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**China's New Navy: The State of Play in 2010**

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**My intent: State of the PLAN in 2010 (with reference points in 1950 / 1990 / 2000)**  
i.e., how capable is China's navy, and for what missions?

**General Questions / Issues (to which I will return in Conclusion):**

(1) **PLA is a “party army”**: political education vs. professional training? Note PLAAF comments on visit to Maxwell.

(2) **Modernization since 1996**: hardware significant, as are numbers, but more important are advances in personnel accession, training, and education, ship and unit training, maintenance and supply procedures....

(3) **How “good”** is the PLAN: equipment? personnel? experience?

### *Introduction*

On 23 April 2009 China conducted a fleet review to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). In an interview the next day, General Guo Boxiong, vice chairman of China's Central Military Commission, “urged the Navy to beef up its combat capacity to better protect the country's maritime security.” The PLAN commander, Wu Shengli, stated that his service would “develop weaponry such as large combat warships, submarines with longer range and stealth capability, supersonic cruise aircraft, more accurate long-range missiles, deep-sea torpedoes and upgraded information technology, among others.” Wu also listed strengthened logistics and support facilities “to improve far-sea repair, delivery, rescue and replenishment capacities” while establishing “a maritime defense system . . .”

Speaking at the celebration, China's president, Hu Jintao, urged the Navy to “comprehensively push forward its modernization to constantly enhance its capability to carry out its missions in the new century.”<sup>1</sup> Two months later Hu argued that China “should raise our strategic capability of safeguarding our maritime security, defend our country's territorial sea and maritime rights and interests, [and] protect the security of our country's increasingly developing maritime industry, maritime transportation, and energy resources

strategic channels.” These were significant remarks, but were also just the latest in a near-two decades-old trend of China’s increasing awareness of the importance of maritime power.

Historically, national naval power has been linked directly with national economic strength. China’s remarkable economic growth during the past three decades, with its concentration in coastal regions and reliance on seaborne trade, highlights the maritime arena as a national security interest of the highest priority for Beijing. The remarkable growth of China’s economy, the broadening of Beijing’s global political and economic interests, and the resolution of almost all border disputes with China’s many contiguous neighbors have contributed to a newly confident international outlook. These factors in turn have contributed to increased attention to threats to the vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs) on which China increasingly depends.

The Asian maritime realm is marked by seas, straits, and gulfs with many narrow navigational points and areas of conflicting sovereignty claims. These waters are also characterized by great distances, which mean long transit times for seaborne traffic. The distance from Shanghai to Abadan, Iran, for instance, is more than 5,000 nm, a fourteen-day trip for a ship traveling at 16 knots.<sup>26</sup>

### *Background*

China’s historic focus on continental security concerns has been moderated by the nation’s heavy and increasing dependence on maritime trade and a view that the United States and other Asian powers are determined to “contain” China. Furthermore, Beijing’s strategic view of post–Cold War Asia has increasingly come to focus on offshore sovereignty and economic and resource issues. The key question to evaluating today’s PLAN--whether China's

leadership understands the maritime element of national strategy--has been answered in the affirmative during the first decade of the twenty-first century.

As we mark the end of this century's first decade, China has shown apparent confidence in its ability to employ its maritime strength effectively. In 1995, for instance, China fortified Mischief Reef, a bit of contested coral in the South China Sea, as a step in solidifying its sovereignty claims over that sea. Likewise, the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1996 both was an example of Beijing's employment of maritime power—in that case, to threaten Taiwan—and possibly served as a prime motivator for China's naval modernization.

One PLA strategist summed up Beijing's view of the ocean's threatening potential that same year: “In the last 109 years, imperialists have repeatedly invaded China from the sea . . . 470 times, . . . 84 of these being serious invasions. The ocean has become an avenue for the aggressors to bring in their troops and haul away our wealth. . . . [T]he ocean is not only the basic space for human survival, but also an important theater for international political struggle. . . . The better people can control the sea, the greater they have the sea territorial rights [which have] become inseparable from a country's sovereignty.” China was urged to draw three lessons from this experience: (1) a strong naval force is a protection of the land; (2) a nation not understanding the importance of the ocean is a nation without a future; and (3) a major sea power incapable of defending its sea territorial rights will not be a major sea power for very long.<sup>30</sup>

In 2000, a prominent strategist at China's Academy of Military Science cited defense as the continuing central theme in both continental and maritime strategy in China. Lieutenant General Mi Zhenyu claimed that while imperial China fought sea battles, the “basic format in ancient times was ‘land as primary, sea as secondary.’” Today, he continued, “equal consideration is given to ‘land and sea,’” and Beijing considers “the ocean as its chief strategic

defensive direction.” Mi averred that “China’s political and economic focus lies on the coastal areas [and] for the present and a fairly long period to come, [its] strategic focus will be in the direction of the sea.”<sup>1</sup>

Since 2001, Chinese maritime forces have at least five times interfered with U.S. airborne or seaborne intelligence-gathering efforts, once causing loss of life. These events are part of a larger effort to restrict foreign military operations in China’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and the airspace above it.

### *Missions*

Admiral Shi Yunsheng, PLAN commander in 2000, described China’s twenty-first-century Navy as tasked with an “offshore defense” strategy; “strong with science and technology;” equipped with “more advanced weapons,” including “warships, submarines, fighters, missiles, torpedoes, guns, and electronic equipment”; and manned by well-trained personnel and “more qualified people.”<sup>46</sup>

And China’s Defense White Paper for 2004 stated that “the PLA Navy is responsible for safeguarding China’s maritime security and maintaining the sovereignty of its territorial seas along with its maritime rights and interests.” The white paper emphasized the importance of conducting operations well offshore, timely “preparation [of the] maritime battlefield,” enhanced “integrated combat capabilities,” and the ability to conduct “nuclear counter-attacks,” as well as “building maritime combat forces, especially amphibious combat forces . . . [and] updating its weaponry and equipment,” to include “long-range precision strike capability . . . joint exercises . . . and integrated maritime support capabilities.”<sup>4</sup>

This ambitious menu represents a huge step for the PLAN. As recently as 1982, the PLAN was tasked to “resist invasions and defend the homeland,” which underlined the PLAN’s

role as a coastal defense force whose role was to support the ground forces as they resisted a supposed Soviet invasion of China.

### *Scenarios*

Taiwan remains at the core of China's strategic concerns; despite concern about the United States. Beijing refuses to renounce the use of military force to ensure the reunification of Taiwan, and must count on the PLAN for policy options ranging from intimidation to outright invasion.

While Taiwan has furnished the primary scenario for PLAN planners for the past three decades, that is changing. China is modernizing its Navy to deal with national security situations that may occur after Taiwan is reunified with the mainland. These may be described as five major maritime security situations facing Beijing in Asia: Taiwan, of course, then Japan, the South China Sea, India, and vital SLOCs. Thus, Beijing sees more than one critical strategic direction on the horizon.

Beijing's concern with Japan includes disputed East China Sea territory and resources; and Japan looms large. Ancient disputes and rancor combined with World War II grievances and suspicion of future Japanese aggression create an edgy relationship. It is inherently a maritime relationship given the seas that lie between the two nations, forming a natural barrier to any but seaborne or airborne interaction. Beijing's evaluation of Tokyo's intentions must also take into account Japan's alliance with the United States, especially with respect to the implications of the security guidelines as they may apply to Taiwan. If Tokyo and the United States interpret those guidelines' reference to "waters surrounding Japan" as including Taiwan, then China would face a much more complicated situation in the strait.<sup>34</sup>

The South China Sea involves China in disputes—and occasional armed conflict—with the other claimants—Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and the Philippines—to the sea’s land features and resources, including fisheries and energy, and concern about the security of the very long SLOCs linking China with the energy resources of Southwest Asia and Africa.

The Sea is a major PLAN concern. This contiguous sea embodies important economic, political, and nationalistic strategic issues for Beijing; Liu Huaqing noted the PLAN’s mission to secure the “vast resources” of this sea. China has maintained an unwavering position on its sovereignty over much of the area, demonstrated in its actions against U.S. surveillance ships in 2009.<sup>36</sup> The National People’s Congress passed the Law of the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zones in February 1992, midway through Liu’s tenure as China’s senior uniformed officer. This act implies that China claims as sovereign territory almost all of the South China Sea, ocean as well as land areas.

Chinese strategic concern about India centers on the latter’s nuclear arsenal. This capability, combined with the Sino-Indian border dispute and Beijing’s concern for China’s ally, Pakistan, gives India a special position in China’s strategic view. Another concern must be India’s desire to be involved east of Malacca, recently evidenced in New Delhi’s agreement with Hanoi to conduct mutual naval training events.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Strategic Instrument*

One author has described China’s strategic view of the maritime Asia-Pacific region as the “territorialization of the seas,” with Beijing’s objective being the control of adjacent ocean areas as never before defined in international law or usage.<sup>28</sup> Beijing seems to advocate a definition of sovereignty extending out at least 200 nm from its coastal baseline. China’s leaders

believe that the Navy's most important mission--defense of the homeland--includes defending this maritime area.

The PLAN offers China's leaders a flexible, ready instrument for applying power, and Beijing has not hesitated to use it: witness the 1974, 1988, 1995, 1998–1999, 2001-2008 actions in the East and South China Seas; and the 2008-2010 operations in the Gulf of Aden.

In addition to its duties to defend the homeland and China's economic interests, the modernizing Chinese Navy plans to field a sea-based nuclear deterrent resident in the new class of ballistic missile submarines (FBM) currently joining the fleet and its leaders apparently believe that China must deploy a world-class navy if it is to achieve recognition as a world power--the idea that a great country should have a great Navy.<sup>17</sup>

Let me present a maritime analyst's list of several attributes that a nation should possess to qualify as a modern naval power:

- (1) training and education programs leading to professional specialization of the officer corps;
- (2) naval systems and platforms costs, capabilities, and sustainability;
- (3) national scientific and industrial infrastructure for research, development, and production of naval warfare technology and systems;
- (4) the ability to derive doctrine and tactics;
- (5) the ability to administer, operate, and command and control tactical units beyond individual ships;
- (6) sources of intelligence, and its production, analysis, and dissemination;
- (7) service-wide naval strategic planning;
- (8) national maritime leadership; and

(9) the effectiveness of naval strategists in the national strategy-making structure.<sup>4</sup>

### *Offshore Defense*

As early as 1982 Liu Huaqing directed the PLAN's Naval Research College to elaborate a strategy of "offshore defense." By "offshore" Liu probably meant the ocean area from China's coast to approximately the first island chain, defined by a line through the Kurile Islands, Japan and the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, Borneo, and Natuna Besar.<sup>17</sup>

Liu observed that "the strategic position of the Pacific is becoming more important [and] as China is gradually expanding the scale of its maritime development, the Chinese Navy will have to shoulder more and heavier tasks in both peacetime and war." He argued that "the scope of sea warfare operations has extended from the limited space of air, the surface, the water, and coasts, to all space from under the sea to outer space and from the sea inland. . . . In order to safeguard China's coast, resist possible foreign invasion, and defend our maritime rights and interests, it is only right and proper that China should attach great importance to developing its own Navy, including 'emphatic' development of its submarine force."<sup>18</sup>

Liu wanted to change the maritime element of China's national strategy from coastal defense to "offshore defense."<sup>19</sup> He cited the concentration of modern economic interests and growth in the special development zones clustered along China's seaboard as economic justification for a strong PLAN. He stated that "the Chinese Navy must live up to the historical responsibility to grow rapidly up into a major power in the Pacific area in order to secure the smooth progress of China's economic modernization."<sup>32</sup>

His strategy envisioned control of vast oceanic expanses, a very difficult task simply by virtue of the geography, not to mention that other nations would object to Chinese hegemony over such a large portion of the earth's surface. The island chain concept remains active in

Chinese naval thinking, with a focus on Taiwan as a “key point” in the chain. Furthermore, Liu’s timeline was essentially repeated in Beijing’s 2006 Defense White Paper, indicating consistency in China’s strategic long view.<sup>25</sup> PLAN modernization requires a well-articulated offshore mission supporting China as the strongest maritime power in East Asia and as a major power in the Pacific.

Offshore defense [and I very much appreciate Dr. Nan Li’s note about translation] is a maritime strategy with clear offensive implications: Beijing is moving its strategic line seaward from the coast, demonstrating that the Navy has a key role in China’s twenty-first-century strategy.

China’s emphasis on continued economic growth in the twenty-first century is tied directly to achieving energy security, a significant element of which is reliable foreign sources of energy. Liu Huaqing’s three-phase program requires task groups of missile-firing, power-projection-capable ships supported by nuclear-powered submarines and maritime air power<sup>44</sup> and the PLAN has made remarkable progress toward reaching this goal during the little more than twenty years since Liu delineated his strategy. The task groups operating in the Gulf of Aden throughout 2009 have in fact been composed of ships equipped with capable anti-surface and anti-air missiles, helicopters, and special operations detachments, supported by underway replenishment ships. They have achieved productive relations with local countries and have utilized space-based command and control. Meanwhile, China has launched new classes of conventionally and nuclear-powered submarines, while aircraft carrier acquisition has emerged over the horizon.

Beijing is already a strong naval power, contributing to a new geostrategic situation both in Asia and globally. Other Asian nations have responded with caution as they rely on continued

U.S. presence to preclude Chinese maritime hegemony. The PLAN is not yet the dominant naval power in East Asia, however, even apart from the U.S. maritime presence. The JMSDF is superior in some respects, and the Republic of Korea Navy (ROKN) would be a difficult opponent. Even the Taiwanese Navy would not be a pushover for the PLAN. A more thoughtful strategy would be required for the PLAN to achieve specific goals in the face of opposition by the U.S. Navy, the JMSDF, or the ROKN.

### *Operations*

PLAN strategists have described the sea as the “new high ground of strategic competition” and urged attention to five areas of international rivalry: ocean islands, sea space jurisdiction, marine resources, maritime strategic advantage, and strategic sea-lanes. The seas are described both as “a protective screen” and “a marine invasion route.” Naval operations include first, coastal defense; and second, control of the “sea space,” which is “four dimensional,” including air, surface, subsurface, and the seabed. . . . Military control of the seas means achieving and defending national unification, defending national maritime territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protecting legitimate maritime economic activities and scientific research, and ensuring a peaceful and stable climate for national reform, opening, and coastal economic development, by dealing with possible maritime incidents, armed conflicts, and local wars.” The PLAN “has an inescapable mission. . . . The twenty-first century is going to be a maritime one.”<sup>52</sup>

The PLAN’s strategic responsibilities are challenging. First, the distances involved in securing just the South China Sea are daunting to a Navy weak in air power, AAW, ASW, and amphibious lift, although recent exercises and the Gulf of Aden deployments show significant progress being made in command and control, and logistics sustainment. Second, the Taiwan

military is formidable enough, at least on paper, to make any assault on that island a significant military and political problem. Third, in the JMSDF the PLAN would face a more experienced and professional adversary.

Given the continued presence of peaceful borders to the north and west, Beijing's national security priorities for at least the next decade will lie to the maritime east and southeast. The PLAN is also striving to establish an effective nuclear deterrent force at sea as a core element of its national strategic responsibility.

Further, the PLAN is maintaining a naval presence throughout Asia, using port visits to the nations of the region--to include Southwest Asia, with an occasional foray to Europe and the Western Hemisphere. Within this general policy of presence, the PLAN will be focused, as part of a joint force with the PLAAF, on specific objectives which in turn require a credible power-projection force, with enough amphibious and logistics capability to take and hold disputed territory in the East and South China seas.

And pursuit of SLOC defense (likely avenues are expanding a presence west of Malacca, including in Southwest Asia) likely remains a mission near to the hearts of PLAN strategists, but one that will gain prominence only if Beijing decides that the United States is more of a maritime threat to than a guarantor of these long SLOCs on which China depends.

The first stage of Liu Huaqing's reported strategy--to control China's adjacent seas out to the first island chain, may be attainable within the next ten years if Beijing continues the present national prioritization of resource allocation to the Navy--and if Japan and the United States continue to allow it to occur.

Earlier, I mentioned nine factors that may be used to measure a nation's development of a maritime strategy. How does China measure up in 2010?

First, training and education programs have been reorganized and continue to receive attention as the officer corps becomes more professional and specialized.

Second, PLAN modernization is focusing on naval systems and platforms costs, capabilities, and sustainability as new systems and platforms are bought on the global market and produced in China.

Third, the national scientific and industrial infrastructure for research, development, and production of naval warfare technology and systems is improving, but it remains relatively weak for the design and buildup of state-of-the-art systems from drawing board to operational force.

Fourth, the ability to derive doctrine and tactics is clearly advancing, as evidenced in publications; military education, training, and exercises, especially those focused on joint operations; and integrated systems employment.

Fifth, the ability to administer, operate, and command and control tactical formations continues to improve.

Sixth, intelligence--sources, production, analysis, and dissemination--probably absorbs major resources in the PLAN, but its role and influence are unclear.

Seventh, service-wide naval strategic planning appears to be ongoing, with apparent focus not on matching a potential adversary's (i.e., the United States) strengths but on avoiding those strengths.

Eighth, while another naval commander with Liu Huaqing's influence is unlikely to emerge, China's national leadership appears to have recognized the value of a strong Navy.

Finally, while the Army remains the dominant service, the Navy's status no doubt has been enhanced by the Gulf of Aden deployments and increased "presence" missions and will continue to rise in proportion with the degree of crisis in maritime situations, such as Taiwan, the

East and South China seas, or in the missions other than war highlighted in recent Chinese literature.

Imperial China for the most part ignored the sea except for brief periods and specific campaigns. Republican China was simply too preoccupied with the civil war and Japanese invasion to focus on naval development. The communist regime installed in 1949 maintained for almost fifty years a traditional Chinese attitude toward its Navy as a secondary instrument of national power. This strategic view has changed.

However, while naval doctrine development in China is not transparent, descriptions of recently conducted naval exercises have used the right labels for twenty-first-century navies: joint warfare, systems integration, coordinated subsurface-surface-aviation operations, centralized command and control. But I think that the PLAN surface forces suffer in several significant warfare areas, including: AAW, ASW, Systems Integration, Maintenance and Supply....ISR

Further maturation of the PLAN's role in national security priorities will depend on how naval power and maritime economic interests are viewed in Beijing. The value to the nation of its rich offshore mineral and biological resources, and its dependence on seaborne trade and transportation, are clearly understood. Those interests have been categorized as the "five rivalries": over ocean islands, sea space jurisdiction, marine resources, the maritime strategic advantage, and strategic sea-lanes.<sup>17</sup>

In 2007 the PLAN's commander argued, "We must build a powerful Navy . . . to maintain the safety of the oceanic transportation and the strategic passageway for energy and resources, [and] to defend the unification of our nation."

I think China's naval modernization will continue for several reasons. First is the determination for regional dominance, to ensure that unwelcome policies are not undertaken by regional nations. Second even following peaceful resolution of Taiwan's status, Beijing will consider a strategically capable Navy necessary to counter U.S. and possibly Japanese power. Third is Beijing's determination to gain the respect due to a great power, which includes deploying a great Navy. The fourth reason may be momentum: the current buildup has given rise to a wide range of long-term programs and powerful interests--perhaps best described as China's military-industrial complex--that have developed a life of their own.<sup>18</sup> A possible fifth reason is domestic politics: no communist system has been able to establish systemic, orderly leadership succession. China may be the first, but that has yet to be proven; any leadership contest will involve the participants valuing the loyalty of a strong military, especially given the PLA's role as a "party army."

### **Conclusion**

The United States remains the most important naval power in Asian waters. American dominance is neither limitless nor everlasting, however, a fact heightened by America's post-9/11 preoccupation with Southwest Asia and the shrinkage of its naval and merchant fleets: the nearly six hundred-ship Navy of 1990 is less than half that size in 2009, and the downward trend continues.

In the face of U.S. intervention in a Taiwan scenario, China requires the ability to prevail in an area 200–1,000 nm off its coast for a period of ten to thirty days. This in turn requires a Navy able to prevail inside the first island chain, which the PLAN in 2010 is only marginally able to do against the United States or Japan, depending on timing, objectives, and the opposing force. Even Taiwan's navy would present formidable opposition if it fought well.<sup>20</sup> The PLAN in

2020 will remain unable to guarantee mission success if opposed by the U.S. Navy, but the other Asian maritime forces do not presently appear on a course of modernization that promises continuing ability to preclude Chinese naval success.

Maritime strategy should reflect Colin Gray's dictum a maritime strategist must remember that command of the sea, sea control, and sea denial are all means, not ends. They serve only to promote a nation's ability to directly affect events on the land.

(1) **PLA (and the PLAN) is a "party army"**: political education vs. professional training? Note PLAAF comments on visit to Maxwell. Elie Joffe: political reliability and professional competence not mutually exclusive....but Soviets in WWII....PLA in Korea....

(2) **Modernization since 1996**: hardware significant, as are numbers, but more important are advances in personnel accession, training, and education, ship and unit training, maintenance and supply procedures....

(3) **How "good"** is the PLAN: equipment? personnel? experience (GOA)?

(4) And, finally, despite transparency problems, we should not be surprised at what have seen and are seeing in terms of China's maritime modernization....

-assymetry

-assassin's mace

-technology

-Houbei

--SSs