



Asia Pacific Bulletin

Why China's Return to the Sea May Not Be All Bad

BY CHRISTIAN LE MIÈRE

China's newly released 2013 defense white paper clearly points to a more strategic focus on maritime development. For the first time in an official defense-related publication, Beijing has suggested that "safeguarding maritime rights and interests" and "protecting overseas interests" are significant goals for the People's Liberation Army. This message reflects earlier statements by Chinese politicians. At both the Communist Party Congress (CPC) last November and the National People's Congress (NPC) in March, China's leaders emphasized that Beijing was now thinking seriously about the country as a maritime power. In his final address to the CPC, outgoing Chinese President Hu Jintao urged China to "resolutely safeguard [its] maritime rights and interests and build China into a maritime power."

Christian Le Mière, Senior Fellow for Naval Forces and Maritime Security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, explains that "Beijing has avoided major conflict for nearly 35 years, and seems set to continue to do so for the foreseeable future."

At the NPC there were a number of significant maritime announcements, including the restructuring of China's maritime constabulary agencies by merging four of the five "dragons" that have been at the forefront of ongoing sovereignty disputes in the South and East China Seas. It was also revealed that a new National Oceanic Commission was to be created within the State Oceanic Administration to formulate and centralize oceanic policy. In his address to the NPC, and in a phrase highly reminiscent of Hu's earlier statement, State Councilor Ma Kai noted that these changes were aimed at "safeguard [ing] the country's maritime rights and interests." This flurry of rhetoric and bureaucratic activity reflected Beijing's increasing awareness of the need to better coordinate and formulate its maritime policy. It also highlighted the growing shift in China's policy from the land to the sea.

Naturally, China's neighbors are concerned. Just two weeks after the maritime bureaucratic changes were announced, a Chinese naval flotilla arrived at James Shoal, the southernmost feature included in China's maximalist nine-dashed line claim in the South China Sea. This deployment was unusual for including a Type 071 amphibious assault vessel, the largest ship in China's fleet behind its new aircraft carrier, and for a ceremony held by the crew whereby they pledged to maintain national sovereignty. The deployment was therefore rife with symbolism representing as close to a textbook definition of gunboat diplomacy as could exist. As a result, many Southeast Asian countries, along with Japan, worry that China's return to the sea more broadly, and the reorganization of its maritime agencies more specifically, will mean a greater Chinese presence around disputed waters. The thinking is that this is a coercive policy to increase pressure on other states to drop their claims with China on disputed territories.

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

There are, though, some positives to be taken from the recent Chinese maritime policy changes. First, it creates a simpler bureaucracy for communication and coordination with other maritime constabulary agencies in the region. Previously, when an accident or event occurred, officials in Tokyo, Hanoi or Manila wondered whether to contact the Chinese



Asia Pacific Bulletin | April 19, 2013

“As China’s economy continues to grow and becomes evermore reliant on international shipping routes for its commerce and energy supplies, it should only increase its desire to subscribe to the international norm of freedom of navigation.”

maritime agency, the military, the provincial government or the central government. Now, with one unified command, there is a clearer sense of who to call to ensure disagreements do not escalate.

Second, it prevents China from claiming that it is not in control of its own maritime policy. Before, with multiple agencies, governments and actors involved in policing and exploiting the seas, Beijing could argue, and with some justification, that competition between these various groups was both inherently escalatory and difficult to control for the central government. The issues that erupted in the South and East China Seas since 2008, therefore, were not owing to a directed policy from Beijing but an unfortunate consequence of having so many different agenda and goals. It is, however, questionable whether this was ever really the case. An experienced commentator on China’s foreign policy once told me that the interplay of maritime agencies in the South China Sea was like “a Peking opera.” That is, there is a lot of noise from a large number of actors who play assorted roles, but ultimately there is a director behind the performance. The chaos is organized; the drama calculated. Nonetheless, that ruse is now much more difficult to accomplish. With just one primary maritime constabulary agency clearly under the auspices of the Ministry of Land and Resources, there is no way for the central government not to take full responsibility for events in its near-seas.

Similarly, China’s return to the sea need not be all aggression and assertion. For the past few centuries, Beijing has been bound to a land-based strategy, either by choice from the Ming dynasty’s later rejection of an oceanic navy or by accident as civil war and domestic upheaval occupied the attention of the leadership in the last century. Now, with a relatively stable domestic situation, growing interests overseas and a far greater reliance on secure shipping routes for its export-led economic growth, Beijing once again recognizes the importance of the sea and is funneling funds to its navy and maritime agencies accordingly.

This naval build-up, which has been undertaken in earnest since the early 1990s, is obviously worrisome for other nations in the neighborhood, but it is possible that China’s increasing strength could be directed towards beneficial outcomes. Given China’s desire to ensure the security of shipping, which mirrors the position of other maritime trading nations such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Japan, Beijing could be encouraged to assist in operations protecting freedom of navigation and the policing of international maritime thoroughfares.

China already does this to some extent: the Chinese navy has been deployed in counter-piracy operations in and around the Gulf of Aden since late 2008. Indeed, the United States and China do not disagree on the broad principle of freedom of navigation, though they do disagree on the operation of military surveillance vessels in exclusive economic zones. China has also ratified the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea—which to date, the US Senate has failed to do. As China’s economy continues to grow and becomes evermore reliant on international shipping routes for its commerce and energy supplies, it should only increase its desire to subscribe to the international norm of freedom of navigation. This may sound unconvincing to those states that are currently locked in maritime disputes with a country they perceive as opaque and increasingly aggressive. Furthermore, there is little doubt that Beijing will continue to pursue its ongoing maritime policy of an outward presence to bolster its claims to sovereignty.

Nevertheless, China’s return to the sea is inevitable, and hence rival states should attempt to guide this shift in posture towards a positive outcome. Beijing has avoided major conflict for nearly 35 years, and seems set to continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Encouraging Beijing to ascribe to the rules already enshrined in current international law could help lead to a powerful but peaceful Chinese navy, assisting in maintaining the system of maritime trade and traffic rather than disrupting it.

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

APB Series Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye
APB Series Coordinator: Damien Tomkins

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.

Christian Le Mière is Senior Fellow for Naval Forces and Maritime Security at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). His book, *Regional Disorder: The South China Sea Disputes*, was published in March, 2013. He can be followed on Twitter @c_lemiere and contacted via email at le-miere@iiss.org.