

## The People's Republic of China at Sea: A Seapower Ascendant?

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### *Abstract*

The growth of the People's Liberation Army Navy is among the most exceptional achievements of modern China. Correspondingly, much has been made of its rapid rise, however, a degree of sensationalism has clouded general understanding of the realities of China's naval capabilities. While its quantitative capacity is certainly impressive, those qualitative factors which ensure the professionalism and operational success of a maritime service are still lacking. Thus, the threat posed by China at sea remains a nascent one, largely confined to the Indo-Pacific. However, observers would do well to remember that force-building is a long-term process, and given time, China will be able to project naval power well beyond its littoral waters.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, Maritime Strategy, Naval Affairs, Sea Power, US-China Rivalry

### ***Introduction***

For much of its history, China has been a continental power with only occasional and fleeting interest in the naval realm.<sup>1</sup> This has long been the result of the interplay between geography, state building, and culture. Of course, as Alfred Thayer Mahan observed over a century ago, geography is perhaps the most important factor in both determining one's access to the sea and if one's strategic priority ought to lie with it or not.<sup>2</sup> Despite its expansive coastline and ample access to global sea routes, instability in its littoral regions often hindered Imperial China from projecting naval power much beyond its coastline. To say nothing of their domestic concerns, the threat from belligerent foreign powers – for the Han Dynasty it was the Xiongnu, for the Sui and Tang it was the Turks, and for the Song it was the Mongols – consistently focused Chinese attention on its immediate borders rather than on the distant high seas. By the time China was subjugated by the Manchus who, as a minority class of foreign ruling elites, were compelled to substantially invest in securing domestic stability above all else, Chinese naval capabilities and interest dwindled almost to obscurity. With minimal resistance at sea, nineteenth-century gunboat diplomacy and colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Jun J. Nohara, “Sea Power as a Dominant Paradigm: The Rise of China’s New Strategic Identity.” *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 6, no. 2 (2017): 217.

<sup>2</sup> See: Alfred Thayer Mahan, “Chapter I: Discussion of the Elements of Sea Power,” in *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2018), 25-89.

adventurism crippled the last Imperial Chinese dynasty – most notably in the Opium Wars (1839-42; 1856-60).

Today, the People’s Republic of China confronts these same perennial geographic dilemmas, yet the balance may be tipping. In the last few decades, Chinese ambitions to expand into the maritime domain have seen a rapid development in naval capabilities, all with the extensive support of the Chinese Communist Party. Over the last ten years, this extensive expansion has garnered significant international concern, particularly from the United States and its allies, uncertain as to the precise nature of Chinese naval ambitions, and whether China truly intends to take a place as a first-class, twenty-first century *seapower*. Increasingly, an alarm has been sounded among western audiences about such aspirations.<sup>3</sup> Commentaries surrounding Chinese sea power are largely focused on its implications for the adjoining Indo-Pacific region but have the potential to yield anxieties about possible global pretensions. Of course, the Indo-Pacific is already an integral piece of the global maritime space and disruption to its naval balance is indeed a concerning development. As such, exaggerating China’s naval capabilities and strategic intent is a dangerous diversion from its very real regional geopolitical implications. Fundamental to understanding this issue is an

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see: Bruce Jones, “The Challenge of China’s Rising Power on the Seas,” *The Wall Street Journal* (New York, NY) September 16, 2021; Steven L. Myers, “With Ships and Missiles, China Is Ready to Challenge US Navy in Pacific,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY) August 29, 2018.

appreciation of the difference between maintaining *sea power* and being what we might traditionally call a *seapower* state. Concerns surrounding China’s rapidly increasing maritime capabilities have seen recent discussions blur this distinction. This is beyond mere doctrinal semantics. Sea power can be described as the strategic use of the sea by a state, accomplished chiefly through the deployment and use of its naval forces. As such, any state with access to the sea can possess some degree of sea power, however, this does not intrinsically qualify a state as what a naval historian might define as a traditional *seapower*. Instead, a *seapower* state is a polity whose livelihood and identity are intrinsically tied to the sea, and thus applies sea power in support of their maritime enterprises as well as to influence international affairs. The super-power confrontation of the Cold War shifted the conceptual identity of a *seapower* from its traditional politico-cultural essence to the raw military dominance epitomized by the might of the United States Navy, but the historical concept of a *seapower* state, as opposed to a continental one, remains a useful heuristic in the context of strategic culture.<sup>4</sup> Given such a definition, continental states may possess some degree of sea power in that they may have a navy, but are likely to value it only in-so-much as it provides the ability to project force back onto the land to protect its territorial

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<sup>4</sup> See: Andrew Lambert, “Chapter 9: Seapower Today,” in *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict That Made the Modern World* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2018), 311-22.

interests. Thus, this divergence in the conception of sea power’s purpose produces differing strategic cultures and aims in the application of sea power.

For reasons of geography discussed above, it is difficult to conceive of whether the People’s Republic of China could ever become a *seapower state* in the classical sense. Moreover, as the Chinese Communist Party’s rule is chiefly concerned with domestic control and unitary political authority, one questions whether its strategic gaze can ever be sustained far beyond its shores. The fact also remains that China shares distant borders with fourteen foreign states, and that several of these borders remain sites of open conflict, all means that the age-old strategic dilemma persists; can China’s strategic priorities shift substantially from concepts of internal sovereignty to the projection of power at sea?

To assess the full scope of China’s naval capabilities and intent, it is necessary to establish measures of sea power. First and foremost, it must be noted that the goal of sea power is the ability to secure the usage of the maritime domain for a state’s own purposes while maintaining sufficient capability of denying it to others.<sup>5</sup> To achieve such a goal – i.e., command of the sea – a state must have

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<sup>5</sup> Colin S. Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1992), 4.

sufficient naval forces.<sup>6</sup> Yet a state's sea power is defined not only by the number of ships in its navy, but also the quality of its navy's training, its doctrine, national shipbuilding capacity, as well as the continued support of the state and its society. Furthermore, the technological realities of the contemporary strategic period have meant that while warships remain the principal instruments of sea power, aircraft and land-based missile systems also play key roles in the contest for the command of the sea. As such, of all these factors become necessary in evaluating Chinese sea power.

### ***The People's Liberation Army Navy***

Quantitatively, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is the world's largest navy containing at least 355 combat-capable vessels.<sup>7</sup> For context, its nearest peer competitor, the United States Navy, is comprised of some 307 combat surface and undersea platforms.<sup>8</sup> Regardless, China's naval personnel, totalling 250,000, far exceeds its regional peers.<sup>9</sup> Many of the PLAN's vessels have been produced at domestic shipyards and its first domestically constructed aircraft carrier was commissioned in 2019, with a second scheduled for completion in

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<sup>6</sup> Julian S. Corbett, *Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), 87.

<sup>7</sup> *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China* (United States Department of Defense, 2021), 48.

<sup>8</sup> "Chapter Three: North America," *The Military Balance* 121, no. 1 (2021): 51-2.

<sup>9</sup> "Chapter Six: Asia," *The Military Balance* 121, no. 1 (2021): 251-3.

2024.<sup>10</sup> It is, however, the pace of its naval build-up that is most striking. Since 2015, China has acquired over 105 new platforms at an average growth rate of roughly 21 vessels per year, nearly doubling the United States Navy’s average acquisition rate of 11 platforms per year in the same period.<sup>11</sup> Creditable as China’s rate of shipbuilding may be, it is Beijing’s goal of generating a fleet of 550 vessels that marks out the extent of its maritime ambitions.<sup>12</sup> Although the PLAN is still somewhat off this target, in strictly numerical terms, Chinese maritime capabilities are certainly set to grow in the coming decades.

While the overall size of the PLAN is staggering, conceptions of China’s burgeoning sea power are tempered somewhat when one considers precisely what capabilities the fleet will have and the intended roles and missions it will fulfil. Of the PLAN’s 355 or so current platforms, approximately 179 are patrol and coastal combatants, the remainder including some 59 submarines and 80 principal surface combatants, and of these just three ships would be considered major surface combatants, i.e., the two aircraft carriers and one cruiser.<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>10</sup> *Annual Report to Congress*, 48.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald O’Rourke, “China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress” (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021): 7; Mark F. Cancian. “US Military Forces in FY 2020,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies* (2021): 36.

<sup>12</sup> James E. Fanell, “Asia Rising: China’s Global Naval Strategy and Expanding Force Structure” *Naval War College Review* 72, no. 1 (2019): 21.

<sup>13</sup> “Chapter Six: Asia,” 251-2.

remaining 77 vessels comprise 31 destroyers and 46 frigates.<sup>14</sup> These smaller platforms that comprise the bulk of the PLAN's fighting ships, while by no means insignificant, are not necessarily major combatants. Rather, their operational roles are primarily dedicated to escorting the larger surface combatants or amphibious ships as well as in conducting anti-submarine warfare. For its part, the United States Navy maintains 68 submarines and 124 principal surface combatants, of which the latter includes 11 aircraft carriers, 24 cruisers, 68 destroyers, and 21 frigates.<sup>15</sup> Thus, since the majority of China's fleet is comprised of patrol and coastal ships, while its truly combat-capable ships are mainly submarines and small surface combatants, like destroyers and frigates, lauding the PLAN as the world's largest fleet is somewhat misleading. It is likewise notable that of the net 132 ships China's navy has commissioned since 2005, 65 percent (net 86 vessels) were patrol and coastal ships while just net 19 platforms were principal surface combatants.<sup>16</sup> This suggests that China's naval procurement during the last two decades has continued to focus on the acquisition of patrol and coastal combatants rather than major surface ships or submarines. The key implication here is that China's naval priorities, at least in recent years, have remained its territorial and littoral waters and not on developing a major

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> "Chapter Three: North America," 51-2.

<sup>16</sup> O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization," 7-10.



blue-water navy. Accordingly, that the vast majority of the PLAN's vessels are patrol and coastal combatants and not major warships, indicates a limited operational scope. Of course, the domestic production of two aircraft carriers, as the pinnacle of modern surface fleet capabilities, should not be understated. Nonetheless, the fact remains that much of the expansion in Chinese naval capabilities is clearly oriented towards the defence of the littoral, and not in global power projection.

Certainly, obtaining and maintaining naval platforms is an important measure of sea power, but the quality of a navy's personnel is also integral to assessing the value of such vessels. Since 2004, there have been major reforms in the PLAN. Its command and control structure has been consolidated from eight operational bases to three theatre headquarters, streamlining logistics and leadership issues.<sup>17</sup> Regarding its training regimen, the PLAN has pursued a combination of classroom training, shore-based simulations, and on-ship training centres.<sup>18</sup> For its non-commissioned officers, the PLAN has established robust curricula at several professional military education institutions.<sup>19</sup> It has also sought to

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<sup>17</sup> Rodrick Lee and Morgan Clemens, "China Maritime Report No. 9: Organizing to Fight in the Far Seas, The Chinese Navy in an Era of Military Reform," (2020): 3.

<sup>18</sup> "The People's Liberation Army Navy: A Modern Navy with Chinese Characteristics" (Suitland, MD: Office of Naval Intelligence, 2009), 39.

<sup>19</sup> Bernard Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy in the Twenty-First Century*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012), 67.

increase its overseas deployments to enhance crews' on-ship experience, the most notable being its counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since 2008.<sup>20</sup> An annual series of training exercises gauged at enhancing its combat training has also been introduced, the fifth such iteration occurring in early 2020.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, joint naval exercises have played an increasing role in China's naval activities abroad with exercises occurring in a range of environments from the Baltic Sea to the Indian Ocean.<sup>22</sup> In all, from 2018 to 2020, the PLAN conducted more overseas naval deployments than it had in the previous thirty years.<sup>23</sup> These extensive overseas operations have served to significantly enhance the PLAN's institutional quality and demonstrate its proficiency internationally. That said, the Chinese Communist Party continues to constrain the professionalism of China's naval personnel; rather than the service professionals of the Navy itself, is the Party that directly administers promotion boards and assigns political officers to each professional officer.<sup>24</sup> This political interference in manpower decisions prevents the full meritocratic development of the Navy's

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<sup>20</sup> Fanell, "Asia Rising," 18.

<sup>21</sup> Rodrick Lee, "The PLA Navy's ZHANLAN Training Series: Supporting Offensive Strike on the High Seas," *China Brief* 20, no. 7 (2020): 24.

<sup>22</sup> Fanell, "Asia Rising," 19; 21; 28.

<sup>23</sup> O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization," 7-10.

<sup>24</sup> Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea*, 61.

leadership, whilst also potentially undercutting naval freedom of action during a conflict.

### ***People's Liberation Army Navy Operational Range***

The greatest barrier to the PLAN's full power projection capacity, has been its limited operational range. Decades of emphasis on coastal defence has left the PLAN with an underdeveloped support ship capacity.<sup>25</sup> However, China's military reform efforts since 2015 have sought to correct this limitation, increasing the acquisition of support vessels.<sup>26</sup> China's previous policies emphasizing the military's defensive posture likewise prevented it from developing overseas military bases. In 2017, however, with the establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti, China has initiated an overseas base acquisition strategy that seeks to add at least 18 People's Liberation Army (PLA) bases between 2020 and 2030.<sup>27</sup>

The PLA's basing efforts are likely to coincide with the expansion of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) throughout the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>28</sup> Initiated in

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>26</sup> *Annual Report to Congress*, 78-9.

<sup>27</sup> Chad Peltier, Tate Nurkin, and Sean O'Connor, "China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations" (Jane's Information Group, 2020): 22-3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 24-27.

2015, China has officially stated that the BRI is expressly aimed producing a more economically developed and integrated Eurasia.<sup>29</sup> As of 2019, through the BRI, China had invested US\$126 billion in transport and storage facilities throughout Asia.<sup>30</sup> Should these efforts be successful in eventually developing overseas military logistics bases, the PLAN's overseas power projection capability will be significantly enhanced. While many western observers have characterized the BRI as a grand strategy of expanding influence to lay the groundwork for possible basing abroad, the mixed successes and ambivalent partner satisfaction with Chinese infrastructure investments casts doubts on the validity of such a claim.<sup>31</sup> Recent reports have also indicated that China is seeking to establish a base in Equatorial Guinea, its first base on the Atlantic coast.<sup>32</sup> Yet ambiguities about Beijing's precise intentions to establish a second base abroad – an operation which the host government in Malabo has ostensibly denied – hardly signal definitive ambitions to develop a global maritime network. Certainly, doing so would be a major tangible development in China's global

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<sup>29</sup> Seng In Chan and Weiqing Song, "Telling the China Story Well: A Discursive Approach to the Analysis of Chinese Foreign Policy in the 'Belt and Road' Initiative," *Chinese Political Science Review* 5, no. 3 (2020): 422.

<sup>30</sup> Fanell, "Asia Rising," 16.

<sup>31</sup> Lee Jones and Jinghan Zeng, "Understanding China's 'Belt and Road Initiative': Beyond 'grand strategy' to a state transformation analysis," *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 8 (2019): 1426-1427.

<sup>32</sup> Michael M Phillips, "China Seeks First Military Base on Africa's Atlantic Coast, U.S. Intelligence Finds," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2021.

reach, but the current state of China’s basing network, if one could indeed call it that, remains confined to its sole base in Djibouti. As such, the possibility of an expanded global basing presence, while certainly worthy of monitoring, remains at best latent in its potential.

### ***China’s Maritime Paramilitaries***

Among the more distinct elements of China’s sea power are that of the China Coast Guard and the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militias (PAFMM). Each of these institutions has acquired a military combat-capable purpose in addition to their civilian-oriented, maritime security roles. Indeed, the massive expansion of these forces is illustrative of their increasing mission. Since 2010, China’s Coast Guard has expanded its fleet from approximately 60 vessels to more than 130 as of 2021 – making it the largest coast guard force in the world.<sup>33</sup> More strikingly, however, are the 70 patrol combatants and more than 400 coastal patrol craft operated by the Coast Guard that are capable of offshore operations, albeit limited in their nature.<sup>34</sup> Many of the Coast Guard’s vessels are also of military-grade tonnage, a notable contrast from the coast guards of China’s regional peers. The PAFMM is operated at the local and provincial levels,

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<sup>33</sup> *Annual Report to Congress*, 75.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

however, its vessels have also been co-opted for military and paramilitary purposes and have been deployed as far as Indonesian territorial waters.<sup>35</sup> Together, China’s Coast Guard and the PAFMM have become prominent actors in China’s maritime disputes. Indeed, the PAFMM and Coast Guard have been some of the primary tools of action in China’s maritime grey-zone operations throughout the South China Sea.<sup>36</sup>

### ***National Support***

While the naval discourse in China generally accepts that sea power is an important factor in China’s national security interests, the extent to which China’s need to possess sea power and how much it ought to be pursued is the subject of great debate.<sup>37</sup> There are three notable factions in the national discourse: the first argues that sea power is integral to China’s development, a second holds that sea power should be developed equally with the nation’s land power, and a third, smaller faction maintains that China’s continental interests are far more pressing than those of the maritime domain.<sup>38</sup> Within the groups

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>36</sup> Shuxian Luo and Jonathan G. Panter, “China’s Maritime Militia and Fishing Fleets: A Primer for Operational Staffs and Tactical Leaders.” *Military Review* (2021): 10-2.

<sup>37</sup> Phillip C. Saunders, Christopher Young, Michael Swaine, and Andrew Nien-Dzu Yang, *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2011), 81.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 85.

favouring naval development, the question of whether China requires an ocean-going navy or a force with modest regional capability is highly controversial.<sup>39</sup> Nonetheless, the PLAN has received strong support from Presidents Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping.<sup>40</sup> Given the scale of the PLAN's acquisitions and growing capabilities, it would certainly seem that the faction promoting China's naval development has largely triumphed in recent years. Indeed, China's naval reforms since 2000 have been an almost complete reversal of strategic neglect that had characterised policy towards the PLAN in the prior six decades.

While patronage of the navy by the state is important, the support of society as a whole is likewise a necessary factor in maintaining a major naval force. Popular investment in naval development requires both a large pool of service-members and approval, if only tacitly, for substantial tax allocations to sustain a navy's great and constant costs. Despite the nature of the authoritarian government in Beijing, the Chinese Communist Party has proven remarkably perceptive and attuned to the need for cultivating public support in developing a new martial maritime culture. To an extent, this variable is mitigated by the ability of authoritarian regimes to unilaterally enact policy. Nonetheless, since at least

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<sup>39</sup> Nohara, "Sea Power as a Dominant Paradigm," 211.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 226.

1995, the Party and leading Chinese sea power theorists have deliberately enacted a process of fostering the “people’s sea consciousness.”<sup>41</sup> Cultivating this sea consciousness is necessary in sustaining a great power-navy, especially one which has been so rapidly developed and financially burdensome as that of the PLAN. Perhaps the most demonstrative measure of crafting a popular sea consciousness in the Chinese public has been that of “naval nationalist” demonstrations, protesting for hawkish responses to maritime disputes involving China’s neighbours.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Non-naval Elements of China’s Sea Power***

#### *The People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force*

The People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) plays an integral role in China’s naval strategy. As Figure 1 illustrates, these conventional missile capabilities extend well into the Second Pacific Island Chain, effectively pushing its threat projection past China’s inner seas. In addition, maintaining one of the world’s largest missile arsenals at some 3,000 systems, the PLARF is well-suited to support naval operations in the Indo-Pacific region.<sup>43</sup> In the event of conflict,

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<sup>41</sup> Saunders et al., *The Chinese Navy*, 93.

<sup>42</sup> Michael A. Glosny, Phillip C. Saunders, and Robert S. Ross, “Debating China’s naval nationalism.” *International Security* 35, no. 2 (2020): 166.

<sup>43</sup> *Annual Report to Congress*, 60-3.



PLARF doctrine asserts its role as threefold: targeted destruction of major capital ships, the imposition of focused naval blockades, and general aerial defence.<sup>44</sup> The PLA General Staff discusses these roles in their publication, *The Science of Campaigns*, emphasizing the PLARF's anti-ship ballistic missile capability as a means of limiting the freedom of movement of an adversary's naval forces.<sup>45</sup> While the full potential of the PLARF's anti-ship missiles remains uncertain, the threat projection created by PLARF certainly enhances China's latent sea power. It is worth acknowledging, however, that the capabilities PLARF adds to China's naval arsenal are themselves largely confined to the role of area denial and limited to the Indo-Pacific theatre. Thus, its ability to support China's global maritime power projection is minimal.

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<sup>44</sup> Andrew S. Erickson, and David D. Yang. "Using Land to Control the Sea? Chinese Analysts Consider the Antiship Ballistic Missile." *Naval War College Review* 62, no. 4 (2009): 61.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew S. Erickson, *Chinese Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM) Development: Drivers, Trajectories, and Strategic Implications* (Brookings Institution Press, 2013), 59.

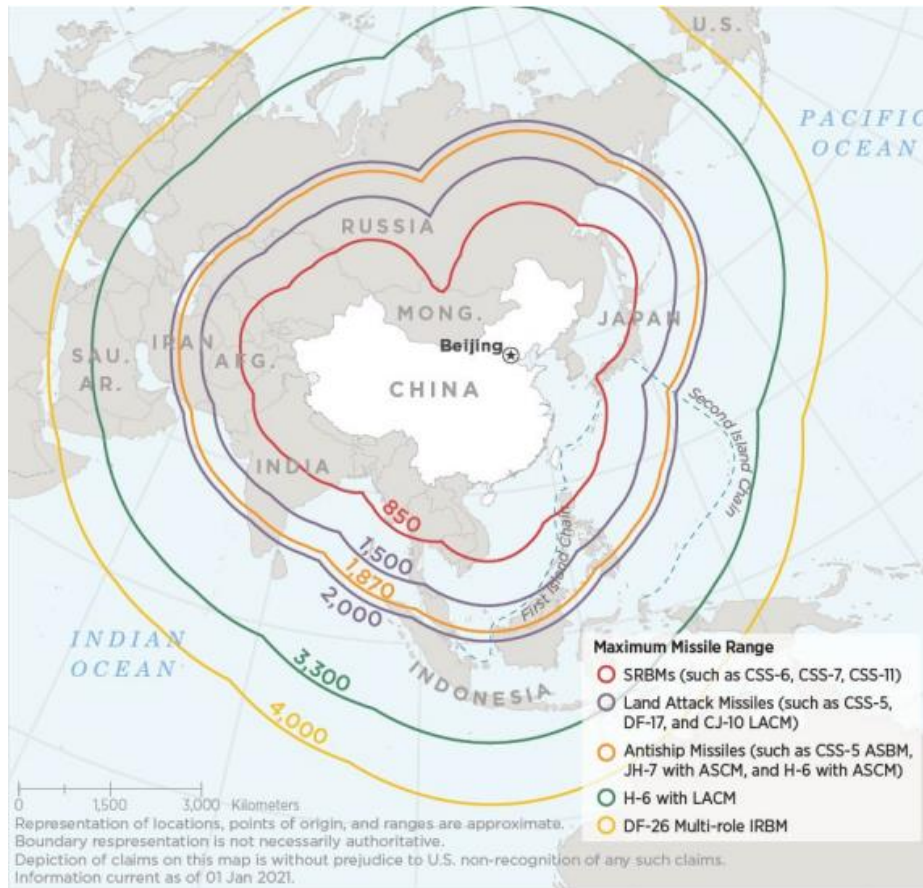


Figure 1: China’s Regional Missile Network, Source: *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (United States Department of Defense, 2021), 62.

***The People’s Liberation Army Air Force***

The People’s Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) is also a significant contributing component of China’s sea power. In 2013, the PLAAF asserted that China’s Air Defence Identification Zone extends into the East China Sea past the

Senkaku Islands which comprise a portion of the First Pacific Island Chain.<sup>46</sup> Since then, the PLAAF has conducted joint exercises with the PLAN in the East and South China Seas as well as the Philippine Sea.<sup>47</sup> It is worth acknowledging that at over 2,800 aircraft, of which approximately 2,250 are combat capable, the People’s Liberation Army Air Force is the largest air force in the Indo-Pacific region and third largest in the world.<sup>48</sup> Yet this figure must again be considered in light of the fact that at least half of the aircraft fielded by the PLAN and PLAAF are legacy platforms with comparatively limited capabilities.<sup>49</sup> The value of each force is somewhat further diminished by the PLA’s own recognition of major shortcomings in air training and readiness.<sup>50</sup> Just as the PLARF enhances China’s naval capabilities within the Indo-Pacific but lacks the means to meaningfully enhance China’s power projection and global maritime security interests, the PLAAF’s effective operational range remains largely limited to within the First Island Chain.<sup>51</sup> For the PLAAF, as with the PLAN, limitations in

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<sup>46</sup> Fanell, “Asia Rising,” 21.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 18-22.

<sup>48</sup> *Annual Report to Congress*, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Michael S. Chase, Jeffrey Engstrom, Tai Ming Cheung, Kristen A. Gunness, Scott Harold, Susan Puska, and Samuel K. Berkowitz. *China’s incomplete military transformation: assessing the weaknesses of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)* (Rand Corporation, 2015), 103-4.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 107; 16.

<sup>51</sup> Ian B. McCaslin and Andrew S. Erickson. *Selling a Maritime Air Force: The PLAAF’s Campaign for a Bigger Maritime Role* (Washington, DC: China Aerospace Studies Institute, 2019), 13.

their operational scope is compounded by China’s scant maintenance of overseas bases from which it would be able to conduct the missions of a *seapower* with global interests. These constraints are only further complicated by the lack of a well-defined joint command between the PLAAF and the PLAN’s naval aviation units which has created significant friction between the services.<sup>52</sup>

### ***Towards a Global Maritime Strategy?***

The People's Liberation Army Navy’s naval strategy has been heavily shaped by Admiral Liu Huaqing’s “near-seas active defence” mantra. Admiral Huaqing’s strategy emphasized conducting naval operations within the First Pacific Island-Chain, stretching from the Kurile Islands in the North to Borneo in the South (see Figure 2).<sup>53</sup> Admiral Liu asserted that once control of the near-seas was acquired, the People's Liberation Army Navy would be capable of extending its operational range to the Second Island Chain and beyond.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea*, 77; McCaslin and Erickson, *Selling a Maritime Air Force*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Nan Li, “The evolution of China's naval strategy and capabilities: from ‘near coast’ and ‘near seas’ to ‘far seas’.” *Asian Security* 5, no. 2 (2009): 150.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 152.



Figure 2: China’s “Near Seas” and “Far Seas” within the Pacific Island Chains, Source: *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China* (United States Department of Defense, 2012), 40

While near-seas active defence remained a guiding principle for the PLAN into the twenty-first century, far-seas operational capability has been increasingly emphasized by both PLAN and Chinese Communist Party leadership. This policy

change was officially initiated by China’s 2015 Defence White Paper that stated that the People’s Liberation Army Navy “will gradually shift its focus from ‘offshore waters defence’ to the combination of ‘offshore waters defence’ with ‘open seas protection...’.”<sup>55</sup> The shift was reaffirmed by the 2019 Defence White Paper that stated that the “People’s Liberation Army Navy is speeding up the transition of its tasks from defence on the near seas to protection missions on the far seas.”<sup>56</sup> Taken together, China’s 2015 and 2019 defence white papers have marked a distinct change in long-term naval objectives that now see the PLAN seeking to assert itself not only outside of the First-Island Chain, but potentially beyond the second. Certainly, securing China’s interests in the near-seas continues to be an essential objective of the PLAN, however, these policy changes signal that the PLAN believes the near-seas to be sufficiently within its sphere of control and is pursuing the extension of its operational range in line with Admiral Liu’s incremental capability development framework.

China’s naval war-fighting strategy has been named Anti-Access/Area Denial by international observers.<sup>57</sup> This strategy seeks to prevent an adversary’s forces

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<sup>55</sup> “China’s Military Strategy” (Beijing: The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2015), 12.

<sup>56</sup> “China’s National Defense in the New Era” (Beijing: The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2019), 21-2.

<sup>57</sup> Sam J. Tangredi, “ANTIACCESS WARFARE AS STRATEGY: From Campaign Analyses to Assessment of Extrinsic Events.” *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1 (2018): 40-1; Yves-

from being able to enter China's near-seas and, should that fail, limit their operational flexibility through attrition-oriented actions.<sup>58</sup> Achieving Anti-Access/Area Denial is founded on the joint efforts of the PLAN's naval strength supplemented by the PLAAF and the PLARF's anti-ship ballistic missile system.<sup>59</sup> Of course, Anti-Access/Area Denial fundamentally aims to achieve of command of the sea; in only being concerned with the Indo-Pacific region, however, the doctrine delimits the aspirational nature of the PLAN's far-seas operations. Moreover, the substantial reliance on the non-naval elements of China's sea power to meet the challenge of a peer or near-peer competitor further reinforces the PLAN's status as regional, and not global, naval force.

Whilst limiting the PLAN's operational relevance to the Indo-Pacific may provide some comfort to observers previously alarmed by its global potential, doing so without acknowledging the fact that many of China's short- and medium-term strategic priorities lie within its region is ill-considered. Indeed, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, the Chinese Communist Party has repeatedly asserted its commitment to the resolution of maritime territorial

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Heng Lim, "Expanding the dragon's reach: The rise of China's anti-access naval doctrine and forces." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40, no. 1-2 (2017): 155.

<sup>58</sup> Lim, "Expanding the dragon's reach," 155-6.

<sup>59</sup> Tangredi, "ANTIACCESS WARFARE AS STRATEGY," 41.

disputes by the centenary of the nation's founding in 2049.<sup>60</sup> These proclamations, particularly over the issue of Taiwan, may appear as nationalistic platitudes, but they do hold genuine value for the legitimacy of the Party's leadership. For those disputes in the maritime realm – most notably the Senkaku-Diaoyu Islands, the “nine dash line” encompassing the Spratly and Parcel Islands, and, of course, Taiwan – the PLAN has been well-equipped to press China's claims. It is telling that among China's naval procurement trends that amphibious ships utilized for troop transit account for the third greatest net acquisitions.<sup>61</sup> Taken alongside the PLAN's seeming satisfaction with its ability to dominate China's near seas, this trend likely indicates preparations to force the resolution of maritime territorial disputes if necessary. Thus, the greatest geopolitical risk presented by the growth of the PLAN is its ability to force its territorial claims in the Indo-Pacific, and in doing so, challenging American global maritime supremacy whether that is the true strategic intention of China's policymakers or not.

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<sup>60</sup> Andrew Erickson, “Chapter 4: China,” in *Comparative Grand Strategy: A Framework and Cases*, ed. Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski, and Simon Reich (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 75-80.

<sup>61</sup> O'Rourke, “China Naval Modernization,” 7-8.



*A Seapower State in the Making?*

Certainly, having constructed the world's largest fleet in terms of total platforms, China has demonstrated its significant naval capacity. The People's Liberation Army Navy has likewise been effective at overhauling its training regimen and expanding its overseas operations, thereby enhancing the professionalism of the force. Yet in measuring sea power, the ability to achieve command of the sea is the crucial qualifier. The doctrinal shift outlined in China's 2015 and 2019 defence white papers demonstrates that the Chinese government believes it has achieved sufficient capabilities to establish command of the sea within the First Island Chain. Indeed, through the implementation of its combined arms Anti-Access/Area Denial strategy integrating the People's Liberation Army Navy, Rocket Force, and Air Force, China is likely able to rapidly achieve command of the sea over its regional adversaries in the near seas. In this context China is undoubtedly a major regional sea power, a status that likely heightens the risk of confrontation with the current global maritime hegemon, the United States, within the Indo-Pacific.

Nevertheless, its ability to project power at sea far beyond the First Island Chain, as is among the most concerning possibilities for western audiences, is more

limited. Despite maintaining a massive fleet, the majority of the People's Liberation Army Navy force is comprised of coastal and patrol vessels unlikely to be deployed outside of the near seas. It is also noteworthy that such small combatants account for most of its recent acquisitions, implying that the intended operational space of the PLAN is largely gauged towards China's littoral waters. For their part, China's major surface combatants remain outnumbered by those of the United States Navy, 80 as opposed to 124 vessels, nor does it vastly outnumber the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force's 51 principal combatants.<sup>62</sup> While the PLAN's training reforms have sought to develop a professional force, its staffing remains subject to the political interference of the Chinese Communist Party which likely undermines its professionalism. Perhaps most significant is that while China is seeking to develop a series of overseas bases, it currently maintains just one on the Horn of Africa. It therefore lacks a sufficient logistical support network to conduct major operations in distant seas. These qualitative deficiencies and restrictions present major barriers to truly considering China as a global naval power, let alone a *seapower*.

Of course, it cannot be forgotten that it was not the vision of the father of the contemporary People's Liberation Army Navy, Admiral Liu Huaqing, to

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<sup>62</sup> "Chapter Three: North America," 51-2; "Chapter Six: Asia," 251-2; 271.

meteorically ascend to global naval supremacy. Had its goals been as lofty and observers could have criticized the shortcomings of China's naval development, they would still have to concede that the achievements of modern China in growing its naval capabilities are truly exceptional. Yet Admiral Liu Huaqing's vision was precisely the opposite. He envisioned a long-term process of gradually building China's sea power, extending from one island chain to the next and beyond. In this light, the People's Liberation Army Navy is certainly on track to achieving major sea power status. Moreover, it is not in line with the short-to-medium term strategic goals of Beijing to be a global *seapower*. Rather, becoming the dominant sea power in its region, a status it has arguably attained, is a necessary condition for resolving its maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas as well as the question of Taiwan which are inextricably linked to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. Thus, observers asking themselves if China's navy can contest American global maritime hegemony outside of the Indo-Pacific overlook the near-term regional priorities that China's sea power is undeniably oriented towards at present and how such objectives are already intimately connected to challenging American supremacy at sea.