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Is China Now a Sea Power?

According to the CSS's Prem Mahadevan, China's deployment of its first aircraft carrier does not signify a major shift in its naval capabilities, particularly in the case of distant 'blue water' operations. It will indeed be quite a while before the Chinese navy can rival American sea power.

By Prem Mahadevan for ISN

Editor's Note: Last week, we considered how the use of 'hard power' is increasingly being shaped by scientific developments, technological advancements and even the practice of lawfare. Since the majority of these developments require significant financial and material resources, they largely remain the instruments of choice for established global powers like the United States and its Western allies. Or do they?

This week we look at particular emerging powers and wonder if they have the financial and technological wherewithal to absorb cutting edge capabilities into their defense-industrial base, their defense policies, and even their geostrategic calculations. We begin by considering whether China is gaining on the US's status as the world's undisputed naval power or not. In doing so, we lay the foundations for our concluding article on Friday, which considers how declining defense budgets may impact the US's ability to project power and safeguard homeland security in the not-too-distant future.

Now that China has acquired and entered into service its first aircraft carrier, speculation about the extent of its naval ambitions is likely to increase. Some analysts have linked China's maritime profile with its growing economic and military power: as the country rises in international stature, so too will its overseas interests expand, and its military capabilities will follow suit. Others have pointed out that China lacks basic infrastructure for out-of-area naval operations, suggesting that it will not seek to become a sea power in the narrow military sense anytime soon. Developing a merchant fleet is one thing. Seeking to wrest control of the world's oceans, or even regulate traffic through them, is another.

The passage of time is likely to create a shifting reality. At the moment, Beijing seems focused on preparing for regional confrontations that might be triggered by circumstances beyond its control. In the long-term, Chinese leaders are probably as unsure as anyone else about what they intend to do with their navy. Much will depend on whether the United States appears to be stuck in intervention fatigue and willing to concede strategic space in parts of the eastern hemisphere. For its part, the People's Liberation Army - Navy (PLAN) is only slowly moving out from under the shadow of its land-based sister service. It still remains captive to the overall security situation that Beijing perceives.

Raising 'sea consciousness'

With Chinese history being characterized by internal conflict and nomadic invasions from Central Asia, contemporary China has long retained a continental security mindset. This began to change around 2003-04, when then-president Hu Jintao called for building a capacity to execute far-seas operations. His statement was, at one level, merely a continuation of his predecessor's policy – to buy political loyalty from the military by throwing money at its modernization efforts. With the PLA Army, Navy and Air Force having undergone personnel reductions to the tune of 1.7 million men since 1985, more funds became available for technology-intensive services.

Hu was keen to keep the military distracted from the Taiwan question; a problem that had been in limbo since 1995-96, when the US deployed a carrier group near the island in response to Chinese naval maneuvers. Some analysts believe that the call for a far-seas capability was less a sign of growing Chinese strength than of enduring weakness – the inability to safely defy the United States and forcibly annex Taiwan. The PLAN itself, quick to exploit an opportunity to boost its own service profile, embraced the notion of far-seas operations as an instrumental link between naval power and trading power. It sought to project itself as a guardian of the Chinese economy.

For a long time, efforts to raise 'sea consciousness' among the Chinese public and political elite focused on two themes: the need to safeguard China's supply of Middle Eastern oil, and Taiwan. Of late, a third has emerged: the defense of unexploited maritime resources within what many Chinese see as territorial waters, but which are internationally regarded as the high seas surrounding China. Beijing is currently embroiled in diplomatic tensions on this issue with Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines, leading both the public and elite to demand a further buildup of naval strength. The risk, though, is that any decision to initiate the use of force would bring in a powerful countervailing actor – the US Navy.

China's current naval growth needs to be studied in the context of its military position vis-à-vis the US. Beijing faces a quandary similar to that of Japan in 1941: strong enough to engage Washington in a short-lived contest, but incapable of winning a sustained fight. Notwithstanding its high-profile port calls to Europe, the Middle East and Latin America, the PLAN would face serious difficulties in protecting China's Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the event of a major clash with the United States. This is partly because the service's strength derives mainly from the recent performance of the Chinese economy, and not a rich tradition of combat experience.

From 'near-coast' to 'near seas'

Following the communist takeover of 1949, China's navy was in essence molded into a subsidiary of its land forces. During the 1950s, the navy's strategic role in the event of a war with the United States or the Soviet Union – at the time, thought to be China's most likely opponents – was one of almost passive defense. With roughly 18,000 kilometers of coastline to protect, it was impossible to stop a foreign invasion force landing in China. The idea was to allow the invader to enter the country and then wear him down in a long war of attrition. The navy would focus first on protecting its limited assets and then harassing the enemy's logistics. This was called the near-coast defense concept.

During the mid-1980s, and especially after 1987, the PLAN shifted to a new paradigm. Diminishing tensions with the Soviet Union and the United States provided a measure of reassurance that a major war was unlikely. Although homeland defense remained a core mission, additional responsibilities were assumed. The two most important were helping the army to occupy Taiwan, and protecting SLOCs and maritime resources in adjacent waters. Instead of just guarding the coastline, the navy was to venture further out to sea and establish China's influence in East Asia. The new concept was known as the near-seas active defense concept.

China is presently in this phase of naval development. A third phase – the far-seas operations concept – remains more aspirational than real at the time of writing. While the PLAN's flag-showing forays into the Indian Ocean have attracted much attention, as have Chinese port-building activities in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Pakistan, these do not alter the fact that China's security perspective remains regionally-focused. Absent a favorable situation in the near-seas, with regard to Taiwan and maritime disputes, the PLAN can ill-afford to indulge in major out-of-area operations. Establishing supremacy over its immediate operating environment is therefore a prerequisite to becoming a major sea power. Towards this end, the service has built on existing ideas of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) to create a 'counter-intervention doctrine', targeted specifically at the US.

Denial before control

Perhaps no better indication of China's naval strengths and weaknesses can be found than in its war-fighting concept. The PLAN is investing heavily in its submarine force, which is expected to grow from about 60 vessels to 75. Its surface fleet, however, is being modernized rather than expanded. Both developments indicate that the service is aiming to achieve a robust sea denial capability rather than actually fight for sea control. The bulk of Chinese airpower in the Pacific theatre will come from land-based aircraft. Although China's carrier construction program can, in the long run, establish the PLAN as a navy with global reach, it is unlikely to match the US Navy. Even if China did add two indigenously-built carriers by 2020, as projected, it would still have to contend with twice as many US carriers in the Pacific, due to Washington's much-heralded 'rebalancing' of naval assets.

There has been speculation that the Chinese 'carrier-killer' missile, the Dong Feng-21, could be a game-changer. Capable of hitting moving vessels before they get within aircraft range of the Chinese coast, it could deliver a powerful blow to US efforts to intervene in an East Asian conflict. Although no verdict has yet been reached, some naval experts suggest that the Dong Feng is not as transformative as it is often perceived to be. For a start, America's large fixed airbases in the western Pacific have long been vulnerable to missile attack – that is a risk that the US Navy factors into its planning. Secondly, new-generation Chinese submarines are as potent a threat as anti-ship missiles. Finally, the 'carrier-killer' is potentially vulnerable throughout the length of its kill chain to electronic attack.

The key question is whether the US will make long-term investments in electronic warfare capabilities to counter the Chinese missile threat before it grows more sophisticated. Not surprisingly, there is little reliable information on this point. Even so, there is little doubt that the US Navy retains a substantial technological advantage over its Chinese counterpart. China is weak in anti-submarine warfare and lacks the aviation assets to protect its anticipated carrier groups from aerial attack. Even if it developed such assets, it would take time to master carrier-based air operations. Presently, the PLAN is believed to have little capacity to absorb personnel losses from training accidents involving naval pilots.

Assessing China's naval buildup requires differentiating between timeframes. China is already one of the most prolific military ship-builders in the world, but, for the foreseeable future, it is likely to remain weaker than the United States. This would not necessarily obstruct the country from becoming a major sea power, but it does limit the potential for operational growth. Beijing still has to contend with a Cold War-type situation vis-à-vis Taiwan and other East Asian states that possess a US security umbrella. It is also domestically insecure about political disturbances. Both factors imply that China's status as a sea power will be ambiguous, until such time as the strategic situation in East Asia changes.

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