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The Rise of the Chinese Navy: What the World can Expect from Asia’s Emerging Maritime Power

David Gerard

As China accelerates its climb toward superpower status, the rhetoric of a “China threat” is heard with increasing frequency throughout the world. In the past, this rhetoric was based on China’s intimidating economic growth. Yet, in recent years, China-anxious nations have turned their focus to a “threat” with more palpable implications: the threat of military expansion. China’s growing military power, specifically its naval power, is a source of growing anxiety for many in the international community. Two of China’s closest neighbors, Japan and South Korea, see China’s enlarged navy as the precursor to revisionist Chinese aggression (Page 2011). Others, like Southeast Asian countries, fear China will use its enhanced naval powers to impose unequal resolutions on territorial disputes in the South China Sea (Washington Post 2011). Even the U.S., a naval giant, sees the rise of the Chinese Navy as a potential threat to stability in the Asia-Pacific region (U.S. Library of Congress 2010, 33). But are these concerns justified or has the world misread this latest maneuver in Chinese foreign policy?

The purpose of this analysis is to identify the cause of China’s recent naval expansion and predict future Chinese naval behavior. It begins by relating the breadth and depth of China’s naval improvements and reviews three prominent competing explanations for this growth. Next, I predict future developments in specific foreign policy issues, including China’s dealings with Japan, South Korea, the South China Sea, the U.S., and the projection of naval power abroad more generally. This article posits that China’s use of its newly improved navy is dependent on domestic considerations, namely, the level of domestic support for and the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party.
The Extent of Chinese Naval Expansion

Since the year 2000, China’s official military budget has experienced consistent, rapid growth, increasing from 14.6 billion (USD) to its present day amount of 77.9 billion (USD) (Global Security). This increase has allowed the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), the naval service arm of the People’s Liberation Army, to acquire more naval assets abroad and simultaneously produce more naval assets at home. According to a recent Congressional Research Service report, the PLAN has focused its modernization efforts on the following key areas: anti-ship ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, submarines, the development of an aircraft carrier, and the production of surface combatants like frigates and destroyers (U.S. Library of Congress 2010, 2). The growth in these areas has been substantial. The Office of Naval Intelligence reports that from 1990 to 2009 the number of Chinese destroyers has increased by 37 percent, frigates by 86 percent, and ballistic missile submarines by 200 percent. They also predict China will have at least one operational aircraft carrier by the year 2015 (U.S. Library of Congress 2010, 19). To complement this growth in naval assets, the PLAN has also sought to improve the education and training of naval officers, logistics management, and operational mobility (Chaffin 2010). The Chinese Navy is not only growing in size but also in efficiency and expertise.

As intimidating as these numbers are, they might only represent a portion of the actual growth in the Chinese Navy. Chinese reporting procedures are notorious for their lack of transparency, and Western powers fear much of China’s military growth remains undisclosed or carefully disguised by the Chinese government’s accounting processes. In fact, in a recent New York Times article, American officials expressed concern for China’s “lack of openness about the growth” seen in the military (Shanker 2010). The possibility of undisclosed military spending is further evidenced by the discrepancy between publicly reported data figures, like the World Bank’s World Development Indicators, and intelligence-based estimations, like those produced by the CIA. While the World Bank statistics reflect a fairly consistent 2 percent of China’s annual GDP has been dedicated to military purposes since 1993, the CIA’s 2006 estimate more than doubles that figure at 4.3 percent (World Bank 2010). This estimate rivals the U.S.’ current military spending level of 4.06 percent; more importantly, it suggests over half of China’s military expenditures are unaccounted for in public reports.

Motivations for Expansion: Three Possibilities

While the scope and speed of China’s impressive naval growth is undeniable, the motivations driving this unprecedented growth are less concrete. Politicians, analysts, and academics alike all struggle to convincingly explain this phenomenon and to penetrate the black box of Chinese foreign policy making. From this ongoing debate, three possible explanations for China’s recent naval growth have emerged.
The first of these three explanations, coined "naval nationalism" by the theory's main proponent Robert S. Ross, suggest China will "embark on a more ambitious maritime policy" in the pursuit of great power status (2009, 46). Ross bases his analysis on geopolitics and the behavior of former land-based powers. As a land based geo-polity, China is at a strategic disadvantage in naval endeavors; it lacks the land security to fully invest in an effective power-projecting navy. Ross argues that a motive outside of strategic interest is directing Chinese behavior. He claims this ulterior motive is a "prestige strategy," in which China attempts to bolster domestic legitimacy with impressive military feats abroad. Ross points out that merely upsetting the equilibrium of global naval power might constitute a considerable victory for a prestige-seeking nation. Accordingly, China is pursuing an access-denial naval strategy. If achieved, this strategy will shift naval power in the Asia-Pacific region but cannot guarantee successful naval projection abroad. In sum, Ross claims it is nationalism, rather than concerns for security, that explain China's recent investment in military might.

Ross supports his argument with a detailed account of China's efforts to develop aircraft carrier capabilities. Since the idea of a native-built aircraft carrier was first conceived in 1986, the issue of whether or not to build such a craft became an increasingly public issue. Ross writes that support for an aircraft carrier became "mainstream" and "spread to the provinces and to all sectors of Chinese society, including to universities, government think tanks, industrial circles, the political elite, and the general public" (2009, 61). In turn, Ross argues, this potent nationalist sentiment dictates government decision-making. Leaders must concede to overwhelming nationalist sentiments in order to maintain their legitimacy as vanguards of China's national interests.

A second possible explanation sees Chinese naval growth as an expected, unthreatening response to China's increased integration into the world economy. Contrary to Ross, these scholars and analysts argue security concerns, rather than nationalism, are the driving force behind Chinese naval expansion. This viewpoint is expressed most clearly by Michael Glinsky and Phillip Saunders in their formal critique of Ross's naval nationalism theory. They cite China's growing interdependence on foreign trade and communication as sufficient motivation for heightened attention on naval capabilities. They further insist Chinese naval build-up is narrowly calculated to serve as a minimal deterrence against foreign aggression, especially in sensitive issues of territorial sovereignty like Taiwan.

These scholars support their assertion with reference to the limited capabilities of China's latest naval procurements. One advocate of this viewpoint, Greg Chafin, notes that "China has focused on developing capabilities to control and respond to contingencies in its own backyard" (n.d., 1). For example, China currently operates only five replenishment ships, hampering its ability to sustain long-term naval campaigns. The Chinese also lack the necessary logistical expertise to conduct aerial
operations on aircraft carriers (Chaffin n.d., 1). The nature of these procurements sug-
gests China's naval growth is not designed to facilitate Chinese aggression but rather
protection. Glosny and Phillips add that China receives 86 percent of its imported oil
via ocean shipping, giving the Chinese strong incentives to develop a navy that can
guarantee access to sea lines of communication (2010, 163).

Xu Qi, a scholar and senior captain in the PLAN, offers a third possible explana-
tion for Chinese naval expansion. Xu suggests Chinese naval growth is the result of
fortunate circumstance. In the past, China unwisely isolated itself from the world be-
cause of its self-sufficient agriculture and Sino-centric worldview. However, in recent
years, the Chinese have experienced favorable conditions for maritime emphasis and
have responded accordingly. These conditions include China's growing economic
power, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the peaceful negotiation of land boundaries
(Qi 2006, 56). These developments grant China greater land security and expendable
resources. Thus, Xu claims, China is in an opportune situation to shift its time and
attention to maritime issues.

Analysis

The three aforementioned theories of Chinese naval expansion each enrich our
understanding of China's recent naval development. In different scenarios and to dif-
ferent degrees, elements from each of these explanations will be helpful in forecasting
Chinese behavior. Ross rightly recognizes the salience of China's growing nationalist
sentiment, Glosny and Saunders consider important economic and practical needs
for an enlarged navy, and Xu Qi provides an historical context with which to under-
stand past Chinese actions. However, Ross identifies the most vital consideration for
calculating the implications of Chinese naval growth: the legitimacy of the Chinese
Communist Party (CCP). In fact, it is the legitimacy of the communist regime dictat-
ing the degree to which each of these theories will hold explanatory power in any
given foreign-policy scenario. For instance, the degree to which nationalism (Ross'
argument) or commercial and security concerns (Glosny and Saunders argument)
influence Chinese decision-making is dependent on how these outcomes influence
the CCP's overall legitimacy.

The Communist Party has three means of bolstering domestic legitimacy: 1) fos-
tering consistent economic growth, 2) ensuring domestic stability, and 3) main-
taining their appearance as vanguards of the national interest. Assuming the CCP is
composed of rational, self-interested actors with a desire to remain in power, these
three criteria for legitimacy can be used to predict Chinese behavior in a wide array
of circumstances. The CCP will employ its new naval capabilities in situations that
enhance its overall legitimacy but will refrain from the use of naval force in situations
that damage their legitimacy. While I agree with Ross in identifying nationalism as
an important force behind China's recent naval modernization, I expand his theory
to account for two other sources of legitimacy for the Communist Party. In turn, the inclusion of these two sources explain how nationalism is not the only reason for Chinese naval expansion but rather an expression of the Chinese government’s deepest and most basic concern: legitimacy. Using this framework, one can predict Chinese naval behavior in relation to Japan, South Korea, the South China Sea, the U.S., and the international community as a whole.

**Japan**

Most contemporary foreign policy disputes between China and Japan can be traced back to World War II. In 1935, the Japanese invaded the Chinese mainland and, for a time, controlled much of northern China, Taiwan, former German concessions in the Shandong Peninsula, and Hong Kong. The undeniable brutality of some of these campaigns, like the Rape of Nanjing, left lasting scars in China’s national memory. As a result, the Chinese possess an enduring skepticism toward the Japanese and are hypersensitive to issues of territorial sovereignty.

In more recent history, these deep-seated feelings have reemerged and ignited dispute in the waters dividing these two nations. This is most readily seen in the ongoing dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. While the islands are of questionable economic and strategic importance, they serve as a symbol of Japan’s imperialist past. The Chinese claim the islands were stripped from them in the early nineteenth century and should have been returned at the close of the Second World War. This issue reignited in early September of this year, when the Japanese Coast Guard arrested a belligerent Chinese fishing captain for ramming a Japanese vessel near the islands (Johnson 2010).

Nonetheless, Chinese naval expansion will bring little change to the status quo in Sino-Japanese relations, unless anti-Japanese sentiment in China incites domestic instability. As a strategic trade partner, the Japanese serve an important role in providing the economic growth necessary for domestic legitimacy. In a May 2010 meeting between Japanese Prime Minister Hatoyama and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, Wen admitted, “China and Japan have very close economic and trade ties. One could say they are at the point where neither could do without the other” (Nishikawa and Buckley 2011). Upsetting relations and risking broken commercial ties would substantially injure the Chinese economy and the CCP’s reputation at home. However, since Japan-related, foreign-policy issues are closely associated with China’s national identity, a surge in public anti-Japanese sentiment might alter CCP calculations. In the past, issues as mundane as Japanese textbook content have incited rioting in the Chinese mainland (Weiss 2008). If similar domestic unrest results from the Senkaku/Diaoyu issue, the party would suffer damaged legitimacy in terms of both internal stability and as vanguards of China’s national interest. In such a circumstance, the Chinese would likely use naval force to challenge ownership of the islands.
South Korea

Similar to Japan, many of South Korea’s maritime disputes with China are rooted in history. China’s close relationship with the North Korean regime has bred skepticism in both the Chinese and South Korean camps. Furthermore, as with Japan, this closely ties any South Korean dispute to China’s national identity and pride. At present, the most prominent expression of Sino-South Korean maritime disagreement is the territorial status of the Yellow Sea. In summer 2010, Chinese officials disapproved of the U.S.’ intentions to conduct joint naval exercises with South Korea in the area (Sima n.d., 1). China claims a soft suzerainty in the Yellow Sea due to its arguably bay-like features and proximity to strategic Chinese cities.

Given the similarities between Japan and South Korea, both in close geographic location with China, Chinese naval behavior toward Korea will likely resemble China’s behavior toward Japan. The communist regime understands the loss of an important economic partner is more detrimental to their legitimacy at home than any legitimacy gained in a crusade of national interest. In his comments on the recent Yellow Sea squabble, Major General Yin Zhuo of the PLA affirmed, “The peace and stability of the Korean peninsula is important to peace in China and to China’s economic development, hence we advocate maintaining peace and stability on the peninsula” (Sima n.d., 1). However, these calculations could be overturned if a South Korean maritime dispute ever incited drastic domestic instability within China.

The South China Sea

China’s territorial claim to islands in the South China Sea predates the founding of the People’s Republic of China. Early Republic of China maps contain generous, inclusive boundaries of Chinese sovereignty that dip deep into the South China Sea. China justifies its ambitious assertions with ancient documents claiming original discovery of the islands. Today, ownership of the islands in this area is heavily contested. Vietnam, Brunei, the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Malaysia all lay claim to some portion of this island speckled region with varying legal justifications. Of these islands, the Spratly and Paracel chains are of particular concern because of their newly discovered offshore oil and natural gas deposits.

The possibility of Chinese naval intervention to solve the South China Sea disputes is not a novel idea. In 1988, the Chinese used naval force to besiege some of the Spratly islands from Vietnam. Southeast Asian nations fear an expanding Chinese Navy is indicative of similar campaigns to come. Moreover, in July of 2010, Chinese officials indicated territorial disputes in the South China Sea constitute a “core national interest” of the PRC, equivocating them with other foreign policy priorities like Taiwan and Tibet (U.S. Library of Congress 2010, 8).

According to the three proposed sources of CCP legitimacy, the Chinese will likely use naval force to occupy the South China Sea if favorable negotiations cannot be
reached. The oil and gas deposits surrounding the islands offer China an opportunity for economic growth. Moreover, the Chinese's deep conviction of their own just cause, coupled with the belief that the South China Seas dispute is a "core national interest" of the PRC, guarantees aggressive actions to secure the territory will be considered a protection of national interest with citizens at home. Moreover, it is also unlikely any such action would disturb social stability. Thus, in total, aggressive maritime policy in the South China Sea would only serve to bolster legitimacy for the communist regime.

Recent events suggest China is becoming more aggressive in its South China Sea claims and is moving closer to military action. At the Southeast Asian Regional Forum in July of 2010, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi implied that competing maritime claims from "smaller" Southeast Asian countries are subservient to claims from "larger" countries, like China (Twining 2010). Many interpret Yang's statement to be a justification for Chinese hegemony in Southeast Asia and, consequently, a threat to use coercive force. Later in the same month, Geng Yansheng, a spokesman for the Ministry of Defense boldly asserted that China holds "indisputable sovereignty" over the South China Sea, despite a recent statement by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton calling for reconsideration of the issue (Pomfret 2010; Clinton 2010). In each of these cases, China's unwavering commitment reflects a willingness to use naval force if negotiations fail to meet Chinese standards.

U.S.–China Relations

An enhanced Chinese Navy will redefine important dynamics in U.S.–China military relations, particularly with regard to the Taiwan issue. Most scholars and analysts agree Chinese naval modernization is aimed, in large part, at preventing third-party participation in a future Taiwanese crisis. In other words, the new Chinese is specifically designed to prevent the U.S. from aiding Taiwan, as it positioned itself to do so in the 1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis (U.S. Library of Congress 2010, 4). This reality is reflected in China's procurement of anti-ship ballistic missiles, attack submarines, and C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance) systems. Together these advancements would allow the Chinese to slow or halt the movement of American naval vessels to the Taiwan Strait but offer little assistance in conducting long-term naval operations abroad. The changed dynamic in U.S.–China relations is the American calculation to assist Taiwan in the event of war. Whereas the U.S. was previously confident in its abilities to aid Taiwan, PRC naval improvements might serve as an effective deterrence to U.S. involvement.

Although China's capabilities to engage the U.S. Navy will be increased after modernization is complete, the Chinese have little incentive to provoke another Taiwanese conflict or, more broadly, challenge U.S. dominance in the Asia-Pacific region. Again, the Communist Party's need for legitimacy dictates these dynamics. Both Taiwan and the U.S. are substantial trading partners. Attacking either of these states
would damage the Chinese economy and injure the party’s legitimacy as provident economic planners. However, if Taiwan instigates an armed conflict, the party’s calculus would quickly reverse itself. Since Taiwan is considered a vital national interest, the CCP’s legitimacy would be weakened unless it sought to reclaim an independent Taiwan. Therefore, while Chinese naval development will alter American calculations regarding a potential Taiwan conflict, it will not increase the likelihood of Chinese aggression against U.S. forces.

Projection of Power

China has limited experience in projecting naval power abroad. The majority of its long-distance naval deployments have consisted of short anti-piracy exercises in the Gulf of Aden (U.S. Library of Congress 2010, 5). This is primarily due to the purpose and design of the Chinese. Until recent efforts of modernization, the PLAN was intended to serve as a coastal defense and lacked the means to sustain itself on extended voyages. Yet, with recent upgrades and a plan to build an aircraft carrier, the PLAN is beginning to resemble a true, blue-water navy. In the future, perhaps in the next decade, China will possess the capacity to project its naval influence around the world (U.S. Library of Congress 2010, 6).

Despite its increased capabilities, China is not likely to increase its number of international naval deployments. When they do engage in naval operations far from home, the Chinese will likely be narrowly concerned with securing economic interests. Once again, this prediction is consistent with the Communist Party’s desire to ensure domestic legitimacy. Projecting naval force abroad provides little benefit for internal stability. Furthermore, the Chinese have few key national interests—besides those previously mentioned—that would necessitate naval intervention. China’s use of naval force in the coming years will likely be driven by economic interests and will resemble China’s past behavior in the Gulf of Aden. China will deploy limited forces in order to protect sea lines of communication important to the Chinese economy. The Office of Naval Intelligence agrees that outside of the Taiwan issue, advancements in the Chinese are intended to address China’s “economic dependence on sea lines of communication” (U.S. Library of Congress 2010, 5).

Conclusion

The heightened sense of alarm surrounding China’s growing navy is understandable. After all, few nations sit quietly while their neighbors are arming themselves. However, with the exception of the South China Sea dispute, the rise of China’s navy will not translate into a more aggressive Chinese maritime policy. This prediction is based on an understanding of the Communist Party’s ultimate goal of regime legitimacy. The party has three means of enhancing domestic legitimacy: economic growth, internal stability, and acting as a vanguard of the national interest. In the majority of these disputes, the economic advantages of a peaceful maritime policy take
precedence over all other considerations. Therefore, disputes with China’s closest neighbors, like Japan and Korea, although tense, are highly unlikely to result in naval conflict because of Japan and South Korea’s importance to the Chinese economy. For similar reasons, there is also no increased likelihood of Chinese aggression towards the U.S., especially in regard to the Taiwan issue. The general projection of Chinese naval power abroad is also likely to be limited and narrowly affiliated with strategic protection of important commercial shipping lanes.

While Chinese naval growth does not increase the likelihood of a U.S.–China naval conflict, the U.S. is not insulated from these developments. A more capable Chinese will surely increase the costs in America’s cost-benefit analysis regarding any future Taiwanese conflict. The U.S. must carefully reconsider its participation in such an event and prepare itself for resistance from a more formidable opponent.

The other notable exception, and area of greatest concern, is the South China Sea dispute. Unlike the aforementioned examples, both economic interest and the need to uphold national interests coincide to suggest China will use its newly developed naval force to intervene in the South China Sea. This sobering reality should give pause to both students of foreign policy and the heads of state tied closely to this delicate issue.

REFERENCES


