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The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles?

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2 January 2008

The Chinese navy has gone through tremendous changes and improvements since the 1995/96 Taiwan Strait crisis. The growing Chinese naval capability, is likely to stir a naval arms competition; only time will tell if this will lead to a regional collision.

SINCE THE 1995/96 Taiwan Strait crisis, the Chinese navy, or the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), has experienced rapid change. China has imported and procured many new submarines and destroyers, along with several squadrons of new naval jet fighters and fighter bombers. The Chinese navy makes more frequent foreign port calls and joint sea rescue exercises with other navies. Its submarines have extended their patrol range to as far as Guam and survey ships have been found in the Japan-claimed Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and Taiwan areas. Chinese warships patrolled in the disputed Chunxiao gas and oil field in the East China Sea. A Chinese submarine was reportedly to surface within five miles of the Kitty Hawk aircraft carrier.

How can these changes be interpreted in the context of power shift? What is the PLAN's role as a policy actor in China's politics? How are the changes related to the Chinese navy's doctrine? How robust is the leadership to support the change? What are the PLAN's capabilities? And what is the PLAN's capability to execute anti-access operations in a contingency over Taiwan?

Historical and Regional Context

Historical studies show that expanding navies are closely related to rising powers that in turn are likely to compete with established powers. In history, almost all rising powers used their naval power as a vital tool to achieve their ends. When a rising economic and political power decides to build a formidable navy, it usually can do so with its wealth and technological prowess. When a rising power builds a strong navy, other strong powers strengthen their own navies in response. All rising powers with rising navies have eventually collided with other great naval powers in combat.

Regional navies, including those of Japan, South Korea, Australia, India and Southeast Asian

countries, are also experiencing tremendous changes. “Drivers” vary, ranging from China’s military factor, competitions among regional countries, changing maritime requirements, territorial and resource claim, and great power aspiration/prestige consideration. The outcome is one in which regional navies are capable of projecting force for extended range with lethal and precision strike capabilities..

The Chinese Navy as a Policy Actor

The PLAN’s sense of mission has been expanded. Long-standing interests such as the Taiwan issue, the defence of China’s coast, and territorial and resource claims remain crucial. However, considering China’s growing international trade, soaring dependence upon imported energy, and potential technological spin-offs, the PLAN is casting itself not only as a consumer of China’s rapid economic growth but also as the protector of and potential contributor to China’s economy.

The consensus among scholars is that as the PLAN is regarded as important in China’s maritime strategy, its operational range needs to be expanded to the borders of China’s claimed EEZ and the continental shelf. But there is no consensus on the actual definition of sea power, the degree of the role played by the navy, roles and status of law and international cooperation for maritime strategy.

The Chinese navy is learning to be an instrument of statecraft. Missile destroyers patrolling in the Chunxiao oil and gas field in the East China Sea in 2005 signaled to claim that the area is within China’s EEZ, and emphasised the seriousness of China’s position. Submarines patrolling to as far as Guam, and later, surfacing within five miles of the Kitty Hawk aircraft carrier, were aimed at threatening US forces en route to intervene in a Taiwan contingency. Foreign port calls and joint exercises could demonstrate China’s global presence and indispensable role in global affairs, along with helping to transform the PLAN itself.

PLAN Leadership and Doctrine

Personnel-related system is being reformed to buttress robust leadership. It includes the accession of civilian college graduates, the development of a non-commissioned officer system as well as improved welfare. Education programmes in military academies are also being adjusted to support duty positions. Emphasis in training has been placed on approximating the battlefield environment with increasing reliance on simulation.

“Offshore defence” remains the PLAN’s doctrine, but the range of “offshore” extends as its capability grows. The PLAN endeavours to build a “sea control zone” which approximately reaches the First Island Chain. Beyond the First Island Chain is the “sea contest zone” where anti-access missions will be executed against US forces. A successful sea control requires an around-the-clock surveillance system capable of distinguishing different ships with precision strike capability -- a capability that the PLAN has not achieved. That is why submarines and land-based ballistic missiles are heavily relied upon.

PLAN Expanding Capabilities

Deliveries of advanced surface combatants and submarines in the past decades signify substantial progress in China’s shipbuilding industry. Traditional systemic weakness is being remedied through various reforms. Experience from producing civilian ships is tapped for warship production and management. with state-of-the-art design and facilities. However, limitations on some key subsystems, sensors, and weapons suites will remain.

“Informationisation” has been a key area where the PLA seeks to achieve breakthrough, including through C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and

reconnaissance). This is not the mere procurement of C4ISR-related hardware system, but also training and education. Since the late 1990s, Chinese C4ISR modernisation has taken off -- an achievement which can be illustrated by the deployment of various sensors in space and the installment of nationwide optic cable network. Nevertheless, with the introduction of the C4ISR system, other urgent issues such as real “jointness” among different services, as well as the centralisation vs. decentralisation of authority to lower level officials may have arisen.

Will history go through its cycle?

Like what happened in history, there is no exception for China. With its growing wealth and technological prowess, China is building up a formidable navy. Nevertheless, technological barrier remains a bottleneck impeding the PLAN to develop a solid sea control capability in the near future; how the Chinese navy executes anti-access mission also needs to be observed. The Asia Pacific region is entering a naval arms competition, if not an arms race; only time will tell if the PLAN will collide with other navies eventually.

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