



China's Strategic Maritime Ambitions – A European Perspective

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Abstract

China left the global maritime domain in 1435 and returned to the maritime stage in 1982 with achievable ambitions. This strategic shift had been decided by China's Central Military Commission under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping. Alfred Thayer Mahan, the great US- Naval strategic thinker, for the initial phase and Sir Julian Stafford Corbett for the next steps, could be seen as facilitators for the development of the Chinese maritime strategy.

In this second phase the idea of "Unrestricted Warfare" has been discussed and accepted by the CMC. This concept translates the strategy into the operational level and the three principles: "Military, Trans-Military and Non-Military" are offering a wide spectrum of options. Some of them apply to the Maritime Strategy. A European approach, which could be compared with this concept is called "The Comprehensive Approach" is to use the maritime domain for transport, as resource, as habitat and to project power. The maritime domain includes the Cyber Space, Outer Space, Airspace, Surface and Subsurface: a maritime strategy for today and the future must take care of all four perspectives of the maritime domain, when it will be successful. The concept of "Unrestricted Warfare" with its three pillars has the same ambition. A similar concept has been discussed in the US, called "Revolution in Military Affairs".

The implementation of "joined" thinking is crucial for power projection in the future and this needs much more than modern technology and a great number of assets. It needs a mind shift, which is as ambitious as the strategy shift. It depends on the training and education philosophy of the PLA as a whole and the services in their traditional thinking. China can leap from in place technology to future programs, but to train and educate leadership which is able to take advantage of the future technology and joint action takes more time.

There are still questions about leadership concepts and functions left unanswered. The implementation of technology which offers decentralization on one hand and better cooperation between civil authorities and the PLA Navy on the other hand: how can this be solved in a centralized organization: a crucial question.

The strategic goals are transparent and the operational ambitions executed in exercises should be recognized. International engagement, like in the Indian Ocean, is serving both goals: to become an international actor and to learn by experience.

It depends very much on the action of the US- Government on one hand and the neighbouring states on the other hand, whether and how the strategic goals can be achieved.

The driving factor is the economy and to be accepted as a partner with equal rights: it should be our goal to link "rights" with "responsibilities".



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About the Author of this Issue

Vice Admiral (rtd.) Feldt was engaged in sea duty assignments for 13 years, which included leadership functions on all command levels and duty assignments in different naval staffs.

Since retirement, Vice Admiral (rtd.) Feldt has occupied several posts of honor. He was president of the German Maritime Institute until June 2012 and is now a member of its board. From 2008 until 2009, he was working for the European Commission (from 2008 till 2009) as advisor for the "Instrument for Stability". From July 2009 to December 2010, he served the European Defence Agency as member of the Wise Pen Team, working on topics of maritime surveillance and maritime security. Since August 2011, Vice Admiral (rtd.) Feldt, in his function as the Director of the Wise Pens International, and his team are working on a study dealing with future maritime capabilities of the European navies.



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Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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ANALYSIS

Part One

China's strategic maritime ambitions ended in 1435 with the death of Admiral Zheng He¹. He was the first admiral to command a big fleet capable of securing the country's sea lines of communications and he was also seen as successful in the fight against piracy. After his death China became a more traditional land orientated power whose strategic thinking was focused on a continental strategy.

Almost 550 years later, in 1982, Deng Xiaoping implemented a similarly important shift in strategy and, like other countries wanting to create a navy from scratch, Deng Xiaoping nominated a general, General Liu Huaqing, to be the Chief of the People's Liberation Army Navy and promoted him to Admiral.

It is important to recognize the classical Mahanian view of sea power that guided the early years of Chinese Navy's rebirth founded on the principles of a strong commercial fleet with a capable navy securing its trade routes.

The end of the 1990s saw another crucial shift in Chinese strategic thinking, marking the beginning of the new millennium.² In response to the country's burgeoning economic development the PLA Navy's ambition logically had to migrate from those of a coastal or brown water navy to those of a high seas or blue water navy. This further development was also the result of the greater influence of Corbett rather than Mahan³ in their military strategic thinking.

One of this great maritime thinker's conclusions, which Corbett considers should be a key strategic objective, is that a navy's rise and fall is often intricately linked to that country's growing importance within the global trading system where it is the oceans that constitute the arteries of global commerce.⁴ Treating this as a fundamental assumption in China's shift of strategy and developing that thinking, we can try to understand such a shift and assess its future ambitions and possible consequences.

Part Two

China's new maritime strategy is a fact. But how has it affected their overall strategic priorities and does the budget actually support the shift with a greater priority for the PLA Navy over the other services?

In reality it seems a continental strategy still dominates their overarching strategic outlook. Increased funding for the military is significant but does not yet demonstrate any particular priority for the PLA Navy. So an important question arises as to whether the Navy is to develop as a "stand-alone" service or if its capabilities are to be as a part of a "joint" strategy? Here we also have to take into account China's so-called "access diplomacy".

Chinese companies are building maritime infrastructure throughout Africa and Asia. This has been called the "the ring of pearls" strategy supporting the PLA Navy's global ambitions. This could be considered a viable

¹ Heinz-Dieter Jopp in „Europäische Sicherheit“ September 2011, Bonn, Germany

² <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1999/WEBRES4.htm>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julian_Corbett

⁴ Julian S. Corbett. *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis 1988

alternative to securing the sea lines of communications globally and avoiding the risks of chokepoints and high threat areas. Equally, the value of maintaining at least two options, one by land using pipelines, roads and trains and the other by sea should not be underestimated.

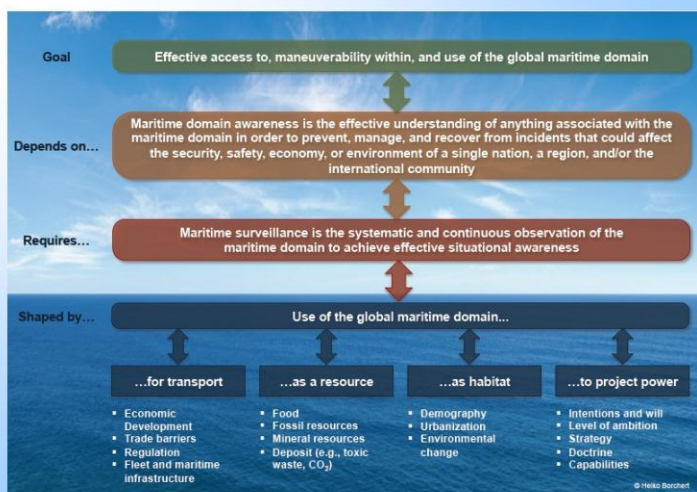
Maintaining both land and sea options for transport routes looks a very wise alternative. Our focus is the sea and so it is China's ambitions in this domain, which we need to analyse.

The change in thinking since 2000 has enabled this new approach to be successfully connected their traditional strategies. The step forward intellectually was achieved by taking into account new technologies on the one hand and the concept of "Unrestricted Warfare"⁵ on the other. It will need fuller analysis to understand this concept fully, but its principles are similar to those of the ambitious "Comprehensive Approach" much discussed in NATO and by western nations generally.

It is essentially an indirect approach based on the thinking in Corbett's "Some Principles of Maritime Strategy"⁶.

Part Three

To grasp the complexities of the global maritime domain, we can make use of the following analysis, which makes it easier to understand.



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As the figure shows, there are four strands in the global maritime domain: transport, resources, environment and power projection. And when we think about the global maritime domain we have to remember to include airspace, outer space and cyberspace as well.

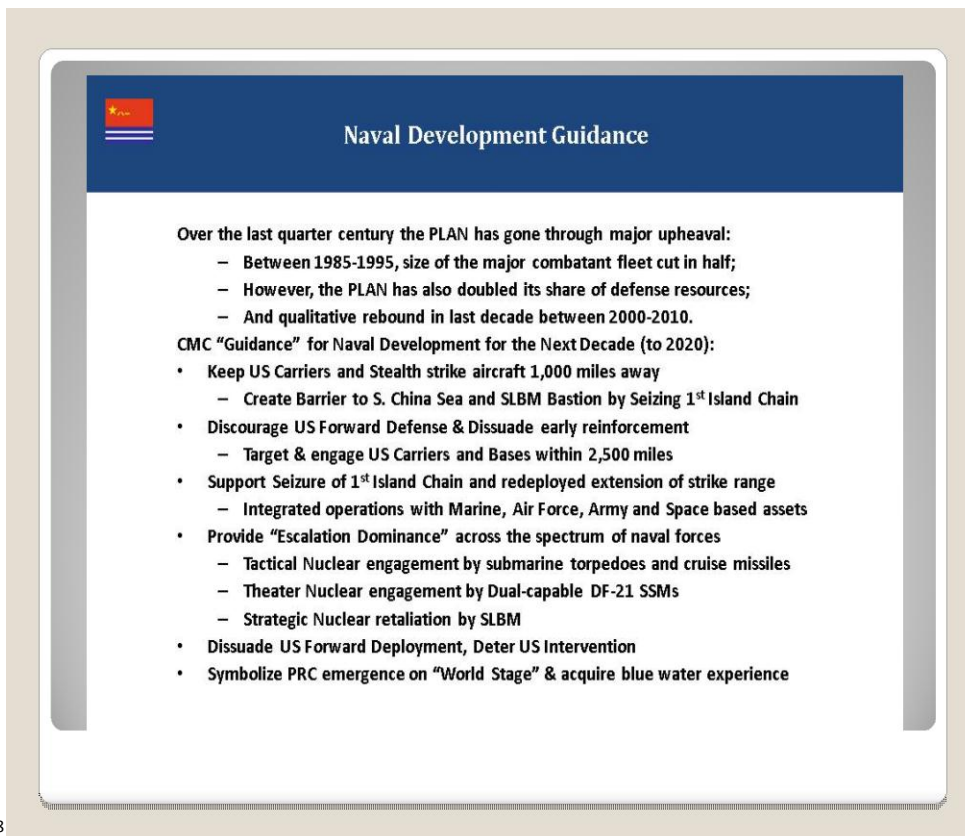
⁵ <http://www.cryptome.org/cuw.htm>

⁶ see footnote 3

⁷ Heiko Borchert, the Future of Maritime Surveillance, Sandfire AG, Lucerne, Switzerland

Taking this approach provides the opportunity to analyse China's maritime ambitions. We will focus first on the "Power Projection" part. But before doing so, we have to face the question, whether China is making a step by step transition from the technologies currently in service to future technologies, from traditional capabilities through modifications and incremental implementation of new technology, or whether in fact China has decided to attempt a generational leap from the technology of the 1960 to 2010 time span to the technology of the 2020 to 2050 era. One indicator of China's strategic maritime ambitions in this regard could be the development of weapon systems.

China's strong economy, together with the growing importance of safe and secure transport routes in all three dimensions: air, land and sea is significant. Their remarkable progress in the indigenous development of future technologies suggests that China's armed forces are actually in the process of making generational leaps in technology. Retaining obsolescent military capabilities within the PLA Navy appears a matter of necessity rather than design. We can recognize the process quite clearly in the PLA Navy. The 75 Destroyer/Frigates, 27 Large Landing Ships, 31 medium sized landing ships together with more than 200 smaller combatants constitute an impressive surface fleet. The 3 SSBN and 5-7 SSN and 56 SSK represent a remarkable submarine force. A Naval Aviation Force and Marine Corps complete the PLA Navy order of battle provides the political leadership with significant regional sea power.



Naval Development Guidance

Over the last quarter century the PLAN has gone through major upheaval:

- Between 1985-1995, size of the major combatant fleet cut in half;
- However, the PLAN has also doubled its share of defense resources;
- And qualitative rebound in last decade between 2000-2010.

CMC "Guidance" for Naval Development for the Next Decade (to 2020):

- Keep US Carriers and Stealth strike aircraft 1,000 miles away
 - Create Barrier to S. China Sea and SLBM Bastion by Seizing 1st Island Chain
- Discourage US Forward Defense & Dissuade early reinforcement
 - Target & engage US Carriers and Bases within 2,500 miles
- Support Seizure of 1st Island Chain and redeployed extension of strike range
 - Integrated operations with Marine, Air Force, Army and Space based assets
- Provide "Escalation Dominance" across the spectrum of naval forces
 - Tactical Nuclear engagement by submarine torpedoes and cruise missiles
 - Theater Nuclear engagement by Dual-capable DF-21 SSMs
 - Strategic Nuclear retaliation by SLBM
- Dissuade US Forward Deployment, Deter US Intervention
- Symbolize PRC emergence on "World Stage" & acquire blue water experience

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⁸ Heinz-Dieter Jopp, The 2. and 3. Step to develop the PLA Navy, unpublished.



The concept of “Unrestricted Warfare”, first published in 1999, demonstrates Chinese intent to make full use of the whole spectrum of capabilities: traditional warfare skills and more recent aspects such as Cyber Warfare, using the media and other components of asymmetric warfare.

The concept is based on the principle of the three pillars:

First, military: nuclear, conventional, bio-chemical, ecological, space, electronic, guerrilla warfare and terrorism.

Second, paramilitary: diplomatic, network-centric, intelligence, psychological, information, industrial, smuggling and drug warfare as well as virtual warfare through deterrence.

And third, non-military: financial, trade, resource, economic, regulatory, sanction, media and ideological warfare.⁹

Part Four

In 2004 the Chinese Defence White Paper described the role of the PLA Navy thus: “the PLA Navy is responsible for safeguarding China’s maritime security and maintaining the sovereignty of its territorial sea along with its maritime rights and interests.” Additionally: “the importance of conducting operations well offshore...enhanced integrated combat capabilities... the ability to conduct nuclear counterattacks ... as well as building maritime combat forces, especially amphibious combat forces...updating its weaponry and equipment ...including long range precision strike capability... joint exercises...and integrated support capabilities.”¹⁰ This was a significant step away from the “Near Seas Defence Strategy”.

In a speech at the 60th anniversary of the PLA Navy, President Hu Jintao gave clear direction when he said: “China has enlarged its areas of interest and seeks to improve its influence. In this on-going process China uses primarily political and economic means, but it is obvious that military means are already in place and are being developed further to provide credible support.”¹¹

The concept is leading to a new strategy, which will be joint and comprehensive in a way that combines military and diplomatic efforts.

⁹ Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, Unrestricted Warfare, Beijing, PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House 1999, p 132

¹⁰ <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/whitepaper/defense2004/defense2004.html> (8 December 2010)

¹¹ All quotations from: Heinz-Dieter Jopp: „Die Weiterentwicklung der chinesischen Streitkräfte, 2. und 3. Entwicklungstufe der PLA Reform“ in „Europäische Sicherheit“ September 2011, Bonn Germany



Toward a New Strategy

- China is in the process of redefining its Oceanic Strategy for the Western Pacific;
- The 1st Island Chain is not just a Perimeter of Engagement but Target of Occupation to insure South China Sea dominance;
- This Strategic Requirement is Being Implemented through a new Theater Strategy of Multiple Simultaneous and Sequential Campaigns;
- The Geographic and Temporal dimensions of this “Strategy of Campaigns” is modeled on (or at least heavily influenced by) the Successful Japanese South East Asian Campaigns of Dec 1941-May 1942;
- The Success of this Theater Strategy is as dependent upon the Defenders’ weaknesses as the Attackers’ strengths;
- This “Model explains much of Chinese Military Reorganization, Long-Range Procurement Planning and Competitive Efforts vs. the US but also challenges some of their most cherished strategic assumptions about:
 - Geographic = “Local War;”
 - Temporal = “Short War;”
 - Decisiveness = “paralyzing RMA impact” beyond Initial Period.
- While Conventional in Execution, this Strategy is predicated on Nuclear Strategic Counter-value Parity and Theater Counter-force Superiority.

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Former President Hu Jintao asked the PLA Navy “to push forward its modernisation comprehensively and to constantly enhance its capability to carry out the missions of the new century.” He then became more specific advising the PLA Navy leadership that “China should raise its strategic capability to safeguard our maritime security; defend our country’s territorial sea, maritime rights and interests; to protect the security of our country’s increasingly developed maritime industry, maritime transportation and the strategic channels for our energy resources”.

In parallel, China established the “Shanghai Co-operation Organization”, contributing to the ASEAN process with the “ASEAN plus 3” initiative.¹³

The new “Security Concept” and “Free Trade Zone” was driven by the political judgement, that integration in East Asia would minimize the fears of the neighbouring nations and would provide the opportunity to influence further developments. It is possible that this political initiative was inspired by the progress made in integration within Europe.

An intermediate conclusion might be therefore, that, as China expands its own areas of interest, it will seek to enhance its influence for its own ends.

China uses primarily political and economic instruments; so far government authorities have attempted to enforce their interests without the use of the Armed Forces. They are seen as a credible support.

China will avoid an arms race with the United States, preferring to reduce or deny foreign influence in the region by using asymmetric capabilities.

¹² See Footnote 8

¹³ <http://www.asean.org/asean/external-relations/asean-3/item/asean-plus-three-cooperation>

China will develop an area of influence in Asia. It is not clear how China intends to influence the development of global “Good Governance at Sea”. Their contribution so far has been to anti-Piracy Operations in the Indian Ocean and participation in the SHADE process¹⁴ for coordinating naval operations. One remarkable result of this process has been that China, India and Japan agreed to coordinate their merchant vessel escort convoys in early 2012 with South Korea joining the agreement in June 2012.

China will increase its research and technology capabilities with a principal focus on the PLA Navy, UAVs and joint, sea-air capabilities.

The concept of “Unrestricted Warfare” will be developed further with priority given to non-military capabilities such as cyber warfare and media campaigns. Looking at this concept in the context of this lecture prompts the question whether there are other concepts in existence which might be an inspiration for Chinese think tanks. The “Revolution in Military Affairs”¹⁵ concept developed in the US by the Pentagon as a route to reform of the armed forces received much attention some years ago, but no longer seems a focus of interest. By comparison with the Chinese concept it seems less comprehensive and lacks the emphasis on civilian-military cooperation.

It is debateable whether the PLA Navy really has decided to create an aircraft carrier force with the necessary additional elements of a task force to protect it. The priority appears to be on UAVs in all three dimensions: air, surface and subsurface and their increasing capabilities require different platforms for their employment. Another question is whether or not the SSBN will be the strategic, sea based platforms for China.

SSBNs are likely to be limited in number and possibly play a similar role to the French Force de Frappe as a national deterrence force with a strategic and an operational option.



¹⁴ <http://oceansbeyondpiracy.org/matrix/activity/shared-awareness-and-deconfliction-shade>

¹⁵ http://www.ifsh.de/IFAR/pdf/wp_13.pdf

Sea denial is obviously a strategic objective of the PLA Navy executed jointly with the PLA Air Force and the Second Artillery. Joint exercises in the recent years have shown both centralized command and control of all three fleets and a joint effort with the other two services. From our own experience, we know this to be a huge challenge and we have to take into account in our assessment not only technology and strategic and operational planning, but also the education and training programme for all the personnel, including the skill level of the officers commanding their ships, fleets and aircraft. The implementation of “joint” thinking has been a step change in the mind set of our nations and armed forces. So I have to ask the question: what are the warfare skills at the three levels of command: strategic, operational and tactical and on what kind of leadership is their education and training based: centralized or decentralized and is the delegation of responsibility to the appropriate leadership level and mission command the overarching principle, or is the command philosophy based on order and execution?

The belief that modern information technology is a substitute for personal leadership skills could be one of the future challenges for all navies, especially when it comes to joint operations.

In western navies we know from experience, that education, sharing knowledge, innovation and taking the initiative are our strengths. In essence we continuously discuss the issue of modern, advanced technology and the right way to use it in all maritime scenarios: from humanitarian assistance to war-fighting. And we know, again from own experience, that it would need a huge change in our mindset to achieve our ambition of a “comprehensive approach” which is in some senses similar to Chinese ideas of “Unrestricted Warfare”.

Part Five



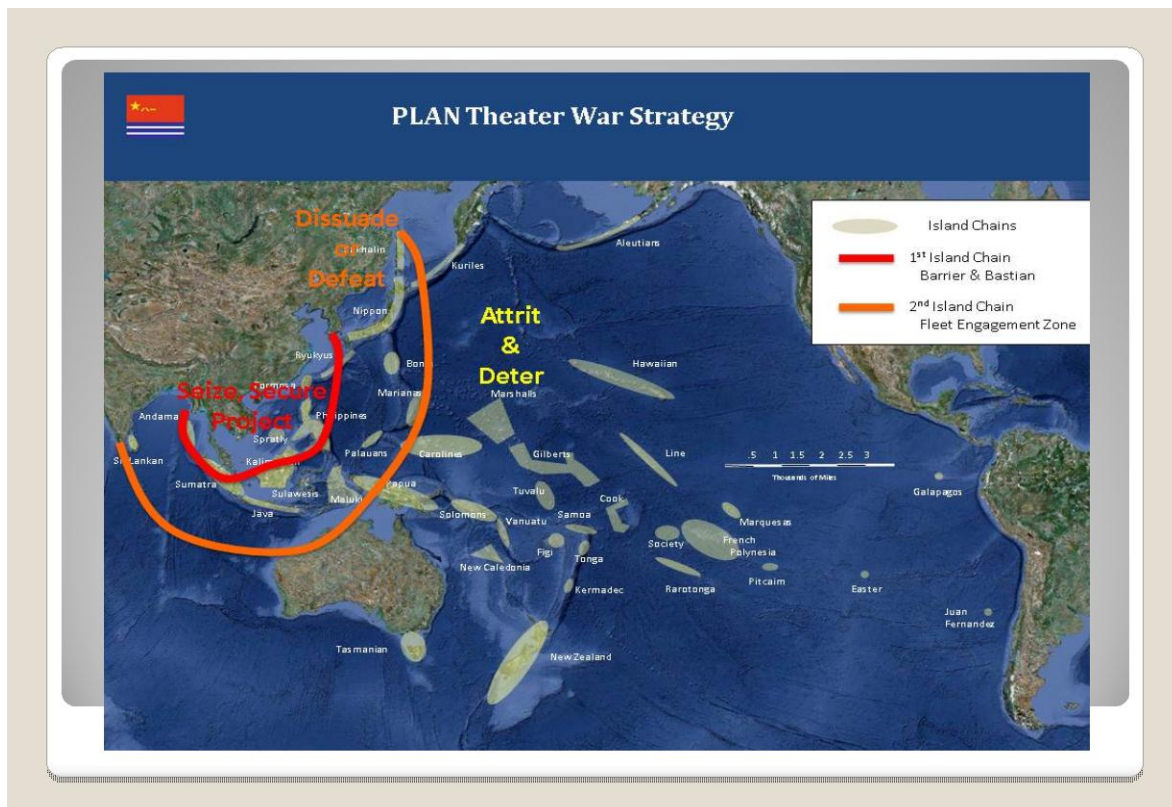
This picture offers a different perspective showing the dimensions of the maritime domain in the Asian region, the neighbouring nations and the organisation of the PLA Navy.

A strategy with ambitions for joint operations needs to be exercised at the operational level. Understanding this properly increases military capabilities even without the introduction of new war fighting capabilities in the single services.

Having exercised this ambitious strategy in two aspects, centralized command and control and successful co-operation with the PLA Air Force, must be seen as proof of the PLA Navy's ambitions.

A possible scenario and its related tasks become clear:

“Attrition” and “Deterrence” outside the area of interest, “Dissuade” or “Defeat” inside the second island chain, called the “Fleet Engagement Zone” and “Seize”, “Secure” and “Protect” in the first island chain, called the barrier and bastion area.





Part Six

Deducing the assumed strategic objectives and their consequences for the PLA Navy seems an appropriate way to conclude this presentation:

1. Defend sovereignty and secure territorial claims;
2. Protect homeland infrastructure and PLA assets from US attack by denying the South China Sea to US military surface, submarine and air forces;
3. Provide "Blue Water" access for SLBMs and by 2020 secure an operating "bastion";
4. Prevent opportunities for US to achieve new bases/ reinforcement in the second Island Chain;
5. Discourage regional states from acting against China's interests.

An assessment of the PLA Navy:

1. Chinese economic interests are in the Indian Ocean, Africa and Europe.
2. China plans minimum deterrence with SSBNs.
3. For Taiwan, "Sea Denial" remains an adequate approach against US Carrier Groups.
4. The PLA Navy still has significant deficiencies in both operational logistics for supporting "out of area" operations and in mine countermeasures capability.
5. Despite having exercised Joint Operations, there is a lack of joint thinking and planning and only limited operational procedures in place.

With its excellent navy, China has a power projection tool suitable for the region. Up till now it has not had the ambition to project power outside the region using military means.

The function of paramilitary and non-military warfare requires further specific assessment.

There are more options for the future, the European Union and individual Member States should take every opportunity to ensure that UNCLOS and "Good Governance at Sea" are enforced in the region.

Europe has a responsibility to act as an independent facilitator in the region and should do so.

I want to end with a quotation from Robert D. Kaplan's book, *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*.

"It bears repeating that there is nothing illegitimate about the rise of the Chinese military. China's ascendancy can fairly be compared with the United States following its own consolidation of land based power in the aftermath of the Civil War... Why should we expect China to follow a totally different path? For China's society is every bit as dynamic now as America's was a century ago."

Special thanks to my colleague and friend Captain (ret) German Navy Heinz-Dieter Jopp for his outstanding assistance.