conventionally powered submarine is the AIP-equipped *Yuan* class (Type 039A/B).²² It has been in series production since 2004, and as many as 20 are expected by 2020. Conventionally powered submarines would not normally be seen as associated with Chinese “open seas protection” missions, because of their important role in A2/AD; however, this large conventional submarine was sent to the Indian Ocean, calling at Karachi, Pakistan, in April 2015. This was the third submarine that the PLAN has deployed to the Indian Ocean in the past two years; the earlier deployments were by a Type 093 SSN and a *Song*-class conventional

²⁰ Bernard D. Cole, “China's navy expands its replenishment-at-sea capability,” *The Interpreter*, 26 August 2015, <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/08/26/Chinas-Navy-Expands-Replenishment-Capability.aspx>.

²¹ Naval Technology.com, “Type 071 Landing Platform Dock (LPD), China,” <http://www.naval-technology.com/projects/type-071-landing-platform-dock-lpd>, Office of Naval Intelligence, *The PLA Navy: New Capabilities and Missions for the 21st Century*, Washington, DC, p. 18.

²² Christopher P. Carlson, “Essay: Inside the Design of China's Yuan-class submarine,” *USNI News*, August 31, 2015, <http://news.usni.org/2015/08/31/essay-inside-the-design-of-chinas-yuan-class-submarine>.

boat, much to the dismay of Indian observers.²³ These deployments, a sort of proof-of-concept operation, suggest that PLAN submarines may also be earmarked for routine far seas operations, just like the Soviet Navy’s submarines when they maintained a routine presence in the Northern Arabian Sea during the final decade of the Cold War.²⁴

It is important to emphasize how essential seven-plus years of uninterrupted anti-piracy operations in the Arabian Sea have been in teaching the PLAN how to conduct distant seas operations. One reason it has learned so quickly is that the anti-piracy patrols are a real-world “battle laboratory,” which has allowed it to operate with ships from all the other great global navies, and closely observe and adopt what it considered best practices.²⁵

Looking Ahead: World’s Second-Largest Blue Water Navy by 2020

To appreciate the magnitude of PLAN’s development of “open ocean protection” capabilities, it is useful to compare them to those of the other “great” navies of the world. Exhibit 1 is a forecast that attempts to compare ships with the capabilities necessary to conduct sustained deployments very far from home waters. This specifically compares the PLA Navy classes of ships discussed in the preceding section, with ships of similar capabilities from other navies routinely operating in far seas. This comparison is *not* intended to be an order-of-battle inventory where every ship of every class is counted; rather, it is an attempt to compare Chinese “far seas” warships to other nations’ “far seas” warships, projected to around the year 2020.

Exhibit 1: Far Seas Navies’ Major Ships ca. 2020²⁶

| | PLA Navy | UK | France | Japan | India | Russia |
|----------|----------|----|--------|-------|-------|--------|
| Carriers | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 |

²³ DOD, *Annual Report 2015*, p. 19; and Rajat Pandit, “Chinese submarine in Karachi, India alarmed,” *The Times of India*, June, 27, 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Chinese-submarine-in-Karachi-India-alarmed/articleshow/47845930.cms>.

²⁴ An authoritative discussion of Soviet naval presence (32 ships, including submarines, in early 1978) in the Northern Arabian Sea/ Gulf of Aden region of the Indian Ocean is by Mark A. Carolla, “The Indian Ocean Squadron,” in Bruce and Susan Watson, eds., *The Soviet Navy: Strengths and Liabilities* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), pp. 241-46.

²⁵ Michael McDevitt, “PLA Naval Exercises with International Partners,” in Roy Kamphausen et al., *Learning by Doing: The PLA Trains at Home and Abroad*, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, 2012, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdf/files/pub1135.pdf>; and Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *No Substitute for Experience: Chinese Antipiracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden*, U.S. Naval War College, China Maritime Studies No. 10, Naval War College Press, November 2013.

²⁶ Aegis-like DDGs include the UK Type 045 *Daring* class, the French *Horizon* class, the Japanese *Kongo* and *Atago* classes, and the Indian *Kolkata* and *Visakhapatnam* classes.

| | | | | | | |
|-------------------------|-------|-----|-----------|----|------|-------------|
| Aegis-like destroyer | 18-20 | 6-8 | 2 | 8 | 5-6 | 0 |
| Modern high-end frigate | 30-32 | 1-2 | 6 (FREMM) | 4 | 3-10 | 9-11 |
| Large amphibious | 6-7 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 0-3 | 0 |
| AOR | 8-10 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 0-3 | 4 very old |
| SSN | 6-7 | 7 | 6 | 0 | 1-2 | 8-9 +6 SSGN |
| SS (AIP) | 20 | | | 22 | 6 | 9-11 |
| SSBN | 5-6 | 4 | 4 | 0 | 1-2 | 10-12 |

For perspective, Exhibit 2 also compares the PLAN classes that have been discussed with similar classes in the U.S. Navy. Again, this is *not* an “order of battle” ship-counting exercise but an attempt to show that while the PLAN’s far seas capabilities are very impressive when measured against those of the rest of the world’s navies, there is still no comparison when measured against America’s naval forces, most of which are inherently “far seas” capable. But, all of China’s ships are homeported in East Asia whereas most of the U.S. Navy is homeported thousands of miles away. There is little doubt that by the beginning of the next decade the PLAN will have a substantial capability advantage in East Asia. When one combines the forces of Japan and the U.S. Seventh Fleet, a rough equivalency in “far seas” ships will exist. However, a contribution from Japan is not assured in contingencies when the security of Japan is not directly threatened.

Exhibit 2: Major Far Seas Ships ca. 2020, PLAN vs. USN

| | USN Overall | PLAN Far Seas | US 7 th Fleet | Japan |
|----------------------|-------------|---------------|--------------------------|-------|
| Carriers | 11 | 2 | 1 to 1.5 | 0 |
| Aegis-like destroyer | 88-91 | 18-20 | 10 | 8 |

| | | | | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|--------------|----|
| Frigate (FFG) | 0 | 30-32 | 0 | 4 |
| Large amphibious ship | 33 | 6-8 | 3-4 | 3 |
| AOR (replenishment at sea) | 30 (Combat Logistics Force-CLF) | 8 | rotational | 5 |
| SSN | 51+4 SSGN | 6-7 | 3+rotational | 0 |
| Modern SS (AIP) | 0 | 20 | 0 | 22 |
| SSBN | 14 | 5-6 | 0 | 0 |

Preliminary Judgments

China’s shipbuilding industry has unquestionably demonstrated the ability to produce modern warships and submarines, while at the same time continuing to lead the world in total shipbuilding output. It is also true that virtually all of the PLAN ships discussed in the preceding paragraphs have been commissioned over the last decade; the obvious conclusion is that China’s “open ocean protection” mission will be executed by a new and modern far seas force. This force, well balanced in capabilities and ship classes, in many ways already resembles a “mini-me” of America’s navy—with the notable exception of sea-based airpower, and that is in the offing.

The question is: Will Beijing employ this microcosm of the USN in the same way that Washington uses its navy? So far, trends are moving in that direction. Like the USN, the PLAN already conducts the whole range of activities associated with what is normally characterized as “peacetime” presence”: naval diplomacy, emergency evacuations, disaster relief, and exercises with friendly navies. What has not been seen is traditional power projection—yet.

China is putting power projection components into place—carrier air, land attack cruise missiles on multi-mission destroyers, and amphibious forces—that, when assembled as a task force, are very credible. By 2020 China will have the second-largest modern amphibious capability in the world (after the United States), and potentially will be able to embark between 5,000-6,000 marines for operations anywhere in the world. When combined with modern destroyers as escorts and an aircraft carrier to provide air defense, China will have a distant-seas power-projection capability for the first time since Admiral Zheng He’s last voyage (1431–33).²⁷

²⁷ For the most accurate account of Zheng He’s “power projection” voyages, see Edward Dreyer, *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405-1433* (New York: Pearson, 2006).

In fact, when one counts the number and variety of warships that the PLAN is likely to have in commission in just a few years, it is not a stretch to argue that by around 2020, China will have the second most capable “far seas” navy in the world. Certainly in terms of numbers of relevant ship classes, it will be in that position. Whether China deliberately set out to achieve this position as soon as 2020 is not known; its impending “ranking” among the world’s great navies is greatly facilitated by fact that while the PLAN is expanding, virtually all of the other traditional maritime powers (India is a notable exception) have downsized and reduced major warship production.

In short, the PLAN is not only a formidable “near seas” challenge; it is on the cusp of becoming a well-rounded (balanced) and very capable far seas navy. Significantly, it now has an official green light to focus on an “open seas protection” mission that includes combat. The way it trains for this mission should provide insights on how China’s far seas navy will be employed.

Uncertainties

It is also necessary to address the many questions that these judgments raise. First and foremost, as any professional naval planner would ask: How good are these folks? Are the PLAN operators competent? Will PLAN combat systems operate as advertised? What about China’s unique consensus-based dual-command system, wherein the ship’s commanding officer and political officer share coequal positions? Will it work in the stress of combat, when decisions must be made quickly?²⁸ This question is particularly important since success or failure in a surface engagement has historically been dictated by who wins the “battle of the first salvo.”²⁹

The open-source answers to these questions are more conjecture than fact, but some signposts are available. The fact that the PLAN has had seven-plus years of counter-piracy deployments suggests that its ships are very reliable during peacetime operations. The PLAN has learned to be remarkably adaptable over the years that these deployments have occurred. Significantly, there are now seven-plus-years’ worth of officers, including admirals, who have experienced extended deployed operations. We also have insights into the growing sophistication of PLAN warfare-oriented training that is taking place in open ocean environments. A paper written by the former

²⁸ Based on a conversation with Dennis Blasko, an acknowledged expert on PLA organizational issues, technically (by regulation) the commander and the political officer are jointly responsible for their unit. The commander is in charge of tactical considerations while the political officer is in charge of political-related work, which can overlap with tactics. In theory the commander should be obeyed in times of emergency/crisis/combat when he gives a tactical order without the political officer having to sign on. However, if time permits they would prefer to have a group meeting to settle important matters and establish consensus. In practice this shared responsibility concept is driven by personalities (how the commander and political officer get along), plus the influence (or lack thereof) of the ships party committee (senior leaders.) While naval officers raised in the western maritime tradition may be aghast at such a system it is important to keep in mind this is the only organization PLAN officers have known. They have learned to make it work during peacetime far seas deployments.

²⁹ “To achieve victory one must attack effectively first.” Captain Wayne Hughes, USN (retired), *Fleet Tactics: Theory and Practice*, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1986, p. 146.

assistant naval attaché in Beijing, Captain Chris Sharman, USN, maps the growing complexity of PLAN at-sea training and makes clear that China's navy is working hard to improve.³⁰

Perhaps the biggest uncertainty is: How large will the “far seas” PLAN become? If one takes seriously the words in the 18th Party Work report — “Building strong national defense and powerful armed forces that are *commensurate with China's international standing* and meet the needs of its security and development interests is a strategic task of China's modernization drive...” — it could become very large indeed.³¹

To this point, the “far seas” warships/submarines discussed above total between 90-98 combatants; if one adds to this number the 175 odd warships/submarines commissioned since 2000 that are not really suitable for “far seas” operations the total PLAN warship/submarine strength circa 2020 is in the range of 265-273.³² As of this writing the US Navy is projected to have force structure of around 260 similar classes of ships in 2020.³³ While the US number includes many more high-end ships, the number of combatants the PLAN would be able to muster for a defensive campaign in China's near seas is very impressive.

Several years ago, in a paper written for a Naval War College conference, I asserted that China was not trying to replicate the Imperial Japanese Navy and build a force aimed at having a climactic battle for sea control somewhere in the Philippine Sea. I am not so sure today, because the image of an East Asian navy as capable as the IJN was in 1941 no longer seems incredible. Recall that the IJN on the eve of Pearl Harbor was a formidable force: 10 battleships; 12 aircraft carriers; 18 heavy cruisers; 20 light cruisers; 126 destroyers; and 68 submarines. Could the PLAN over the next decade or two become as imposing?³⁴

Implications for the United States

³⁰ Christopher H. Sharman, *China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Toward a New Maritime Strategy*, China Strategic Perspectives No. 9, Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Security Studies, National Defense University, Washington, DC, April 2015, p. 37, <http://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-9.pdf>.

³¹ Full text of Hu Jintao's Report at the 18th Party Congress,” Xinhua, 17 November 2012, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpcnc/2012-11/17/c_131981259.htm.

³² This number is the sum of: (9 older DDG, 11 older FFG, 25 older conventional submarines, 60 Houbei Fast Attack Craft, 29 LSTs, and 40 of the new type 056 corvettes). By older I mean commissioned since 2000, but no longer in production because they have been succeeded by new classes.

³³ The USN total is reached by adding to the 231 to 234 ships listed in exhibit 2 above the 28 Littoral Combat Ships (LCS) that should be in inventory around 2020.

³⁴ David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887-1941*. Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1997.

Seeing Chinese warships in the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean's far reaches will become routine. U.S. combatant commanders responsible for those regions may view Chinese naval presence as welcome, e.g., anti-piracy patrols. There may be far more opportunities for USN-PLAN cooperation because they are far removed from Chinese home waters where sovereignty and maritime claim disputes create a different maritime ambiance. That could change, however, if, for example, Sino-Russian naval activities in the Eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea assume the appearance of being counter to American interests.

Certainly, should the PLAN begin to maintain a routine naval presence in the Indian Ocean in addition to its anti-piracy operations, such an increase in presence seems likely to increase Indian apprehension regarding long-term Chinese objectives along the Indian Ocean littoral. From Delhi's point of view, that could increase the incentives for an even closer Indian-American naval relationship. The pace of that relationship will naturally be dictated by the overall state of Sino-Indian relations; but it is conceivable that an increase in PLAN presence, especially submarines, could result in some sort of a combined Indo-U.S. ASW organization dedicated to keeping track of in-region PLAN submarines.

The question of whether the PLAN would create bases along the Indian Ocean littoral has been an issue of sometimes-heated commentary among sinologists. That debate is over. The PLAN is actively engaged in what could be characterized as a "place and base" approach in the Indian Ocean region because it will be necessary to support "open seas protection" deployments. In fact, it seems likely that once China's leadership decided to become serious about the navy's role in protecting Chinese interests and citizens abroad, it was necessary to back away from its long-standing policy of decrying overseas bases as a feature of hegemonic behavior. Hence we now have the spectacle of Beijing rationalizing its logistics "outposts" in the western portion of the Indian Ocean as contributing to regional security and development—as well they might be. Construction of a Chinese facility in Djibouti has already started,³⁵ and more bases could be in the offing. Recently, when asked about Djibouti, China's foreign minister indicated that China's intent was to fulfill international obligations to protect shipping:

We are willing to, in accordance with objective needs, responding to the wishes of host nations and in regions where China's interests are concentrated, try out the construction of some infrastructure facilities and support facilities; I believe that this is not only fair and reasonable but also accords with international practice.³⁶

³⁵ Ben Blanchard, "China launches charm offensive for overseas naval base," Reuters, March 23, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-djibouti-idUSKCN0WP300>; John Lee, "China Comes to Djibouti: Why Washington Should be Worried," *Foreign Affairs Snapshot*, April 23, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-africa/2015-04-23/china-comes-djibouti>.

³⁶ Ben Blanchard, "China hints more bases on way after Djibouti," CANMUA Net, March 8, 2016, <http://canmua.net/world/china-hints-more-bases-on-way-514571.html>.

Clearly, Gwadar, Pakistan, is already a “place” that could become a base.³⁷

One implication for Washington of potential “open seas protection” task forces routinely operating in the western Indian Ocean is that U.S. authorities can no longer assume unencumbered freedom to posture U.S. naval forces off Middle East and East African hotspots if Chinese interests are involved and differ from Washington’s. It is possible that both governments would elect to dispatch naval forces to the water offshore of the country in question. The best-known historic example of this sort of intermingled naval presence was during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, when the Soviets deployed more than 95 ships to the Eastern Mediterranean to challenge the U.S. Sixth Fleet’s sea control in the area.³⁸

With the growth of the PLAN nuclear-powered submarine force, the United States may face the challenge of keeping track of far seas-deployed PLAN submarines that could be deployed on missions close to U.S. territory—especially in U.S. EEZs. During the Cold War, a USN at least twice the size of today’s navy, with almost a third of its structure dedicated to the primary mission of ASW, invested considerable operational effort into keeping track of Soviet submarines operating near American coasts. The substantial investment in primary-mission ASW forces that was a hallmark of the Cold War era navy no longer exists today.

Finally, once the reality of a large Chinese navy that routinely operates worldwide sinks into world consciousness, the image of a PLAN “global” navy will over time attenuate perceptions of American power, especially in maritime regions where only the USN or its friends have operated freely since the end of the Cold War. As Xinhua reported on 12 May 2015:

This is the first time that [China] has conducted naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea. It is a new challenge for the Chinese Navy. It also showed that [China] is expanding its national interests and security interests to waters further away from China. **People should get used to seeing China’s warships out in the sea.**³⁹

Since 1945, the United States has been able to employ its naval-centered expeditionary capabilities in the pursuit of national interests on the far shores of the Indian and Pacific Oceans with little or no concern regarding the U.S. Navy’s ability to arrive and stay wherever it thought best, for as long as it thought best. A credible naval opponent was a concern during certain periods of the Cold War in the Eastern Mediterranean, but in East Asia and in the Arabian Sea it was never a serious inhibiting concern for any U.S. administration. In the not too distant future,

³⁷ Saibal Dasgupta, “China gets 40-year management rights on Pak’s Gwadar port, access to Arabian Sea,” *The Times of India*, April 14, 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/china/China-gets-40-year-management-rights-on-Paks-Gwadar-port-and-access-to-Arabian-Sea/articleshow/46923252.cms>, and Angela Yu, “China leases 800 ha land at Gwadar port,” *IHS Maritime 360*, 9 September 2015, <http://www.ihsmaritime360.com/article/19228/china-leases-800-ha-land-at-gwadar-port>.

³⁸ Bruce W. Watson, *Red Navy at Sea: Soviet Naval Operations on the High Seas, 1956-1980* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), p. 88.

³⁹ Xinhua, May 12, 2015, http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-05/12/c_127791919.htm.

this policy flexibility will be open to question—a new strategic environment is just around the corner.

