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The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is on the roll in the past month. Successive air, naval and marine amphibious assault exercises were staged across the Western Pacific. Notably, a huge turnout of the PLAN in the South China Sea was observed via satellite imagery in late March – about 40 vessels including what appeared to be the aircraft carrier Liaoning, followed not far astern by a slightly smaller combat support ship, and flanked by surface combatants of various sizes and apparently led by submarines and two distinct three-plane aerial formations.

Clearly, there should be no dispute amongst naval observers that the formation in which this fleet sailed amounted to what would be termed as a photo exercise (PHOTOEX). But there were differing viewpoints about this amongst regional watchers – some dismissed this maneuver as a propaganda exercise designed to flaunt steel muscle, whereas others cautioned that this could imply that the PLAN has intensified its peacetime combat readiness and training.

Neither side is wrong, for both schools of thoughts encapsulate the meaning of gunboat diplomacy in the first place – the limited threat or use of naval force for the attainment of limited political objectives, as James Cable wrote in his seminal work in 1971. Rather to say, the satellite imagery did capture what amounted to a mere snapshot of a whole activity sequence. Usually a PHOTOEX is obligatory for major exercises, and examples are bountiful – Exercise Malabar in July 2017 with all three flattops of the American, Indian and Japanese navies sailing in formation with fighter jets blazing above; and the Thailand-hosted ASEAN Multinational Naval Exercise late last year – just to name a few.

This huge PLAN turnout in the SCS should be no different. Does it make sense to burn expensive fuel, taking so many warships and their crews away from other tasks, to just have a photo op?

Focusing on the apparent propaganda value of the PLAN maneuvers solely based on the satellite pictures diverts one's attention away from a more pertinent phenomenon, that is, while much focus had been on the Chinese coastguard and fabled maritime militia in the SCS, and in other East Asian maritime flashpoints involving China for that matter, the PLAN has been gradually improving its ability to fight in a high-intensity war. There is nothing radically new about this: the PLAN has been building new vessels over the years. Just over the last two years alone, over 40 new ships were commissioned or launched.

But combat capability does not just emanate from inducting new hardware. Clearly the PLAN understands the value of honing its combat readiness through intense training. While one could question the various other factors that contribute to combat readiness, for example command and control protocols, fact of the matter is that in recent years, corresponding with the rate of naval shipbuilding efforts there has also been an upswing in the PLAN's training and exercise regimen.

New hardware allows the fleet to maintain a higher level of readiness compared to having older ones simply because of maintenance requirements. To be sure, one could not project what would happen to the PLAN in the coming years with its level of maintenance, repairs and overhaul for even these shiny new "toys". Suffice to say, for now the PLAN has the luxury of utilizing its newbuilt fleet of vessels to intensify training – more sea time for its crews, which translates into more familiarity with operating their vessels under varying conditions, and getting acquainted with the strengths and weaknesses of their combat systems.

Until laggard maintenance schedules do catch up eventually, which nobody could be certain, one should assume that the PLAN would remain fixated with building a more proficient fleet capable of undertaking large-scale operations. Also noteworthy is the growing extent of inter-fleet coordination of effort. This is also nothing new – the PLAN South Sea, East Sea and North Sea Fleets have mobilized assets to train with each other in the past. What is different this time around and in the future, is that such inter-fleet exchanges would take place on a larger scale thanks to new assets available. To add to that, the PLAN has also been honing its interoperability with both the coastguard and maritime militia.

If one takes seriously the incessant exhortations from Beijing's political elites to "train as you fight", large-scale naval maneuvers similar to the one observed in late March would plausibly not be a one-off event but represent a new normal, which is made possible only as the PLAN gains new capabilities and its personnel acquire newfound confidence.

That could mean two things for peace and stability for the SCS and Southeast Asia in particular. On the one hand, a more capable PLAN may provide public security goods and contribute towards the promotion of defense diplomacy. On the other, however, a more capable and overconfident PLAN may serve more of a tool of coercion. There is never a binary notion to these – a navy is such a flexible instrument for foreign policy that it can well perform either of those tasks with finesse. It depends on how the navy's political masters choose to utilize this capability.

The growing PLAN power and its enhanced combat readiness that should not be kept out of everyone's radar scope. It remains a force with an enlarging shadow looming over its coastguard and maritime militia counterparts, ready to weigh in at any point of confrontation at sea with Beijing's rivals. While not over-exaggerating this threat, we might just ignore this growing Chinese naval challenge only at our own peril.

This commentary was first published in the *South China Morning Post* (click [here](#) for article)



CHINA | 27 MARCH | REUTERS

Exclusive: Satellite images reveal show of force by Chinese navy in South China Sea

Dozens of Chinese naval vessels are exercising this week with an aircraft carrier in a large show of force off Hainan island in the South China Sea, satellite images obtained by Reuters show.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA | 2 MARCH | CHINA DAILY

Nation can produce larger carriers

The builder of the Navy's aircraft carriers has become able to make new, larger carriers, according to its chairman.

[Full Report](#)

JAPAN | 3 MARCH | THE MAINICHI

Onodera admits gov't studying deploying stealth jets on MSDF carriers

Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera admitted for the first time that his ministry is studying whether it is possible to convert the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF)'s helicopter carriers into models capable of carrying F-35B stealth fighter jets, during a House of Councillors Budget Committee session on March 2.

[Full Report](#)

UNITED STATES | 5 MARCH | SEAPOWER

F-35B Makes First Ship, MEU Deployment

A detachment of F-35B Lightning IIs with Fighter Attack Squadron 121 (VMFA-121) arrived aboard the amphibious assault ship USS Wasp March 5, marking the first time the aircraft has deployed aboard a U.S. Navy ship and with a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) in the Indo-Pacific, the Amphibious Force, U.S. Seventh Fleet, said in a release.

[Full Report](#)

UNITED STATES-VIETNAM | 5 MARCH | TUOI TRE NEWS

US aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson arrives in Da Nang

U.S. Navy aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson arrived in the central Vietnamese city of Da Nang around Monday noon, commencing a visit to Vietnam for the first time in more than four decades.

[Full Report](#)

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MALAYSIA | 6 MARCH | NEW STRAITS TIMES

Navy plans to have 36 patrolling and littoral mission vessels

The Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) is planning to have 36 patrolling and littoral mission vessels in stages to boost its ability to secure the nation's territorial waters.

[Full Report](#)

UNITED STATES | 6 MARCH | USNI NEWS

Navy Leaders See Possible Path to 355 Ships by the 2030s

If Congress is willing to pay for it, Navy leaders think they could get to a 355-ship Navy by the 2030s.

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THE PHILIPPINES | 7 MARCH | RAPPLER

Frigates deal pushing through; 1st delivery by 2020 – Lorenzana

Despite a "concerted effort" to stop a multi-billion peso frigate acquisition project, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana on Wednesday, March 7, told reporters the much-awaited upgrade to the Philippine Navy is pushing through.

[Full Report](#)

SINGAPORE | 12 MARCH | NAVAL TECHNOLOGY

Singapore Navy developing new USVs

The Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) has revealed the development of a new type of unmanned surface vessel (USV), which will be used to improve the country's maritime security and homeland defence capabilities.

[Full Report](#)

JAPAN-UNITED STATES | 13 MARCH | STARS AND STRIPES

US, Japan conduct anti-submarine drills in the South China Sea

U.S. and Japanese warships are once again conducting anti-submarine drills together, this time in the South China Sea.

[Full Report](#)

INDIA | 15 MARCH | NAVAL TECHNOLOGY

SMD delivers two Atom Mk1 submarine rescue systems for Indian Navy

Subsea design and manufacturing company Soil Machine Dynamics (SMD) has delivered two units of the 1,000m Atom Mk1 Remotely Operated Vehicle (ROV) system to underwater capability provider JFD for integration with the Indian Navy.

[Full Report](#)

INDIA-SEYCHELLES | 22 MARCH | AL-JAZEERA

India's Seychelles military base plan hits choppy waters

India's plans for building military facilities in Seychelles have hit choppy waters, with the Indian Ocean island's political opposition blocking efforts to ratify a deal reached by the two governments.

[Full Report](#)



UNITED STATES | 23 MARCH | REUTERS

Exclusive: U.S. warship sails near disputed islands in South China Sea, officials say

A U.S. Navy destroyer carried out a "freedom of navigation" operation on Friday, coming within 12 nautical miles of an artificial island built by China in the South China Sea, U.S. officials told Reuters.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA | 25 MARCH | GLOBAL TIMES

PLA conducts spring drills in West Pacific, S. China Sea

The Chinese military has begun its spring drills, with its air force recently conducting a high-sea training mission in the West Pacific and a joint combat patrol mission in the South China Sea.

[Full Report](#)

PAKISTAN | 29 MARCH | QUWA

Pakistan announces Babur Sub-Launched Cruise Missile (SLCM) test

Pakistan's Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) announced that the Pakistan Navy had successfully test-fired the submarine-launched version of the Babur – i.e. the 'submarine-launched cruise missile Babur (SLCM Babur)'. The SLCM Babur has a stated range of 450 km.

[Full Report](#)



CHINA | 21 MARCH | SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST

China's military police given control of coastguard as Beijing boosts maritime security

China has shifted control of its coastguard to its armed police force in a clear show of Beijing's commitment to protecting the nation's waterways.

[Full Report](#)

MALAYSIA | 3 MARCH | NEW STRAITS TIMES

Over 10,000 cross-border crime arrests in Malaysia's water's since 2006

A total of 10,125 arrests involving various cross-border crimes in the country's water's, was recorded by the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA).

[Full Report](#)

CHINA | 5 MARCH | XINHUA NEWS

China Exclusive: China's 4,500-meter submersible shows new deep-sea power

China's unmanned submersible Qianlong No. 2 has applied its new capabilities in the latest exploration in the southwest Indian Ocean, scientists told Xinhua Monday.

[Full Report](#)

JAPAN-TAIWAN | 5 MARCH | FOCUS TAIWAN

Taiwan protests after fishing boat water-cannoned by Japanese patrol

Taiwan lodged a protest with Japan on Monday following an incident in which a Taiwanese fishing boat was chased and water-cannoned by Japanese patrol boats in waters near the disputed Diaoyutai Islands over the weekend, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA).

[Full Report](#)

AUSTRALIA-TIMOR-LESTE | 6 MARCH | REUTERS

Australia, East Timor sign deal on maritime border, gas field

East Timor and Australia signed a treaty at the United Nations in New York on Tuesday to resolve a long-running dispute over their maritime border and struck a deal on how to share revenue from the offshore Greater Sunrise gas field.

[Full Report](#)

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CHINA | 7 MARCH | CHINA DAILY

Research starts on advanced icebreaker

Chinese scientists have begun preliminary research on a next-generation icebreaker capable of lengthy research missions in the Arctic and Antarctica, according to the program's chief designer.

[Full Report](#)

THE PHILIPPINES | 11 MARCH | RAPPLER

PH Coast Guard deploys marshals for Mindanao-bound vessels

The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) has deployed sea marshals to secure vessels bound for Mindanao as part of efforts to thwart attacks from pirates and terrorists.

[Full Report](#)

MALAYSIA | 13 MARCH | FREE MALAYSIA TODAY

Esscom identifies 3 new kidnap-for-ransom groups

The Eastern Sabah Security Command (Esscom) has identified three new kidnap-for-ransom groups, its chief DCP Hazani Ghazali says.

[Full Report](#)

ASEAN-AUSTRALIA | 19 MARCH | RADIO FREE ASIA

ASEAN, Australia Agree to Boost Terrorism Fight, Enhance Maritime Cooperation

Australia and the ASEAN bloc agreed during a weekend summit in Sydney to bolster the fight against terrorism and maintain efforts to keep regional peace amid territorial disputes, officials said Monday.

[Full Report](#)

THE PHILIPPINES | 19 MARCH | RAPPLER

Misuari says MNLF joining PH-Indonesia border security patrol

The founding chairman of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) said its troops would be launching a border security initiative with Indonesia, the Philippines' neighboring state which has recently been focusing on guarding its maritime gates.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA-THE PHILIPPINES | 20 MARCH | INQUIRER.NET

China warns PH planes 'every time' they fly over West Philippine Sea

The Philippines continues to get warnings from China whenever it conducts aerial patrols over the features of China, Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said Tuesday, but without referring to the Spratlys in the West Philippine Sea (South China Sea).

[Full Report](#)



JAPAN-THE PHILIPPINES | 26 MARCH | GMA NEWS

PHL Navy receives remaining three TC-90 aircraft from Japan

The Philippine Navy on Monday formally received the three remaining units of the Beechcraft TC-90 aircraft from Japan, which would be used to enhance the maritime surveillance capability of the troops.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA-INDIA | 28 MARCH | THE PRINT

No confrontation or warning shots at Chinese warships near Maldives: Indian Navy

India has categorically denied reports that its warships were in direct confrontation with the Chinese Navy near the Maldives last month as the state of emergency imposed on the island nation fuelled tensions in the region.

[Full Report](#)

UNITED STATES-VIETNAM | 29 MARCH | VNEXPRESS

US delivers six patrol boats to Vietnam's Coast Guard

The U.S. transferred \$20 million worth of hardware to Vietnam's Coast Guard on Thursday as the countries continue to boost ties.

[Full Report](#)

MALAYSIA-VIETNAM | 31 MARCH | THE SUN DAILY

Vietnamese fishing boat tries to ram MMEA ship

The twenty-three member crew of a Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) ship, the KM Jujur, faced an anxious moment when it was almost hit by a Vietnamese fishing boat when it attempted to haul up the foreign vessel for encroaching.

[Full Report](#)



SINGAPORE | 7 MARCH | THE STRAITS TIMES

Parliament: \$100m injection to enhance maritime sector amid growing global competition

Shipping firms can expect more government support as Singapore ramps up efforts to enhance the maritime sector amid growing global competition.

[Full Report](#)

SOUTH KOREA | 2 MARCH | HELLENIC SHIPPING NEWS

Hyundai Heavy inks MOU with WinGD to enhance smart ship capability

South Korea's leading shipbuilder, Hyundai Heavy Industry (HHI), said that it has signed a deal with a Swiss engine manufacturer to strengthen its capability in the smart ship sector, an area that promises considerable growth potential.

[Full Report](#)

SINGAPORE | 6 MARCH | SINGAPORE BUSINESS REVIEW

STB and CLIA partner to push cruise sector growth in Southeast Asia

The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) have signed a three-year partnership to boost cruising industry in Singapore and Southeast Asia.

[Full Report](#)

GLOBAL | 8 MARCH | BUSINESS WIRE

COSCO Shipping Ports announces subscription of terminal operating system from Navis to further enhance terminal efficiency

COSCO SHIPPING Ports Limited ("COSCO SHIPPING Ports" or "CSP", HKEX stock Code:1199), the world's leading ports operator, today announced it has entered into a subscription agreement with Navis, for its N4 terminal operating system (TOS), with the goal of further enhancing the efficiency of its port operations.

[Full Report](#)

PACIFIC ISLANDS | 14 MARCH | SPLASH 24/7

Pacific Islands issue position paper on shipping emissions

The Pacific Islands Development Forum (PIDF) has published a position paper in regards to shipping emissions negotiations taking place at the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

[Full Report](#)

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JAPAN-SRI LANKA | 15 MARCH | HELLENIC SHIPPING NEWS

Japan agrees to assist Sri Lanka's ports, infrastructure development

Japan agreed to assist the development of Sri Lanka's infrastructure such as port facilities in Trincomalee and Colombo, renewable energy sources and the highways.

[Full Report](#)

INDIA-INDONESIA | 19 MARCH | THE ECONOMIC TIMES

India & Indonesia seek to deepen infrastructure ties with eye on maritime sector

India and Indonesia on Monday held their first ever infrastructure meet including in maritime sector amid push by both countries to increase their partnership in the Indo-Pacific region.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA | 20 MARCH | THE MARITIME EXECUTIVE

The Chinese cruise market continues to retrench

In another sign that the Chinese cruise market continues to retrench, Royal Caribbean Cruises and its Chinese travel partner, Ctrip, announced that they are ending their SkySea Cruise Line joint venture.

[Full Report](#)

GLOBAL | 21 MARCH | SEATRADE MARITIME NEWS

APL launches new India, Middle East-Europe service

APL has launched a new weekly service that directly connects India, the Middle East and five major North European ports.

[Full Report](#)

RUSSIA-UAE | 22 MARCH | PORT NEWS

Russia Trade and Economic Development Council sign MOU to further strengthen cooperation with Abu Dhabi ports

Abu Dhabi Ports and the Russian Trade and Economic Development Council signed a Memorandum of

Understanding (MoU) to strengthen trade links between the UAE and Russia and further stimulate economic cooperation between companies from both countries.

[Full Report](#)

PAKISTAN | 23 MARCH | THE NATION

Govt approves setting up new shipyard in Gwadar

The government has approved a plan to set up a new shipyard at Gwadar with the capacity to build very large and ultra large crude carriers.

[Full Report](#)

GLOBAL | 24 MARCH | FISH INFO & SERVICES

Pacific plastic patch increasing rapidly

A new study reveals that an area known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (GPGP) contains as much as sixteen times more plastic than previously estimated, with pollution levels increasing exponentially.

[Full Report](#)

CONGO | 26 MARCH | SEATRADE MARITIME NEWS

DP World wins 30-year concession for Port of Banana in Democratic Republic of the Congo

DP World has won a 30-year concession with an option of a further 20-year extension for the management and development of a greenfield multi-purpose port project at Banana, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

[Full Report](#)

DJIBOUTI-FRANCE | 27 MARCH | REUTERS

Djibouti in talks with France's CMA CGM to build container terminal

Djibouti's port authority is in talks with French shipping company CMA CGM to develop a new \$660 million container terminal and hopes to award the concession in July.

[Full Report](#)

CHINA | 30 MARCH | BLOOMBERG

China plans merger of shipbuilders to create Behemoth

China's government is working on a plan to combine its two biggest shipbuilders to create an industrial giant that would dwarf its South Korean rivals, according to people with knowledge of the matter.

[Full Report](#)