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This monograph seeks to answer the following question: Is China's maritime strategy development and maturation influenced by Alfred Mahan's sea power theory? Collectively, the analysis suggests a correlation exists between Mahan's sea power theory and China's overall maritime strategy and long-term aspirations supported by the emphasis of Beijing's military strategy and political and military discourse on management of the seas and protection of the country's sea lines of communications (SLOC), coupled with its continued development of a robust and credible sea power, and by its acquisition of rights to overseas basing.

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*United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22134-5068*

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

Mahanian Sea Power: The Bedrock of China's Maritime Strategy?

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LCDR Erica Goodwin, USN

AY 16-17

Mentor and Oral Defense Committee Member: Edward J. Erickson, PhD

Approved: 

Date: 17 April 2017

Oral Defense Committee Member: Lynn Tesser, PhD

Approved: 

Date: 17 April 2017

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Preface

While attending the Marine Corps Command and Staff College, I came across the article “China’s Navy: A Turn to Corbett?” by James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara. The authors asserted that China’s maritime strategy had largely been influenced by the works of United States naval officer Alfred Mahan. However, they further contended that China had incorporated more of Julian Corbett’s theories on maritime strategy into their naval strategic framework and thinking since 2008. The authors noted, that while Mahan’s theory provided Chinese maritime strategists with a guide or basic framework for the development of Chinese sea power, the addition of Corbettian precepts in the form of a plan, would allow China to develop a grand theory of sea power and naval warfare.¹ As a naval officer who has spent most of her time afloat in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman, I knew very little about the People’s Liberation Army Navy. The article greatly peaked my interest. With the premise that a country’s theoretical influence shapes its national strategy, which in turn, would determine its military policy in hand, I set out to determine exactly which maritime theorist China was most influenced by.

I would like to thank my professor and mentor, Dr. Edward Erickson, Professor of War Studies at the Marine Corps Command and Staff College. Dr. Erickson was always able to keep me on the right path, while simultaneously stoking my passion for a deeper understanding of the subject matter. And of course, none of this work would have been possible without the love and support of my husband Andrew.

¹ James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, “China’s Navy: A Turn to Corbett?,” *Proceedings* 136, no.12 (December 2010): 44, <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings>.

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Introductionⁱ

Since the Communist Party of China (CPC), led by Deng Xiaoping, instituted a policy of “opening up” to the rest of the world in 1979, Beijing embarked on an impressive national, social, economic, and military modernization program. Nowhere has the enormous strides the Chinese government and the nation have made been more evident than in the maritime domain. During the last thirty-eight years, China has evolved and matured its views on the relevance of the maritime domain to its continued development, security, and place in the world.¹ However, much debate remains on which maritime theoretical thinker, if any, have influenced the development of China’s maritime strategy and sea power. In *Red Star Over the Pacific: China’s Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy* published in 2010, Naval War College professors Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes contended that China has turned to the sea primarily for economic development and energy security reasons, in which geography plays a significant strategic role. Based on an extensive survey of a variety of Chinese literature to include official sources, military and technical publications, and reputable academic journals, the authors maintained that Chinese officials, mariners, and scholars drew their grand inspiration from the American maritime strategist Alfred Mahan, with Mahanian principles providing the underlining logic for the country’s maritime strategy.² More specifically, they argued, “Mahan furnishes the logic of Chinese sea power while Mao’s [Mao Zedong’s] ‘active defense’ concept helps Beijing tailor the warlike grammar of sea power to China’s local circumstances.”³

Utilizing Yoshihara and Holmes’ argument as a reference point, this paper seeks to update and compliment the authors’ work in two ways: 1) to provide analysis of material not

ⁱ Every effort was made to thoroughly research the subject matter. However, two limitations limited the scope of the study: 1) due to the author’s inability to read Mandarin, she was limited to using sources that were either written and/or interpreted in English; and 2) the study does not account for any other viewpoints that influenced Chinese policy makers’ decisions that were not documented in published material.

available to the authors at the time of their publication and 2) to expand on their analysis by exploring the material aspects of China's turn to the sea in the form of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLA(N)) modernization program and the country's acquisition of overseas basing rights. Accordingly, the following questions will be addressed: Is China's maritime strategy development and maturation influenced by Alfred Mahan's sea power theory? If so, to what extent are Mahanian tenants and principles reflected in Beijing's military strategy, political and military discourse, and the modernization of the PLA(N)?

The first section of this paper will provide a primer on Mahan's maritime theory to familiarize the reader with his principles and tenets. Next, the paper will examine China's published military strategy and political and military discourse with regards to Mahan's tenets. The third section of the paper will analyze China's efforts to modernize and expand the PLA(N) and correlate it to Mahan's principle of a credible sea power. The final section of the paper will conclude with an assessment of the future implications of a Mahanian influenced China. Collectively, the analysis suggests a correlation exists between Mahan's sea power theory and China's overall maritime strategy and long-term aspirations supported by the emphasis of Beijing's military strategy and political and military discourse on management of the seas and protection of the country's sea lines of communications (SLOC), coupled with its continued development of a robust and credible sea power, and by its acquisition of rights to overseas basing.

Mahanian Maritime Strategy and Sea Power

Writing in the late ninetieth and early twentieth centuries, U.S. naval officer Alfred Mahan recognized and expounded on the strategic importance of the vast oceans to a nation's prosperity and security, particularly for a nation that bordered on the sea. Mahan highlighted the

importance, stating, “The mutual dependence of commerce and the navy is nowhere more clearly seen than in the naval resources of nation, the greatness of which depends upon peaceful trade and shipping.”⁴ Although Mahan did not specifically define “maritime strategy” in any of his writings, one could conclude that the interconnectedness of a nation’s sea borne commerce with its strategic aims of prosperity and security inherently demanded a maritime strategy that sought to protect the former for the furtherance of the latter. Thus, a nation’s maritime strategy should focus primarily on the protection of its sea borne commerce and trade. In explaining the relationship, Mahan asserted, “It seems demonstrable, therefore, that as commerce is the engrossing and predominant interest of the world to-day, so, in consequence of its acquired expansion, oversea commerce, over-sea political acquisition, and maritime commercial routes are now the primary objects of external policy among the nations.”⁵ Mahan particularly stressed the importance of the economic needs of the nation determining its geopolitics, which in turn, should inform its military strategy. In *Retrospect and Prospect: Studies in International Relations, Naval and Political*, he succulently illustrated the relationship noting, “The starting point and foundation [for sea power] is the necessity to secure commerce, by political measures conducive to military, or naval, strength. This order is that of actual relative importance to the nation of the three elements – commercial, political, military.”⁶

A key tenant of a nation’s maritime strategy, as advocated by Mahan, was the principle of a credible sea power. Sea power defined by Mahan was, “In the broad sense, which includes not only the military strength afloat, that rules the sea or any part of it by force of arms, but also the peaceful commerce and shipping from which alone a military fleet naturally and healthfully springs, and on which it securely rests.”⁷ A credible military sea power should thus focus on the protection of SLOCs, protection of sea borne commerce and trade ships, as well as, ensuring the

security of ports, both abroad and at home. Mahan explained, “The ships that thus sail to and from must have secure ports to which to return, and must, as far as possible, be followed by the protection of their country throughout the voyage. This protection in time of war must be extended by armed shipping. The necessity of a navy, in the restricted sense of the word, springs, therefore, from the existence of peaceful shipping, and disappears with it.”⁸ Mahan sometimes referred to the military arm of a nation’s sea power as a “battle fleet”.⁹ Strongly associated with the principle of sea power, was the tenet of naval strategy. Noting that the development of a country’s naval strategy was not only important in wartime, but was critical in peacetime as well, Mahan quoting a French author, asserted, “Naval strategy has indeed for its end to found, support, and increase, as well in peace as in war, the sea power of a country.”¹⁰ To do so, a nation must develop a sea power commensurate with its size, economic necessities, global standings, and security requirements.

*China’s Military Strategy*ⁱⁱ

2008

Beginning in 2009, China’s military defense white papers have increasingly placed more emphasis on the maritime domain, and with each successive paper, more of each document has focused on the PLA(N) roles, responsibilities, and future capabilities. For the first time, the 2008

ⁱⁱ Beijing has never publicly published its maritime strategy. However, the country does publicly publish defense white papers. Center for Strategic and International Studies’ analysts have confirmed the papers are issued biennially by the Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China and have concluded that the white papers “provide a detailed picture of China’s public statements, the logic and drivers behind its military modernization program, and China’s strategic view of the world.” Given their assessment, this paper will analyze China’s defense white papers as a source for identifying and evaluating China’s maritime strategy. Anthony H. Cordesman, Steven Colley, and Michael Wang, *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2015: A Comparative Analysis* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2015), 28, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/151215_Cordesman_ChineseStrategyMilitaryMod_Web.pdf.

military strategy, titled *China's National Defense in 2008*ⁱⁱⁱ, assigned the “responsibility of such tasks as safeguarding China’s maritime security and maintaining the sovereignty of its territorial waters, along with its maritime rights and interests” to the PLA(N).¹¹ In testimony to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC), Michael Auslin, a scholar in foreign and defense policy studies, stressed the shift in China’s evolving maritime strategy, citing the aforementioned section of the white paper to the committee and expounding on the significance, stating:

Historically, China has been a continental power with extensive maritime networks. The size of its domestic economy, and the sophistication of its political and technological systems, in centuries past ensured that a dense web of maritime trade routes converged on China, stretching from India all the way to Japan, roughly the same as today’s Asian Maritime Domain... China’s reliance on overseas markets for imports of raw materials and export of finished or semi-finished goods has resulted in a strategic decision to build its naval capabilities beyond a brown-water force and towards a true blue-water orientation.¹²

Additionally, the 2008 defense white paper acknowledged the importance of a maritime integrated logistical support system capability, which indicated Beijing’s recognition that logistics are critical to extending the reach of its sea power.¹³ Both concepts, protection of maritime rights and interests and the need for logistical support can be found in Mahan’s writing. On the importance of protection of maritime rights and interests, Mahan wrote, “Nor is it easy to conceive what broad military use they [navies] can subserve that at all compares with the protection and destruction of trade.”¹⁴ Similarly, Mahan observed the importance of a mobile and robust logistical system to Lord Nelson’s last great campaign, during which, he was able to

ⁱⁱⁱ Although titled *China's National Defense in 2008*, the defense white paper was not released until January 20, 2009. Similarly, *China's National Defense in 2010* was released in March 2011 and the *Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces* white paper, which is considered to be China’s 2012 defense white paper, was not released until April 2013.

remain at sea for two years. In praising his logistical feats, Mahan extolled, “This was an achievement of logistics, of movement constant and unimpaired, because of diligent prevision.”¹⁵

2010

Similarly, China’s 2010 defense white paper, titled *China’s National Defense in 2010*, placed continued importance on safeguarding the national sovereignty, security, and interests of the country. Particularly, the 2010 white paper correlated the goals and tasks of China’s military specifically with its economic development stating, “National defense is both subordinate to and in service of the country’s development and security strategies. It safeguards this important period of strategic opportunities for national development.”¹⁶ The correlation of military strategy with the development and safety of a nation is a mainstay of Mahan’s theory. When writing about national policy, Mahan specified, “Military preparations should be determined chiefly by those broad political considerations which affect the relations of states one to another, or of the several parts of the same state to the common defense.”¹⁷ Also significant, is the section of the white paper devoted to Beijing’s escort operations in the Gulf of Aden. The counter piracy operations, which began on December 26, 2008, were the first overseas operations aimed at the protection of overseas SLOCs and interests that China has undertaken.¹⁸ Even more noteworthy, these operations were executed in conjunction with an international maritime task force, indicating the importance China placed on the mission.

2012

The *Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces* augmented and expanded on the maritime strategy Beijing outlined in previous years’ defense white papers. Along with featuring the country’s overseas operations and exercises, the white paper also underscored the commissioning of China’s first aircraft carrier *LIAONING*, emphasizing, “China’s development

of an aircraft carrier has a profound impact on building a strong PLA(N) and safeguarding maritime security.”¹⁹ True to Mahanian theory, the white paper further drew a parallel between China’s national interest and its overseas interests to the nation’s economic and development requirements. Among the many maritime issues China was facing, top priority was given in the white paper to overseas energy and resources, strategic SLOCs, and Chinese nationals and legal persons overseas.²⁰ The strategy identified vessel protection at sea, evacuation of Chinese nationals overseas, and emergency rescue as “ways and means for the PLA to safeguard national interests and fulfill China’s international obligations.”²¹

2015

With regards to Beijing’s maritime strategy, perhaps the most revealing defense white paper has been its 2015 iteration. In terminology reminiscent of Mahan, the strategy called for management of the seas and oceans to support strategically its maritime aspirations.²² Moreover, the document declared China’s strategic goal of building itself into a maritime power, the first publicly released strategy to do so.²³ Providing insight into China’s strategic decision, the document noted, “The seas and oceans bear on the enduring peace, lasting stability and sustainable development of China. The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned.”²⁴ Increasing the PLA(N) mission set from “offshore waters defense” to a combination of “offshore waters defense” with “open seas protection”, China aligned the PLA(N)’s mission to the country’s expanded maritime strategy.^{iv} In explaining the significance of the increased PLA(N) mission set, retired U.S. Rear Admiral Michael McDevitt, stated:

^{iv} “Offshore waters defense” is also referred to as “near seas defense”. Similarly, “open seas protection” is synonymous with “far-seas protection”. In testimony provided to Congress, Center for Naval Analyses research scientist, Thomas Bickford, defined the terms noting, “Near seas refers to the area within the first island chain and far-seas to the rest of the world’s oceans.” *Developments in China’s Military Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities: Hearing Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 114th Cong., 2 (January 21, 2016) (statement of Thomas J. Bickford, Senior Research Scientist, Center for Naval Analyses), 142,

“The nature of this emphasis [the importance the white paper placed on protecting sea lanes] is new and is different than the now almost decade old guidance found in earlier white papers that was focused on the *peacetime* uses of the navy...In the 2015 white paper the enumeration of peacetime MOOW [military operations other than war] no longer includes any reference to sea lanes upon which China relies. These are addressed in separate sections within the context of “protection,” which suggest to me that thinking regarding open seas has shifted from conceptually framing those operations as strictly peacetime, to a broader framework that takes into account having to protect “strategic SLOCs” in wartime.”²⁵

Admiral McDevitt further posited, “Protecting overseas interests and sea lanes is becoming as important to China’s leadership as defending China itself.”²⁶ The prominence China placed on extending the PLA(N)’s reach is analogous with how Mahan viewed national policy. He aptly explained, “The sphere of the navy is international solely. It is this which allies it so closely to that of the statesman. Aim to be yourselves statesmen as well as seamen.”²⁷ If Admiral McDevitt’s observations on China’s intent to prepare for wartime scenarios are indeed accurate, Mahan would applaud their efforts. Mahan famously stated, “Naval strategy is as necessary in peace as in war.”²⁸

Public Discourse

Political

A review of China’s defense white papers suggests a Mahanian link to China’s maritime strategy, but can a correlation be found in the country’s political and military discourse on the subject? As a communist nation, China is led by the CPC, the sole governing party of China, and adheres to the principle of democratic centralism which is defined as “a principle of the Communist party organization by which members take part in policy discussion and elections at all levels, but must follow the decisions made at higher levels.”²⁹ As such, the CPC leadership wields substantial power and authority in the governance of the nation. Therefore, when

http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/transcripts/Hearing%20Transcript_01.21.16.pdf and Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Military Strategy*.

analyzing political statements and sentiments on a given topic within China's borders, it is critical to begin with those of the top leadership.

As early as 2006, Chinese leadership began shifting their attention to the maritime domain. In December 2006, Hu Jintao, General Secretary of the CPC and President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), advocated for the building of a strong navy. Quoted in the Reuters' article "China's Hu Calls for Powerful, Combat-ready Navy" Hu argued, "We should strive to build a powerful navy that adapts to the needs of our military's historical mission in this new century and at this new stage."³⁰ However, it was not until 2012, that a prominent Chinese official publicly announced the country's ambitions to become a maritime power. Speaking to the 18th CPC National Congress, President Hu declared, "We should enhance our capacity for exploiting marine resources, develop the marine economy, protect the marine ecological environment, resolutely safeguard China's maritime rights and interests, and build China into a maritime power."³¹

Advancing President Hu's declaration, his successor, Xi Jinping, elaborated on the country's future maritime role at the CPC's Central Committee Political Bureau's eighth collective study session held in July 2013. Stressing that becoming a maritime power was an integral part of the cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics, General Secretary Xi further contented:

"After many years of development, China's marine industries as a whole have entered their best period of development in history. These achievements have laid a solid foundation for our building of a maritime power... [We] must persist in following the development path of relying on the ocean to build a prosperous country, making use of marine resources to build a powerful country...and promote the building of a maritime power in a down-to-earth manner through peaceful development and win-win cooperation."³²

Commenting on the gravity of the study session and Xi's remarks, China Institute of International Studies' research fellow Jia Xiudong explained, "The latest collective study

sessions examined the special subject of building a maritime power, the first time that the CPC Central Committee Political Bureau had done so in its eighty-two collective study sessions over the course of more than ten years. This shows the great significance attached by the new central leadership to building a maritime power and safeguarding maritime rights and interests.”³³ Xi’s remarks, and those previously made by Hu, are very similar to the sentiments conveyed by Mahan in *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*. In examining England’s powerful navy, Mahan concluded, “The sea power of England therefore was not merely in the great navy...Neither was it in a prosperous commerce alone...It was the union of the two, carefully fostered, that England made the gain of sea power over and beyond all other States.”³⁴

Military

Other important actors in China’s decision making process regarding the maritime domain are high ranking military officials of the PLA(N). Naval War College professor, Nan Li, attributed the changes in China’s earlier policy of near-coast defense strategy to the near-seas active defense strategy to PLA(N) commander Liu Huaqing. Li asserted, “He [Liu] particularly appreciates Mahan’s arguments that oceans are central to growing the wealth and power of a nation, because by establishing control of SLOCs, a nation can develop commercial shipping and trade in times of peace, and accomplish military objectives in times of war.”³⁵ Li further argued that many of the present-day Chinese maritime strategies, such as maneuver-based offense, could be traced back to the concepts Liu proposed while commanding the PLA(N) from 1982 through 1988 and later as the general of the PLA.³⁶ Interestingly, Yoshihara and Holmes described Liu as “the founding father of the modern Chinese navy” and noted that he is “known in the West as ‘China’s Mahan’.”³⁷

Other senior military PLA(N) members have also published articles proposing principles and tenets that are consistent with Mahan's. In an article published in the *China Military Science*, Senior Captain Xu Qi argued that the maritime geostrategy of China was important to the development of the Chinese navy.³⁸ The article read as if Mahan himself wrote it, with subparagraphs discussing the interrelationship between the sea and national power in determining the long-term prosperity of the state and the relationship between maritime geography and national security, to name a few. When expounding on the naval strategy the PLA(N) should pursue, Xu stated:

“To meet the requirements of national security and development interests, the navy must not only develop the important function of defending national sovereignty, but also unceasingly move toward [the posture of] a ‘blue-water navy’ [and] expand the scope of maritime strategic defense, in order to contribute to the defense of national maritime rights and interests. To this end, the navy must take to heart the maritime interests of the nation, pay close attention to changes in the circumstances of maritime geostrategy, raise the nation’s naval defense combat capability, [and] provide [a] reliable guarantee of national maritime security.”³⁹

Senior PLA(N) Captain Zhang Wei’s published comments parallel those of Xu. In an article originally published in the journal *Xueshu Qianyan*, Zhang examined the influence Mahan had on Chinese thinkers in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Although he agreed that China needed to develop a sea power capability, he was also adamant that Mahan’s theory needed to be adapted to incorporate Chinese characteristics. He aptly explained, “Under the guidance of “the five principles of coexistence,” the “new security” concept, and the “harmonious world”, China will extract the wheat and discard the chaff of sea-power theory.”⁴⁰ He concluded the article by stating, “Chinese sea power is the application of national maritime forces to developing and using the sea. It is also the process of protecting national rights and interests and ensuring national maritime security. Above all, it is the process of developing strategic management of national maritime affairs, the capability of administering the ocean, and

the art of doing so.”⁴¹ Xu and Zhang’s articles collectively covered the main ideas of Mahan’s sea power theory.

Chinese Sea Power: Modernization of the PLA(N)

As previously stated, Mahan advocated for a nation bordering on the sea to have a credible sea power capability, with protection of the entire system of sea borne commerce and trade (i.e. SLOCS, ships, ports, etc.), in both peace and wartime, as its main goal. To reliably execute protection of sea borne commerce and trade, a nation would need to possess a sea power that could support, sustain, and defend operations in the far-seas. Admiral McDevitt posited that the PLA(N) would need to be composed of a mix of naval capabilities such as large multi-mission destroyers and frigates, helicopter capable ships, amphibious ships, logistic support ships, long range air defenses, and nuclear powered attack submarines to accomplish the mission set associated with “open seas protection”^v.⁴² Naval weaponry, such as surface-to-air missiles, and surface anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM), and the maritime command, control, computers, communication, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) assets to effectively employ the naval platforms and naval weaponry, are also capabilities that would enhance overseas protection missions. The final ingredient needed for operations in the far-seas is professionalized and trained naval personnel. The Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) summarized the capabilities needed for SLOC protection the best when it stated, “SLOC

^v In written testimony provided to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (USCC) on January 21, 2016, Admiral Michael McDevitt (ret.) equated open seas protection to expeditionary missions, which he further defined as “military operations abroad. They are executed by military forces specifically trained and equipped to fight a long distance from home.” *Developments in China’s Military Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities: Hearing Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 114th Cong., 2 (January 21, 2016) (statement of Rear Admiral Michael A. McDevitt, USN (ret), Senior Fellow, Center for Naval Analyses), 150, http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/transcripts/Hearing%20Transcript_01.21.16.pdf.

protection is not simply a matter of deploying ships to chokepoints. It requires the capability to sustain a maritime presence in strategic locations, in hostile conditions, and for extended periods.”⁴³

Budget

Spurred by enormous economic growth due to the globalization of its economy, China has placed and continues to place significant capital and resources into expanding and modernizing its navy. The USCC reported China’s 2015 official^{vi} annual defense budget rose 10.1% to \$141.9 billion dollars, increasing its military budget by double digits almost every year since 1989.⁴⁴ The Commission also assessed, “China’s defense spending appears sustainable in the short term. Although China’s slowing economic growth will generate opportunity costs as government spending strains to meet other national priorities, there is no sign this has affected military spending.”⁴⁵ The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), on the other hand, estimated China’s 2015 total military related spending^{vii} exceeded \$180 billion dollars with an annual increase of 9.8% from 2006 through 2015. Like the USCC, it also assessed Beijing had the ability to sustain comparable levels for the foreseeable future.⁴⁶ Highlighting the significance of Beijing’s defense budget, DoD reported, “IHS [Information Handling Services] Jane’s Defense Budgets expects China’s defense budget to increase by an annual average of 7%, growing to

^{vi} In their 2015 report to Congress, the USCC noted, “Its [China’s] actual aggregate defense spending is much higher, as Beijing omits major defense-related expenditures from its official budget.” U.S.- China Economic and Security Review Commission, “Executive Summary and Recommendations,” in *2015 Report to Congress* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2015), 10, http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/annual_reports/2015%20Executive%20Summary%20and%20Recommendations.pdf.

^{vii} In the Department of Defense’s 2016 report to Congress, DoD attributed the difficulty in estimating China’s military expenses “due to China’s poor accounting transparency and incomplete transition to a market economy.” US Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2016* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, April 26, 2016), 77, http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2015_China_Military_Power_Report.pdf.

\$260 billion by 2020. As of March 2015, the DoD Comptroller forecasted the US Defense budget will reach \$598 billion in current dollars over the same period.”⁴⁷

Naval Combatants

Beginning in 1989, China embarked on a modernization program, which many would characterize as ambitious, to increase both the capacity and the capabilities of the PLA(N). The main objective of China’s modernization plan was to produce a more technologically advanced and agile force to effectively execute the nation’s maritime strategy. *Table 1* and *Table 2* present the total inventory of the PLA(N), broken down by the type of combatant, from 1990 projected out to 2020. *Table 3* and *Table 4* indicate the percentage of modern^{viii} naval and subsurface assets China possessed or will possess from 1990 projected out to 2020.

When Beijing commenced executing its modernization plan, the PLA(N)’s inventory consisted primarily of coastal patrol boats and antiquated, single mission surface combatants and submarines that were unable to prosecute operations of any significant duration, let alone in the far-seas.⁴⁸ However, during the nineties and the early twenty-first century, China was successful in importing technology, reverse engineering, and indigenously developing a more technological and diverse fleet.⁴⁹ Initially, China focused much of its attention to updating and upgrading, what it viewed as the backbone of its fleet, destroyers and conventional submarines. As time progressed, China expanded its program to include modernizing other combatants in its inventory and acquiring or producing additional naval and auxiliary assets, such as the *LIAONING* aircraft carrier, the *SHANG*-class nuclear powered submarine, and the *FUCHI*-class

^{viii} In the USCC staff research background report *China’s Naval Modernization and Implications for the United States*, the authors defined modern surface ships as “those able to conduct multiple missions or that have been extensively upgraded since 1992” and modern submarines as “those able to employ submarine-launched intercontinental ballistic missiles or anti-ship cruise missiles.” Craig Murray, Andrew Berglund, and Kimberly Hsu, *U.S-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Research Background: China’s Naval Modernization and Implications for the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), 6-7.

replenishment ship. Throughout modernization, China has continuously replaced older legacy naval combatants with newer, more technologically advanced, and better equipped multi-mission capable ships, with the overall effect of producing a force that is approximately 70% modern.⁵⁰ If current production levels continue, which all indications point to, Beijing is on track to have the second largest inventory of far-seas capable ships by 2020.⁵¹

Weaponry and C4ISR Systems

In addition to enhancing the hull designs and propulsion systems of its ships and submarines, China has also improved shipboard weaponry and C4ISR systems. ONI has assessed that the PLA(N) emphasizes anti-surface warfare (ASUW) as its core strength and, as such, has developed advanced ASCMs with longer effective ranges.⁵² For example, the *LUYANG III* destroyer is outfitted with China's newest ASCM, the YJ-18 (290 nautical miles (nm)) and the submarine variant of the YJ-18 will be fielded on the *SONG*, *YUAN*, and *SHANG*-class submarines.⁵³ China has also increased shipboard area defense capabilities by equipping their newer destroyers with HHQ-9 (55 nm) and HHQ-9 extended range (80 nm) surface-to-air missiles.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Chinese space based satellites are increasingly being utilized by the military for C4ISR and position, navigation, and timing (PNT) functions. Of note, China's PNT satellite system, known as Beidou, became operational in 2012 and is expected to have global coverage by 2020.⁵⁵ In describing the importance of the system, the USCC reported to Congress, "When completed, this [Beidou] system will provide PNT functions, essential to the performance of virtually every modern Chinese weapons system, independent from U.S.-run GPS [global positioning system]."⁵⁶

Training and Exercises

To be able to operate modern naval combatants thousands of nautical miles from home port, the crew must be skilled, trained, and proficient. Add the increased complexities and stresses associated with wartime scenarios and proficiency at sea must be more akin to mastery of the sea. Recognizing that personnel training is an essential component of modernizing the PLA(N), Beijing has focused on increasingly more realistic and complex training patterns to improve the operational proficiency of its fleets during the last decade.⁵⁷ *Table 5* provides a detailed listing of the PLA(N) operations that were conducted in the Western Pacific from 2013-2014 and *Figure 1* and *Figure 2* are graphical representations of the chokepoints that were transited by the PLA(N) during the same timeframe. *Table 6* summarizes the PLA(N)'s gradual "stepping stones toward far-seas defense" and "normalized PLA(N) deployments to the Western Pacific", as assessed by naval officer and author Christopher Sharman.⁵⁸

In October 2013 and again in December 2014, China conducted "ocean going exercises" with ships from all three fleets (North, South, and East) and integrated fixed wing aircraft for the first time. *Figure 3* is a map that annotates the locations of each fleet's headquarters, as well as a general order of battle. In December 2016, a Chinese carrier battle group, which included the aircraft carrier *LIAONING*, conducted exercises in the Yellow Sea. In late December 2016 through mid-January 2017, the same battle group conducted "exercises far out at sea", which included fighter launch, recovery, and air combat exercises in the Western Pacific.⁵⁹ The underway period was the first time a Chinese aircraft carrier has operated in waters outside the first island chain. The exercises are an example of the PLA(N)'s overall training trends of, not only having the competency to increase the frequency and complexity of its training and exercises, but also the PLA(N) leadership's confidence to conduct exercises with a greater number of ships at considerable distances from China.

The best way to elevate the competency and proficiency of a fleet is by conducting actual operations in areas where it is likely to operate in the future. Since 2009, a flotilla of two combatants and one auxiliary ship have participated in counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. As of January 2016, China has conducted a total of twenty-two deployments to the Gulf of Aden. As the deployments have normalized over the years, Chinese ships' time on station have increased from 3-4 months for the first seven deployments to between 170 and 200 days for the remainder.⁶⁰ In 2011, a PLA(N) frigate assisted a Chinese interagency task force in a non-combat evacuation operation (NEO) evacuating approximately 35,000 of its citizens from Libya and in 2015, China diverted its counterpiracy task force to conduct another NEO in Yemen.⁶¹ Other examples of overseas operations include multiple nuclear-powered attack submarine patrols in the Indian Ocean beginning in late 2014; a *YUAN*-class attack submarine conducting the first foreign port call by a PLA(N) submarine to Karachi, Pakistan in 2015; three PLA(N) ships transiting the Bering Sea following a China-Russia naval exercise in 2015; and a three month-around the world tour following the 2015 counterpiracy task group's deployment to the Indian Ocean that included port calls in the United States, Europe, and Central America.⁶² Dr. Christopher Yung, Director of East Asian Studies at the Marine Corps University, most aptly described Beijing's overseas experience when he stated, "American PLA watchers may disagree over the depth and extent of the Chinese Navy's improved capability; however, no expert observer would disagree that the Chinese Navy has become much more 'salty' or comfortable with blue-water and 'out of area' operations."⁶³

Net Assessment

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Explaining the significance of a nation possessing a battle fleet, Mahan acclaimed, "All consideration goes to show that the supreme essential condition to the assertion and maintenance

of national power in external maritime regions is the possession of a fleet superior to that of any probable opponent.”⁶⁴ China has certainly realized relative supremacy in its near seas and, by all accounts, is on track to become a formidable far-seas navy, as well. While highlighting the rapid expansion and operational proficiency of the PLA(N), ONI has also noted that the service faces some capability gaps in key areas. However, it has assessed overall, that within the next decade, the PLA(N) will transition from a coastal navy to one that is capable of conducting multiple missions globally.⁶⁵ DoD evaluated the PLA(N)’s capabilities similarly stating, “China’s modern naval platforms include advanced missile and technological capabilities that will strengthen the force’s core warfighting competencies and enable credible combat operations beyond the reaches of land-based defenses. Moreover, China’s current aircraft carrier and planned follow-on carriers will extend air defense umbrellas beyond the range of coastal systems and help enable task group operations in the ‘far-seas’.”⁶⁶ Admiral McDevitt, moreover, credited the PLA(N) with “not only a formidable ‘near seas’ challenge, thanks mainly to its submarine contribution to A2/AD [anti-access/area denial] operations”, but to “becoming a well-rounded (balanced) and very capable expeditionary navy.”⁶⁷ He further posited, “It is likely that by 2020, China will have the second most capable ‘distant seas’ navy in the world.”⁶⁸ All indications point to Beijing’s willingness and financial capability to pursue a truly global navy. If modernization, training, and exercises continue, as history has shown, and China furthers its operational reach, the PLA(N) will undoubtedly gain a mastery of the seas not previously known.

Overseas Basing

Secure ports, from which a nation’s navy can replenish, rest, and repair, were a core element of Mahan’s theory. Often referred to as positions, Mahan wrote, “If...we determine that our interest and dignity require that our rights should depend upon the will of no other state, but

upon our own power to enforce them, we must gird ourselves to admit that freedom of interoceanic transit depends upon predominance in a maritime region...Control of a maritime region is insured primarily by a navy; secondarily, by positions, suitably chosen and spaced one from the other, upon which as bases the navy rests, and from which it can exert its strength.”⁶⁹ During a policy speech in October 2013, while making his maiden Southeast Asian trip, President Xi announced Beijing’s 21st Century Maritime Silk Road initiative, which is part of a larger development strategy called One Belt, One Road.⁷⁰ The maritime component of the initiative seeks to link China with Southeast Asian countries, Africa, and Europe through sea routes. *Figure 4* is a graphical representation of the proposed Silk Road routes. Center for Naval Analyses researcher Morgan Clemens described the Maritime Silk Road routes as China’s most vital SLOCs and argued, “Chinese interest lies mainly in access to necessary military support facilities, rather than possessing outright such facilities themselves. Thus, we can expect any development of physical facilities along the Maritime Silk Road to be relatively limited in nature, but there almost certainly will be development of some kind.”⁷¹ Although not primarily focused on military basing alone, the Maritime Silk Road represents Beijing’s intentions on broadening its naval support infrastructure globally.

Coupled with the Maritime Silk Road initiative, China announced in November 2015 that it will construct a military base in Djibouti, Africa.⁷² Specifically not calling the construction in Djibouti a naval base, but rather a logistics support facility, a Chinese Defense Ministry spokesman stated, “The support facilities will mainly be used by the Chinese military for its officers and men, as well as ships, to recuperate and have replenishment during anti-pirate missions in the Gulf of Aden and Somali waters and during humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.”⁷³ Similarly, Daniel Kostecka, a senior analyst for the U.S. Navy, contended

that a supply network for Chinese maritime assets is indeed taking shape. He correlates the ports where Chinese naval combatants have pulled into as “an indicator of not only where the PLA(N) prefers to replenish its ships and rest its crews, but also of where it is likely to develop formal arrangements should it choose to do so.”⁷⁴ *Figure 5* is map showing the different ports Chinese warships have pulled into in the past. A study conducted by Dr. Yung, *et al.* theorized that a Chinese overseas logistical base would more likely be a dual-use military and civilian facility and suggested Pakistan as a likely location due to the close political alignment China has with the country.⁷⁵ Regardless of the ports’ ownership and usage, it is clear that China is expanding its access to foreign ports to logistically support its growing far-seas operations.

Future Implications

A Mahanian influenced China affords many opportunities for cooperation and engagement. As argued throughout, Beijing’s global presence is almost a certainty, given the country’s current intentions and capability and capacity to realize its goals. In the not so distant future, the PLA(N) could potentially have naval combatants routinely traversing the Indian Ocean and perhaps the Mediterranean, as well. An increased Chinese presence along the global maritime routes is beneficial for the global community because it brings to bear another set of resources to ensure the freedom of navigation for all. Additionally, China’s additional resources can assist and even improve or add to the capacities and capabilities of the international community in areas of mutual concern, such as anti-piracy, humanitarian assistance/disaster relief, and combatting terrorism. An increased Chinese presence also opens the door for greater engagement among the many navies of the world. China’s participation in the Rim of Pacific (RIMPAC), a multilateral naval exercise hosted by the United States, is just one example of the opportunities for engagement that a growing Chinese presence in the maritime domain can

create.⁷⁶ Counterpiracy exercises in the Gulf of Aden between coalition nations are another example of the kind of engagements in which Chinese naval ships could participate in. Military-to-military engagements can result in policy dialogues and senior leader engagements, similar to participant countries' endorsements of the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) that aimed at improving maritime communications in the Asia region. The endorsement by the United States occurred at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium held in Qingdao, China.⁷⁷ Lastly, relationships between nations can be enhanced through military exchanges. DoD highlighted recurring institutionalized events, such military exchanges, as the "backbone of U.S.-China defense policy discussions" because they are a mechanism that allows for continual dialogue between the two nations.⁷⁸

Conclusion

A thorough analysis of Beijing's strategic maritime policy, geopolitics, modernization program, and overseas basing intentions and actions supports the premise that Alfred Mahan's maritime theory provides the foundation for China's national strategic goal of becoming a global maritime power. In coupling its military strategy with the nation's strategic goal, China has embarked on an enterprising and, some would argue, a spectacular overhaul of the PLA(N). It has done so with much vigor and speed, dedicating all aspects of its national power to attainment, indicating Beijing's determination to realize what it deems as essential to the country's growth and development. The main impetus of equating maritime power with the "Chinese dream", and in turn the legitimacy of the regime, will continue to be the driving force of Chinese will-power to extend and expand in the maritime domain. By all accounts, China has realized what Mahan once asserted, "In this respect, the navy is essentially a light corps; it keeps open the communications between its own ports, it obstructs those of the enemy; but it sweeps

the sea for the service of the land, it controls the desert that man live and thrive on the habitable globe.”⁷⁹

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⁵ A. T. Mahan, *Retrospect & Prospect: Studies in International Relations, Naval and Political* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1902), Kindle edition, chap 5.

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²¹ *Ibid.*

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²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Developments in China’s Military Force Projection and Expeditionary Capabilities: Hearing Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, 114th Cong., 2 (January 21, 2016) (statement of Rear Admiral Michael A. McDevitt, USN (ret), Senior Fellow, Center for Naval Analyses), 150-152, http://origin.www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/transcripts/Hearing%20Transcript_01.21.16.pdf.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Mahan, *Naval Strategy Compared and Contrasted*, 21.

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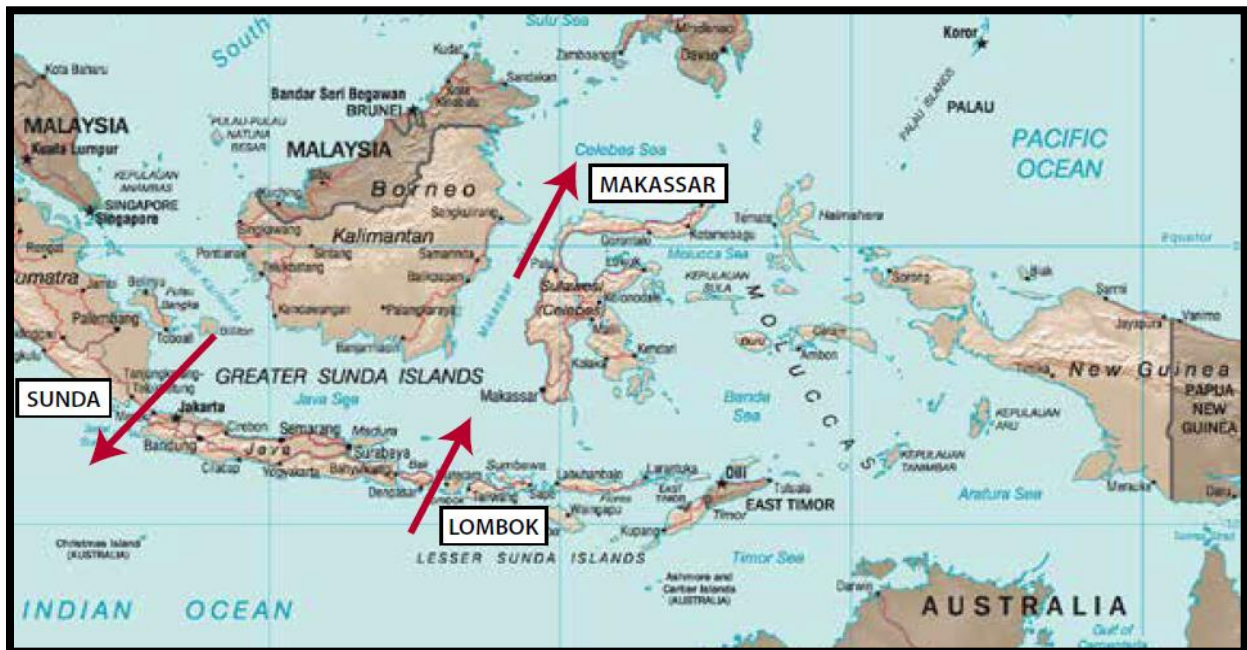
Illustrations

Figure 1: 2013-2014 PLA(N) Western Pacific Chokepoint Transits



Source: Christopher H. Sharman, “China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Towards a New Maritime Strategy,” *China Strategic Perspectives* 9 (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 29.

Figure 2: 2013-2014 PLA(N) Indian Ocean Chokepoint Transits



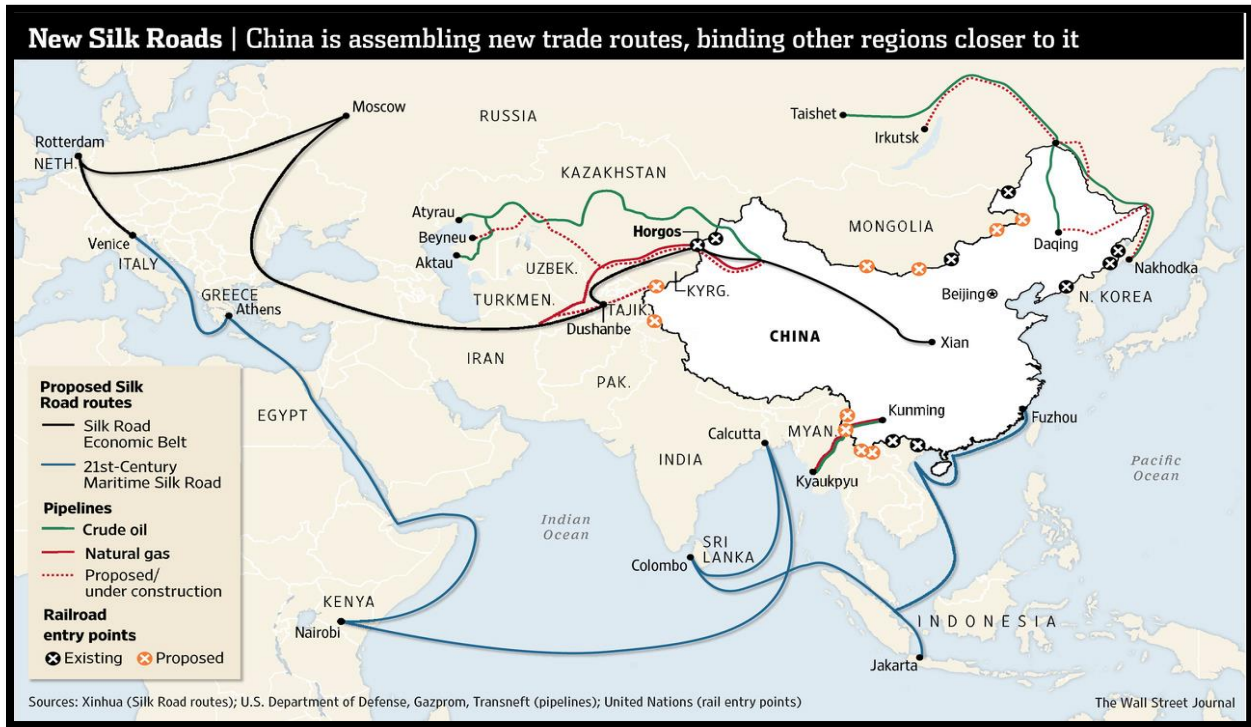
Source: Christopher H. Sharman, “China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Towards a New Maritime Strategy,” *China Strategic Perspectives* 9 (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 31.

Figure 3: North, South, and East Fleets Headquarters' Locations



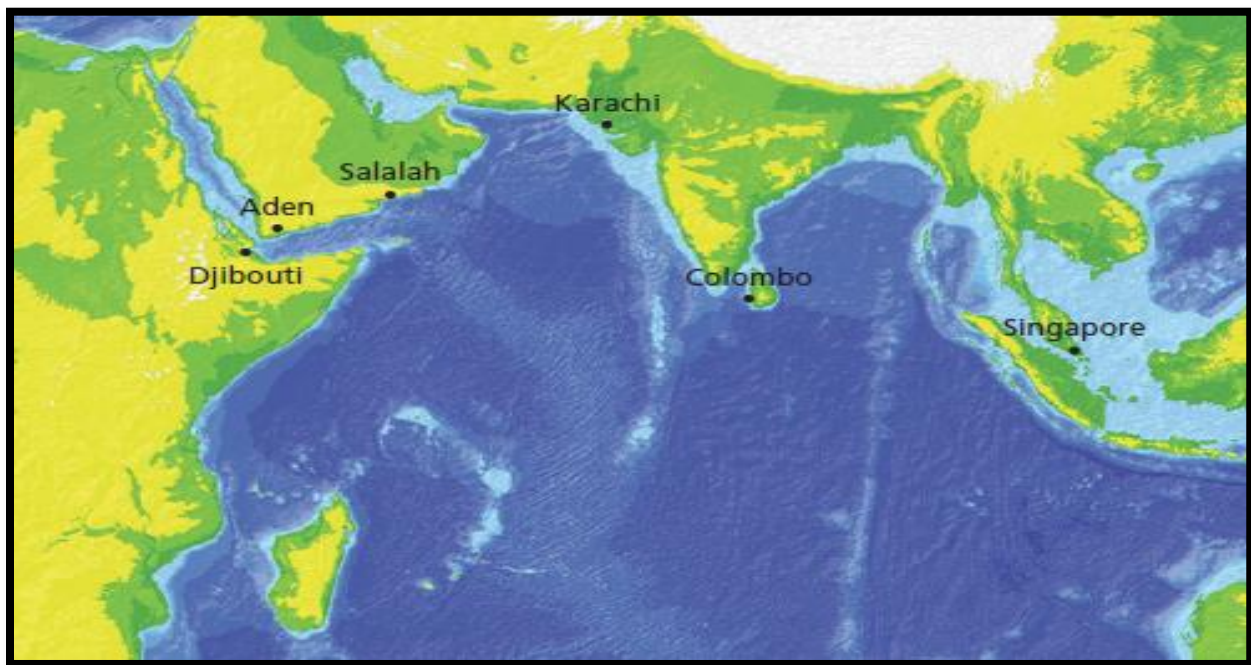
Source: US Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2016* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, April 26, 2016), 29.

Figure 4: China's Proposed Maritime Silk Road and Silk Road Economic Belt



Source: Morgan Clemens, *The Maritime Silk Road and the PLA* (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analyses, March 15, 2016), 2, https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/maritime-silk-road.pdf.

Figure 5: PLA(N) Ports of Call



Source: Daniel J. Kostecka, "The Chinese Navy's Emerging Support Network in the Indian Ocean," *Naval War College Review* 64, no.1 (Winter 2011): 65.

Tables

Table 1: PLA(N) Surface Orders-of-Battle 1990-2020^{ix}, Total Numbers							
Type	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Aircraft Carriers	0	0	0	0	0	1	1-2
Destroyers	19	18	21	21	25	28-32	30-34
Frigates	37	37	37	43	49	52-56	54-58
Corvettes	0	0	0	0	0	20-25	24-30
Amphibious Ships	58	50	60	43	55	53-55	50-55
Coastal Patrol (Missile)	215	217	100	51	85	85	85
Total	329	322	218	158	214	239-254	244-264

Source: Murray, Berglund, and Hsu, *USCC Staff Research Backgrounder: China's Naval Modernization and Implications for the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), 7.

Table 2: PLA(N) Submarine Orders-of-Battle 1990-2020, Total Numbers							
Type	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Diesel Attack	88	43	60	51	54	57-62	59-64
Nuclear Attack	4	5	5	6	6	6-8	6-9
Nuclear Ballistic	1	1	1	2	3	3-5	4-5
Total	93	49	66	59	63	66-75	69-78

Source: Murray, Berglund, and Hsu, *USCC Staff Research Backgrounder: China's Naval Modernization and Implications for the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), 6.

Table 3: PLA(N) Surface Orders-of-Battle 1990-2020, Approximate Percent Modern							
Type	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Destroyers	0%	5%	20%	40%	50%	70%	85%
Frigates	0%	8%	25%	35%	45%	70%	85%

Source: Murray, Berglund, and Hsu, *USCC Staff Research Backgrounder: China's Naval Modernization and Implications for the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), 7.

Table 4: PLA(N) Submarine Orders-of-Battle 1990-2020, Approximate Percent Modern							
Type	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Diesel Attack	0%	0%	7%	40%	50%	70%	75%
Nuclear Attack	0%	0%	0%	33%	33%	70%	100%

Source: Murray, Berglund, and Hsu, *USCC Staff Research Backgrounder: China's Naval Modernization and Implications for the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), 6.

^{ix} The numbers provided in *Tables 1-4* for 2015 and 2020 are projections provided to the authors of the *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Staff Research Backgrounder: China's Naval Modernization and Implications for the United States* by the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence. Murray, Berglund, and Hsu, *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review*, 6-7.

Table 5: 2013-2014 PLA(N) Operations in the Western Pacific			
Approximate Date	Fleet	Surface Ships	Strait/Channel
January–February 2013	North Sea Fleet	Luhu DD-113 Jiangkai II FF-538 Jiangkai II FF-546	East: Miyako West: Bashi
March-April 2013	South Sea Fleet	Yuzhao LPD-999 Luyang II DDG-170 Jiangkai II FF-569 Jiangkai II FF-572	East: Bashi West: Bashi
April 2013	South Sea Fleet	Luyang II DDG-170 Jiangkai II FF-572	East: Bashi West: Miyako
May 2013	East Sea Fleet	Jiangwei II FF-566 Jianghu I FF-559 Fuchi AOR-886	East: Miyako West: Bashi
May–June 2013	North Sea Fleet	Luhu DD-113 Jiangkai II FF-547 Fuqing AOR-881	East: Miyako West: Osumi
July 2013	North Sea Fleet	Luzhou DDG-115 Luzhou DDG-116 Jiangkai II FF-546 Jiangkai II FF-538 Fuqing AOR-881	East: La Perouse West: Miyako
27 August–10 September 2013	East Sea Fleet	Jiangkai II FF-548 Jiangkai II FF-549	East: Miyako North: Yonaguni
October 2013 Exercise Mobility-5	North Sea Fleet	Luzhou DDG-116 Luzhou DDG-115 Luhu DD-113 Jiangkai II FF-547 Jiangkai II FF-538	East: Miyako West: Miyako
October 2013 Exercise Mobility-5	East Sea Fleet	Jiangkai II FF-529 Jiangkai II FF-530	East: Miyako North: Yonaguni
October 2013 Exercise Mobility-5	South Sea Fleet	Luyang I DDG-168 Jiangkai II FF-570 Fuchi AOR-887	East: Bashi West: Bashi
December 2013	South Sea Fleet	Jiangkai II FF-570 Jiangkai II FF-571 Fuchi AOR-887	East: Bashi West: Bashi

Table 5: 2013-2014 PLA(N) Operations in the Western Pacific, cont.			
Approximate Date	Fleet	Surface Ships	Strait/Channel
January–February 2014	South Sea Fleet	Yuzhao LPD-989 Luyang II DDG-171 Luyang I DDG-169	South: Sunda North: Lombok East: Bashi West: Miyako
February–March 2014	East Sea Fleet	Luyang II DDG-150 Jiangkai II FF-548 Jiangkai II FF-549 Fuchi AOR-890	East: Miyako North: Yonaguni
May–June 2014 Training Cruise	North Sea Fleet	Jiangkai II FF-550 Daxin AXT-81	East: Miyako North: Indonesian Straits
June 2014	East Sea Fleet	Jiangwei II FF-528 Jiangwei II FF-565 Fuqing AOR-881	East: Miyako West: Osumi
July 2014	North Sea Fleet	Jiangkai II FF-546 Jiangwei II FF-527 Fuchi AOR-889	East: Not reported West: Miyako
December 2014 Ocean Going Exercise	North Sea Fleet	Luzhou DDG-116 Luhu DD-112 Jiangkai II FF-538 Jiangkai II FF-546 Fuchi AOR-889	East: Osumi West: La Perouse
December 2014 Ocean Going Exercise	East Sea Fleet	Luyang II DDG-151 Sovremenny DDG-138 Jiangwei II FF-521 Jiangkai II FF-548 Fuchi AOR-886 Dongdiao AGI-851	East: Miyako West: Miyako
December 2014 Ocean Going Exercise	South Sea Fleet	Not reported	East: Bashi West: Bashi
Source: Christopher H. Sharman “China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Towards a New Maritime Strategy.” <i>China Strategic Perspectives</i> 9 (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 26-27.			

Table 6: Evolution of PLA(N) Western Pacific Deployments				
	2004-2006	2007-2009	2010-2012	2013-2014
Western Pacific Deployments	None	Single fleet (2-12 ships, submarines)	Single fleet (2-12 ships, submarines)	Multifleet (2-10+ ships)
SLOC/Strait Chokepoints	Taiwan	Tsugaru Miyako Bashi Taiwan	Osumi Miyako Yonaguni Taiwan Bashi	Yonaguni La Perouse Osumi Miyako Gashi Taiwan Indonesian Straits
Discipline	Logistics, Naval fleet tactics, techniques, and procedures	One dimensional (surface) (scripted)	Multidimensional (surface, submarine, air) (scripted)	Multidimensional (surface, submarine, air) (back to back)
Location	Near Seas	Western Pacific	Western Pacific	Western Pacific Indian Ocean
Air Integration	Air Defense	Air Defense	Unmanned aerial vehicle/helicopter	Fixed wing
Source: Christopher H. Sharman, "China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Towards a New Maritime Strategy," <i>China Strategic Perspectives</i> 9 (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 35.				

Acronyms and Abbreviations

A2/AD	Anti-access/Area Denial
ASCM	Anti-ship Cruise Missile
ASUW	Anti-Surface Warfare
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
C4ISR	Command, Control, Computers, Communication, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance
CMC	Central Military Commission
CPC	Communist Party of China
GPS	Global Positioning System
NEO	Non-combat Evacuation Operation
NM	Nautical Miles
ONI	Office of Naval Intelligence
PNT	Position, Navigation, and Timing
PRC	People's Republic of China
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLA(N)	People's Liberation Army Navy
RIMPAC	Rim of Pacific Naval Exercise
SLOC	Sea Lines of Communication
USCC	U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission

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