

**“Laying a Foundation for Ambition at Sea:
The Role of the PLA (N) in China’s Goal of Becoming a Maritime Power”**

A paper for China as a “Maritime Power” Conference

July 28-29, 2015

CNA Conference Facility

Arlington, Virginia

by

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Introduction

At the 18th Communist Party Congress in November 2012, China’s leadership called for China to become a maritime power. This naturally raised the question of what that decree would mean for the PLA(N). As is typical with documents issued by China’s top leadership, the Party Congress report did not offer specific guidance on what exactly constitutes a “maritime power” or what role various maritime-related organizations in China should play in the process of becoming one. The latest PRC defense white paper, released in May 2015, defined the PLA(N)’s role in clear but broad terms. It described that role as providing “strategic support” for China to become a maritime power.² It listed several key tasks in this role: developing a modern maritime military force structure, safeguarding sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protecting the security of

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² “China’s Military Strategy,” The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, May 2015, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/defensenews/2015-05/26/content_4586748.htm.

strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and participating in international maritime cooperation.

This paper analyzes open source discussion in China of the role that the PLA(N) will play in building China into maritime power. The research focuses on the period between the release of the Party Congress report and the 2015 defense white paper. It is intended to clarify the goals outlined in these government documents and provide insights into how the public discussion may have contributed to the language of the defense white paper.

The public discussion reviewed in this paper includes a number of authoritative Chinese media reports and journal articles, written by Chinese scholars from November 2012 to May 2015, that examine the PLA(N)'s role in building a maritime power and its relationship with other Chinese maritime actors.³ Individuals in China who have commented on the issue include both active and retired PLA and PLA(N) officers, as well as other subject matter experts (SMEs) who are frequently cited by state-run media. A handful of the sources, such as an essay by a deputy commander of the PLA(N), VADM Tian Zhong, are systematic in outlining necessary tasks for the PLA(N) and offer a way to categorize other public discussion in China. The gradual development of this public discussion in the period since the 18th Party Congress suggests that China's goal of becoming a maritime power may have been open to some degree of public debate among Chinese officials and military officers. This debate may have influenced the writing of the 2015 defense white paper, and, at the very least, it demonstrates an effort to educate

³ Of note, this paper does not examine the *Science of Military Strategy*, a broadly theoretical and doctrinal work produced by the PLA Academy of Military Science. While it has some implications for the PLA(N)'s role in building a maritime power, it is discussed more thoroughly in another paper written for the same conference by the author's colleague at CNA, Tom Bickford.

the Chinese public, military, and officials about what China's maritime power goal would entail and what might be expected of each actor involved.

In discussing the navy's role in China's maritime power ambitions, many Chinese observers seem to use it as a catch-all slogan to describe needed reforms, or as a means to justify enhancements to PLA(N) capabilities. However, China's maritime power goal likely has wider implications than this, as it may also represent a way for the PRC to coordinate bureaucratic relationships among various state actors that are active in the maritime domain. While establishing a strong navy is frequently described as fundamental to becoming a maritime power, there has been more public discussion about the roles of China's coast guard, its shipbuilding industry, and its efforts to exploit undersea resources, and even about the education and public consciousness of the Chinese people in regard to maritime issues in China. In short, the goal of becoming a maritime power places PLA(N) reforms in the context of a new whole-of-government approach to maritime issues.

This paper will first address definitions of maritime power in a Chinese context. Then, it will examine the role of the PLA(N) compared with the roles of other Chinese public and private organizations in achieving this goal. It will also look at some specific tasks that the PLA(N) must accomplish in pursuit of this goal, and some shortcomings that Chinese observers think it should rectify. This will be followed by a discussion of some implications for growth of PLA(N) capabilities in "far seas," or blue water, areas. The paper will end by assessing the implications of these findings for the United States and its allies in the region.

Defining Maritime Power in a Chinese Context

While the 18th Party Congress work report did not include an official definition of what it means to become a maritime power, some authoritative Chinese sources offer clues as to what this concept entails, with particular insight on the role of the PLA(N). For example, an article in *Seeking Truth*—the official journal of the Chinese Communist Party and perhaps the most authoritative source of CCP views outside of official government documents—offered a general definition of the concept.⁴

The article characterized China as a “maritime country” that has extensive maritime interests but is not yet a maritime power. The article stated that “maritime power” denotes “a country that can exert its great comprehensive strength to develop, utilize, protect, manage, and control oceans,” likely referring to a wide range of tasks including (but not limited to) protecting SLOCs, exploiting offshore natural resources such as undersea oil and gas deposits, and promoting the Chinese fishing industry. The article further stated that “China has yet to improve its ability to develop and utilize oceans, and it faces numerous threats and challenges to its maritime sovereignty, rights, and interests,” pointing to disputes in the East and South China Seas and what it called the “plundering” of China’s resources in these waters; here, the article refers to the exploitation of natural resources in disputed waters by the Philippines and Vietnam, among others. The article asserted that China will be able to safeguard its rights only when it has achieved the goal of becoming a maritime power.

Most other sources simply describe what China must do in order to become a maritime power. For example, PRC Ministry of National Defense spokesman Geng

⁴ Xu Sheng, “Follow the Path of Maritime Power with Chinese Characteristics,” *Seeking Truth (qiushi)*, 1 November 2013.

Yansheng, commenting on the 18th Party Congress work report, stated that in order to become a maritime power, China must “enhance [its] capacity for exploiting maritime resources, develop its maritime economy, safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests, and ensure sustainable economic and social development.”⁵ Overall, these four categories provide a rough summary of what Chinese open source materials describe as necessary for China to accomplish as it seeks to become a maritime power.

Notably, Chinese sources are generally very unclear on any possible timeframes in which China hopes to become a maritime power. Some sources offer the mid-21st century as a far-flung deadline for this goal.⁶ Chinese leaders also cite this as an estimate of when China will achieve “middle class society.” Some sources offer the year 2049, which corresponds to the 100th anniversary of the founding of the “new China” by the Communist Party. This vague date can likely be dismissed as uncontroversial boilerplate language that is not a result of rigorous analysis of the future of China’s navy or other Chinese maritime actors.

Role of the PLA(N) Among Various Aspects of Maritime Power

Some Chinese observers logically contend that the PLA(N) is essential or fundamental to becoming a maritime power. For example, PLA(N) Commander ADM Wu Shengli stated at the Western Pacific Naval Symposium that a navy is the “mainstay”

⁵ “MND: China Has No Intention to Pursue Maritime Supremacy,” *PLA Daily (jiefangjun bao)*, 30 November 2012.

⁶ For one example, see p. 17 in Nie Yongyou, “Analysis of Current Maritime Disputes and Suggested Strategies,” *Journal of Shanghai University Social Sciences Edition (shanghai daxue xuebao shehui kexue ban)* 30, no. 6 (2013).

of maritime power.⁷ Similarly, a *PLA Daily* reporter who had interviewed several representatives from the PLA(N) to the PRC National People's Congress, stated that he heard from many of them that the support of a powerful navy is a requirement for building China into a maritime power.⁸

According to many Chinese observers, the most obvious role for the PLA(N) is to safeguard China's maritime rights and interests, a concept which generally includes but is not limited to defending China's sovereign rights in its territorial waters and exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and ensuring freedom of navigation for Chinese vessels on the high seas.⁹ Indeed, this is one of the tasks for the PLA(N) outlined in the 2015 defense white paper.¹⁰ However, many Chinese observers also argue that a strong navy is the foundation for maritime power because it is necessary in order to provide security guarantees for other maritime activities as well. They point out that these activities require a fundamental level of security in order to reach their full potential, and that security must inevitably be provided by the PLA(N). The overall impression from Chinese public discussion is that the Chinese navy must prepare to respond to both traditional and non-traditional security threats. The former represents threats to China's security and sovereign rights, while the latter also threatens the stability and safety of

⁷ Fan Jianghuai, Liu Gang, "PLA Navy Commander Wu Shengli Delivers a Keynote Speech at the Annual Meeting of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium," *PLA Daily (jiefangjun bao)*, 23 April 2014.

⁸ Luo Jing, "Maritime Power, an Inevitable Choice in Implementing the Chinese Dream," *PLA Daily (jiefangjun bao)*, 9 March 2013, http://www.chinamil.com.cn/jfjbmap/content/2013-03/09/content_29680.htm.

⁹ For a lengthier and more systematic discussion of exactly what the Chinese concept of "maritime rights and interests" entails, see: Thomas J. Bickford, Frederic Vellucci, Jr., and Heidi A. Holz, "China as a Maritime Challenge: The Strategic Dimension," CNA Research Memorandum D0023549.A1, September 2010.

¹⁰ "China's Military Strategy," The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, May 2015, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/defensenews/2015-05/26/content_4586748.htm.

China's maritime economy, seaborne trade, and overseas investments, and the growing numbers of Chinese citizens residing abroad.

For example, Senior Captain Wang Xiaoxuan of the PLA(N) Naval Research Institute (NRI) offered a more detailed explanation than his colleagues in the Chinese navy who are cited above.¹¹ He described building a maritime power as a “comprehensive concept” that is also a considerable strategic issue. He stated that the ability to guarantee maritime security is itself an important component of maritime power but, at the same time, is also a method of supporting other components of maritime power. He stated that the concept of maritime power includes two basic issues: development first, and security second. He described development as “fundamental,” and the most essential principle behind maritime power. He asserted that both traditional security threats such as maritime conflict or war, and nontraditional security threats such as natural disasters, could derail the process of building China into a maritime power. He outlined several aspects of maritime security that China must monitor to prevent this: security of sovereign rights over islands, reefs, and territorial waters; security of the sea lanes; security of efforts to develop maritime resources; and security of overseas Chinese and their investments. Though he did not state this explicitly, these efforts to ensure the smooth transition to a maritime power clearly afford an important role to China's navy.

While it may seem obvious that PLA(N) officers would assert that a strong navy is an essential requirement for ensuring the success of building China into a maritime power, other voices in China's government have made similar remarks. The usual explanation for why the PLA(N) is essential is similar to those presented above: a

¹¹ “More than 30 Experts and Academics Enthusiastically Discuss ‘Maritime Views and Building a Maritime Power,’” *China Ocean Report (zhongguo haiyang bao)*, 3 September 2014, <http://fujian.people.com.cn/ocean/n/2014/0903/c354245-22197895.html>.

maritime power must be able to defend its maritime rights and interests. For example, in January 2014, Chen Mingyi, a member of the State Oceanic Administration's (SOA's) Senior Advisory Committee on National Maritime Program Development, stated in the official SOA newspaper that building China into a maritime power "requires having [a] powerful [and] modernized" navy.¹² Chen then expanded on three tasks that a "powerful" navy must be able to accomplish: protecting China's rights in the waters under its jurisdiction; guaranteeing the freedom of navigation of all types of Chinese merchant vessels in international waters; and protecting China's expanding overseas interests, including citizens residing abroad and overseas investments.

Some Chinese statements also assert that the PLA(N) can and should directly coordinate with other state organizations and private entities to ensure their security at sea. For example, the PRC State Council Information Office held a press conference concerning the 2012 PRC defense white paper—released in April 2013—and clarified its call for China to become a maritime power. The office's spokesman, Wu Xihua, stated that China's armed forces have "maintained close coordination and cooperation with China's maritime law enforcement departments" and are prepared to offer security support for "maritime law enforcement, fisheries, and oil and gas exploitation."¹³

Despite the emphasis on the PLA(N) mission to defend China's maritime rights and interests, Chinese observers are also careful to note that China does not intend to become a "maritime hegemon" and that its goal of becoming a maritime power remains peaceful. This line of reasoning reinforces the all-encompassing nature of how China

¹² Chen Mingyi, "China Must Be Built Into a Maritime Power by 2050," *China Ocean Report (zhongguo haiyang bao)*, 13 January 2014.

¹³ "Press Conference on PRC Defense White Paper," PRC State Council Information Office, 16 April 2013.

defines maritime power. For China, it is a broad concept, and not simply another way to characterize navy building. For example, Jin Yongming, director of the Center for Chinese Maritime Strategy Studies of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, wrote in China's official English newspaper, *China Daily*, that China's leadership wishes to distinguish it from "traditional maritime powers."¹⁴ He asserted that China will use "all its strength," including political, economic, legal, cultural, and military measures to defend its maritime rights and interests. He added that China would develop its navy "in proportion to its overall strength." This echoes the 18th Party Congress work report and 2012 defense white paper, both of which stated that China's goal is to build a military that is "commensurate" with China's international standing.¹⁵ The 2015 defense white paper similarly added that China must develop a "modern maritime military force structure" commensurate with its maritime rights and interests.¹⁶

Chinese observers also emphasize that the PLA(N) can play a variety of peacetime roles in China's maritime power strategy in addition to its more obvious wartime roles. For example, two scholars from Beijing's Renmin University argued that the PLA(N) should undertake activities such as military exercises and naval diplomacy in order to demonstrate China's "strategic intentions and resolve" and apply pressure to

¹⁴ Jin Yongming, "Maritime State to Maritime Power," *China Daily*, 5 August 2014.

¹⁵ "Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 18th Party Congress," Xinhua, 17 November 2012, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpcnc/2012-11/17/c_131981259.htm; "Full Text: The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces," Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 16 April 2013, available from Xinhua: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-04/16/c_132312681.htm.

¹⁶ "China's Military Strategy," The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, May 2015, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/defensenews/2015-05/26/content_4586748.htm.

other nations, with the goals of resolving crises and avoiding war.¹⁷ The scholars stated that, given a choice, this was definitely preferable to warfare as a policy method.

Tasks for the PLA(N) in Support of China as Maritime Power

Much public discussion of the PLA(N)'s role simply asserts that China needs a "strong" navy to become a maritime power. Some sources, however, offer much more detail on what "strong" might mean. One of the most important of these to be published during the past two years is an essay from VADM Tian Zhong, a deputy commander of the PLA(N). On 2 April 2014, *PLA Daily* published 18 articles from various high-ranking PLA commanders, including VADM Tian, which focused on the study and implementation of President Xi Jinping's statements on national defense and army building. Essentially, these articles described how various PLA services and military regions would support Xi's goals for the development of the Chinese military.

VADM Tian's essay, "Providing Strategic Support for the Building of a Maritime Power," directly addresses the topic of this paper, and provides a useful means of categorizing public discussion of PLA(N) requirements to support China's maritime power goal.¹⁸ It is arguably one of the most pertinent and authoritative documents issued on the PLA(N)'s role in reaching China's goal of becoming a maritime power, after the 18th Party Congress report and the 2015 defense white paper. Of note, the defense white paper—released over a year after VADM Tian's article appeared—copied his language

¹⁷ Guo Lulu, Zhu Xiaosheng, "On Modern China's Maritime Power Strategy" (*dangyi dangdai zhongguo haiyang qiangguo zhanlue*, *Theoretical Boundary (lilun jie)*, no. 2 (2013).

¹⁸ Deputy PLA(N) Commander ADM Tian Zhong, "Providing Strategic Support for the Building of a Maritime Power," *PLA Daily (jiefangjun bao)*, 2 April 2014.

describing the PLA(N)'s role as “providing strategic support for building [China] into a maritime power” nearly word for word.¹⁹

VADM Tian's recommendations for the PLA(N), as outlined in his essay, fell into roughly five categories: improving the PLA(N)'s ability to protect China's maritime rights and interests; improving readiness; promoting the transformation of army building; raising the level of realism in training; and innovating the use of the PLA(N) in “far seas” or blue water missions.

Below is a closer look at VADM Tian's statements on each of these tasks and other sources of public discussion in China that expand on them. As shown below, VADM Tian's recommendations in his essay reflect other discussions of this topic in China, and probably represent a measure of consensus within the navy on the role of the PLA(N) in building China into a maritime power.

Protecting Maritime Rights and Interests

As described by Chinese observers, a strong navy is identified as fundamental to maritime power because it is necessary for protecting a nation's maritime rights and interests. Appropriately, VADM Tian identified this as the first lesson to be learned from President Xi's statements on maritime power since the 18th Party Congress. He argued in his essay that the PLA(N) must strengthen preparation for maritime combat and focus on “being able to fight and win wars,” specifically “maritime local wars under informatized conditions.” He asserted that maritime rights “do not only reflect comprehensive national power,” but also are the “foundation” of strategic support for it and the “basis for its

¹⁹ “China's Military Strategy,” The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, May 2015, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/defensenews/2015-05/26/content_4586748.htm.

future potential.” In saying “comprehensive national power,” VADM Tian was referring to a Chinese concept which measures a nation’s power and influence by combining military strength with economic and cultural factors.

Other observers have made similar observations. For example, Senior Captain Zhang Junshe of the PLA(N) NRI asserted that China must build a strong navy, not only to contain wars and win wars, but also to effectively protect national development interests and maritime rights and interests, including the security of its maritime economy.²⁰

Readiness

VADM Tian also identified improving readiness as a key goal for the PLA(N). He stated that the PLA(N) must strengthen “daily combat readiness work” and always maintain a “high degree of readiness.” The idea of readiness more generally, or at least the ability of the PLA(N) to take rapid action to defend China’s maritime rights and interests, is also discussed in other sources. For example, the PRC State Council Information Office spokesman identified the establishment of a combat patrol system in “relevant sea areas of responsibility,” thereby improving readiness to provide security support for other maritime activities, as one step that had already been taken towards building China into a maritime power.²¹ Senior Captain Zhang stated that strong naval forces, providing support for building China into a maritime power, should be prepared to

²⁰ Zhang Junshe, “Economic Maritime Strategy Calls Out for a Strong Navy,” *PLA Daily (jiefangjun bao)*, 14 August 2013, http://chn.chinamil.com.cn/gd/2013-08/14/content_4550092.htm.

²¹ “Press Conference on PRC Defense White Paper,” PRC State Council Information Office, 16 April 2013.

respond to all kinds of possible situations.²² He continued that the PLA(N) should “closely observe, actively be on guard, and prepare at any time to respond to military conflict.”

Army Building

VADM Tian also stressed the importance of army building, under which he listed such goals as optimizing maritime combat systems, developing new combat platforms and precision strike weapons, and improving information systems for maritime combat.

Unfortunately, relatively few Chinese observers have made any remarks about the details of the required weapon systems or given any figures on the number of combat platforms that China should build. Some sources, however, similarly emphasize the importance of information technology and information warfare for the future of the PLA(N). Two scholars from Beijing’s Renmin University, for example, argued that the Chinese navy must be able to accomplish diverse military tasks, with the goal of winning local “informatized” war as a “core” capability.²³ With a call for the PLA(N) to prepare for maritime conflict based on “high technology” capabilities, their main recommendation was to invest further in naval technology, especially in regard to capabilities necessary for combat under “informatized” conditions.

Some Chinese voices argue that investment in PLA(N) capabilities remains far too low. Retired RADM Yin Zhuo, for example, argued that the Chinese navy’s share of defense spending is lagging, and that the speed of its development has been easily

²² Zhang Junshe, “Economic Maritime Strategy Calls Out for a Strong Navy,” *PLA Daily (jiefangjun bao)*, 14 August 2013, http://chn.chinamil.com.cn/gd/2013-08/14/content_4550092.htm.

²³ Guo Lulu, Zhu Xiaosheng, “On Modern China’s Maritime Power Strategy,” (*dangyi dangdai zhongguo haiyang qianguo zhanlue*), *Theoretical Boundary (lilun jie)*, no. 2 (2013).

outpaced by the expansion of China's overseas interests.²⁴ He justified his argument for greater spending on the navy by explaining that, as China's maritime interests continually expand and China still does not possess overseas bases, the navy is the most appropriate military service for protecting these expanding interests. Though RADM Yin did not elaborate further, it seems likely that he referred to the PLA(N)'s demonstrated capability to travel halfway around the world and remain on station without any permanent base structure for support. Six years of anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden provide ample proof of its ability to protect overseas interests.

Training

VADM Tian also emphasized that PLA(N) training must be as close to “actual combat standards” as possible—that is, as realistic as possible. He identified realistic training scenarios and training under “informatized conditions” as key elements of this process.

In February 2014, not long before the publication of VADM Tian's essay, *PLA Daily* carried a readout of PLA(N) training goals for 2014, as discussed during a plenary meeting of the PLA(N) Communist Party Committee.²⁵ *PLA Daily* portrayed these training goals as supporting China's goal of becoming a maritime power, and described the committee members as concerned with the task of supporting the PLA(N)'s “serious mission” of protecting China's maritime rights and interests. The committee identified

²⁴ “Yin Zhuo: China Will Not Fire the First Shot; But Will Definitely Fire the Second Shot,” China National Radio, 3 March 2014, http://news.cnr.cn/native/gd/201403/t20140303_514973037_1.shtml.

²⁵ Wu Chao, Cao Jinping, Qian Xiaohu, “Naval Units Explore Using Combat Power as the Standard in Improving Real War Capabilities,” *PLA Daily (jiefangjun bao)*, 18 February 2014.

improving the level of realism in training as an important objective for the PLA(N), and outlined several training measures for 2014 in pursuit of this goal. These included:

- deepening training of the command structure;
- deepening tactical innovation;
- stepping up training in the use of weapons in complex electromagnetic environments;
- stepping up training conducted in far seas;
- building realistic environments for training under informatized conditions; and
- solving problems in unit training standards.

Indeed, in an analysis of actual PLA(N) training missions during 2013-2014, U.S. Navy Commander Christopher Sharman analyzed PLA(N) training and found that the PLA(N) increased both the “frequency and complexity” of its deployments in the Western Pacific.²⁶ According to Sharman, this included the integration of fixed-wing aircraft into exercises in the Philippine Sea, the first Western Pacific exercises that involved all three PLA(N) fleets, and its first surface ship deployment to the Indian Ocean that was not a part of China’s Gulf of Aden deployments.

Far Seas Missions

Finally, VADM Tian argued that China should continually expand the scope of areas in which the PLA(N) could be used and take advantage of the navy’s value as an “international” military service. He added that the PLA(N) must deepen its “far seas training” and escort missions in distant oceans, and “normalize” the use of its assets—in

²⁶ Christopher H. Sharman, “China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Toward a New Maritime Strategy,” *China Strategic Perspectives*, no. 9, National Defense University.

other words, make them more regular and routine—in “far seas” regions, which are generally characterized as equivalent to blue water missions in Chinese sources.

The *Seeking Truth* article cited earlier in this paper, describing maritime power with Chinese characteristics as peaceful, similarly emphasized the value of international cooperation for the PLA(N), identifying potential missions such as counter-piracy, counter-smuggling, and counter-terrorism at sea.²⁷

A *PLA Daily* article focusing on the role of the PLA(N) in the process of becoming a maritime power listed several accomplishments of the Chinese navy in expanding its far seas presence in recent years.²⁸ The article stated that in 2012 the PLA(N) carried out several training exercises in the West Pacific (meaning beyond the “first island chain”); in 2013, the three fleets of the PLA(N) carried out “far seas confrontation exercises” in the West Pacific; and in 2014, the South Sea Fleet for the first time sailed to both the Indian Ocean and West Pacific to carry out training.

An essay by two authors from the CCP Central Party School outlined similar accomplishments by the PLA(N) that have helped strengthen its capabilities in the process of building China into a maritime power.²⁹ The essay listed China’s Gulf of Aden deployments, a non-combatant evacuation operation to aid Chinese citizens in Libya, training exercises outside the first island chain, and participation in international disaster relief operations as examples of operations that have helped strengthen the capabilities of

²⁷ Xu Sheng, “Follow the Path of Maritime Power with Chinese Characteristics,” *Seeking Truth (qiushi)*, 1 November 2013.

²⁸ “Navy Representatives Enthusiastically Discuss: Maritime Power Requires a Strong Navy,” *PLA Daily (jiefangjun bao)*, 8 March 2013, http://mil.cnr.cn/ztl/2014lh/lhgz/201403/t20140308_515022304.html.

²⁹ Zhang Mingming, Liu Yunzhong, “Some Reflections on China Building a Maritime Power,” *Contemporary World (dangdai shijie)*, 20 February 2014, available on the website of *People’s Daily*, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2014/0220/c187656-24420057.html>.

the PLA(N) and protect China's maritime interests. The authors added that China should undertake more "historic missions" such as these in the future, in order to promote PLA(N) modernization.

The Relationship Between "Near Seas" and "Far Seas" Naval Strategies

As touched on in the previous section of this paper, the future direction of the PLA(N), as it supports China's effort to become a maritime power, will be influenced to a large extent by the distinction between "near seas" strategy and "far seas" strategy. In Chinese military terminology, "near seas" (*jinhai*), sometimes translated as "offshore," typically describes operations within the first island chain—a line off the Chinese coast that extends roughly from Japan to Okinawa, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Malaysia. (However, the first island chain is not necessarily a hard-and-fast boundary between the near and far seas. The distinction as used is relatively flexible, and appears to evolve as the navy's capabilities improve. For example, "near seas" is sometimes expanded to include waters east of the first island chain and the strategic chokepoints leading into it.)

"Far seas" (*yuanhai*) describes operations well outside this area, and includes the Philippine Sea and Central Pacific. The concepts of "near seas" and "far seas" may point to a distinction between protecting China and its claimed territories from attack, and defending Chinese interests and sea lanes abroad. According to the 2015 defense white paper that focuses on China's military strategy, the notion of "near seas defense" is to be gradually combined with "far seas protection" as China's capabilities grow over time.³⁰

³⁰ "China's Military Strategy," The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, May 2015, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/defensenews/2015-05/26/content_4586748.htm.

Chinese writings on maritime power frequently argue that China must achieve naval superiority in near-seas regions while increasingly improving its navy's capabilities to carry out a wider variety of missions in far seas regions. Indeed, comprehensive far seas capabilities are often described as an important indicator that a country has achieved maritime power status. For example, in a journal article discussing China's maritime power goal, two scholars from the International Studies Institute of Beijing's Renmin University made a useful distinction between achieving "absolute" security in near seas and establishing "effective deterrence" in far seas.³¹ According to them, full control of the waters of near seas regions is necessary in order to achieve defense in-depth, protect sovereign rights, and maintain the unity of the nation. However, they emphasized that, because of the expansion of China's maritime interests, this is not enough. China should also develop a far seas navy that can serve not only as a "shield" in near seas but also as a "sword" in far seas. They argued that as China's maritime interests and security needs continuously expand, the range of the Chinese navy's defensive capabilities should also expand. In short, these authors were describing the difference between a regional navy and a global navy. Their view aligns with many Chinese sources which describe China's defensive strategy in near seas and in far seas with slightly different terminology. The term "near seas defense," or *jinhai fangyu*, refers to defense in a fairly typical sense, while "far seas defense," or *yuanhai fangwei*, connotes a more passive activity such as "safeguarding" or "protecting."³² Notably, the 2015 defense white paper replaced *fangwei*

³¹ Guo Lulu, Zhu Xiaosheng, "On Modern China's Maritime Power Strategy," *Theoretical Boundary (lilun jie)*, no. 2 (2013).

³² The author has also touched on this difference in terminology in discussion with analysts in China, who are also unsure how to translate *fangyu* and *fangwei* into English but seem content with the distinction made above.

with *huwei*, which is even more clearly translated as “protection” or “safeguarding” and not “defense.”³³

At a 2013 roundtable event at Shanghai University on China’s maritime power, Major General Ji Mingkui, a PLA National Defense University scholar, similarly pointed out that near seas defense and far seas defense are both important aspects of protecting China’s maritime rights and interests.³⁴ He argued that, while China has accomplished much in improving its near seas defense, it still lags behind international standards. He identified some shortcomings of China’s near seas capabilities, including “various kinds” of difficulties in the “organic integration” of the forces of each service, as well as integrating air and space forces, early warning aircraft, air defense units, surface ships, and coastal radar systems. In regard to far seas capabilities, he added that China must learn to use the various capabilities of aircraft carriers, including their peacetime and wartime uses, but that it should not build “too many” more of them, in order to avoid an arms race.

Other sources describe far seas capabilities, or at least a change in focus from near seas to far seas capabilities, as an important move to support China’s transformation into a maritime power. A scholar from the Dalian Maritime University, for example, argued that China’s heavy reliance on seaborne trade for its economic growth and its energy needs requires that the Chinese navy possess a “far seas combat capability” to support China’s future status as a maritime power.³⁵ Another scholar, from the Nanjing Political

³³ “China’s Military Strategy,” The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, May 2015, http://eng.mod.gov.cn/defensenews/2015-05/26/content_4586748.htm.

³⁴ Nie Yongyou, “Analysis of Current Maritime Disputes and Suggested Strategies,” *Journal of Shanghai University Social Sciences Edition (shanghai daxue xuebao shehui kexue ban)* 30, no. 6 (2013).

³⁵ Zhao Zhao, “Thoughts on Building a Maritime Great Power,” *Theory Boundary (lilun jie)* no. 8 (2013).

Academy, asserted that Chinese naval strategy should shift from near seas to far seas defense to meet the needs of China's process of building up its maritime capabilities.³⁶ These Chinese observers, however, do not address an important distinction between SLOC protection in peacetime and that in wartime. China has already demonstrated the capability to carry out the former—for example, in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden—but wartime SLOC protection may remain an aspirational capability for the PLA(N) for the foreseeable future. However, the recent deployment of both conventional and nuclear-powered submarines to the Indian Ocean does indicate that the PLA(N) recognizes the value of submarines in defending key sea lanes from wartime interdiction.

Implications for the United States and U.S. Allies

Chinese public discussion reveals two major implications for the United States, on both the policy and the operational level, of China's goal of becoming a maritime power. First, China's relations with the United States and its allies in the Asia Pacific are an important factor in China's efforts to become a maritime power, and U.S. policymakers should be aware that Chinese observers see the actions of the United States and its allies as a challenge to China's goal.

An excellent example of this is an essay, mentioned above, which was penned by two authors affiliated with the CCP Central Party School, and published in a journal under the management of the International Department of the CCP Central Committee.³⁷

³⁶ Zhang Li, Yang Shou, "Core Factors, Comprehensive Development, Reasonable Advancement," *Chongqing Socialism Institute Journal (chongqing shehui zhuyi xueyuan xuebao)*, no. 5 (2013).

³⁷ The first author, Zhang Mingming, is a professor and director of the International Politics office of the Party School's International Strategic Studies Institute. The second author, Liu Yunzhong, is affiliated with the same institute at the Party School. For their essay, see: Zhang Mingming, Liu Yunzhong, "Some Reflections on China Building a Maritime Power," *Contemporary World (dangdai shijie)*, 20 February

The essay outlined several challenges that China faces as it seeks to become a maritime power. One is described as the “increasingly complicated” maritime sovereignty disputes in the East and South China Seas, demonstrated by deteriorating Sino-Japanese relations since Japan’s nationalization of the Senkaku Islands in 2012, and disputes over territorial claims and resources in the South China Sea with Vietnam and the Philippines. The authors also identified the U.S. rebalance to Asia as another major challenge to China’s goal of becoming a maritime power. They described the central goals of the rebalance as containing China’s rise and maintaining America’s dominance over regional maritime affairs. They cited several recent U.S. actions that they argued were carried out to support these goals: strengthening the U.S.-Japanese alliance, continuing arms sales to Taiwan, introducing the strategy of Air-Sea Battle, attempting to internationalize South China Sea disputes, and strengthening military cooperation with India. The authors asserted that these moves have narrowed China’s strategic space and increased the pressure on China’s maritime security.

Other Chinese observers have identified the U.S. rebalance to Asia as a factor in China’s desire to become a maritime power. For example, Jia Xudong of the China Institute of International Studies, which is the Foreign Ministry’s think tank, wrote in *People’s Daily* that oceans are an important resource for China’s sustainable development but also are sources of threats; therefore, building China into a maritime power has “great significance” for China’s development and security interests.³⁸ In terms of threats, Jia identified not only the “illegal occupation” of China’s “islands, reefs, and

2014, available on the website of *People’s Daily*, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2014/0220/c187656-24420057.html>.

³⁸ Jia Xudong, “China Strikes Strongest Note Yet about Maritime Rights Defense,” *People’s Daily Overseas Edition (renmin ribao haiwai ban)*, 3 August 2013.

waters” by littoral states such as Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, but also the U.S. “rebalance” strategy, which he argued was designed to maintain a “strategic advantage” over China at sea.

The second consequence that China’s maritime power goal has for the United States is that there will almost certainly be an increasing number of PLA(N) blue water operations in areas beyond the first island chain. While Chinese observers are not unanimous on the priority of near seas or far seas regions for China’s future as a maritime power, they seem to agree that in either case China will seek to expand its far seas capabilities. This means that China will continue to conduct more naval exercises in the Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and beyond.³⁹ China is also likely to seek to participate in more multilateral exercises; its inaugural participation in RIMPAC in 2014 is an example. The U.S. military will likely need to accustom itself to more frequent and more varied interactions with the Chinese navy in new areas beyond the Western Pacific. Over time, the PLA(N) will become a routine international presence, and U.S. military commands far from the Asia Pacific will also face the need to respond to the growing capabilities of China’s navy.

Even without the declaration at the 18th Party Congress that China would strive to build itself into a maritime power, it seems likely that Beijing would still oppose the U.S. rebalance strategy. However, just as the maritime power goal may have become a new way to promote PLA(N) reform, in the future it may also become a new justification for opposing U.S. military activities, and specifically U.S. Navy activities, in the Asia Pacific.

³⁹ Christopher H. Sharman, *China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Toward a New Maritime Strategy*, National Defense University, China Strategic Perspectives 9 (Washington, DC: National Defense University, April 2015).

Conclusion

From its announcement at the 18th Party Congress until the release of the 2015 defense white paper, the role of the PLA(N) in China's national objective of becoming a maritime power was not explicitly defined in a PRC government document. In the interim, a number of Chinese observers outlined many possible improvements to PLA(N) capabilities and missions that would support this goal. In certain cases, such as the essay written by VADM Tian Zhong, this public discussion may have directly informed the 2015 defense white paper, which defines four general tasks for the PLA(N) to undertake as it provides "strategic support" to build a maritime power. In any case, this public discussion provides China analysts with further explanation of objectives outlined in the defense white paper, and addresses the PLA(N)'s relationship with other maritime actors involved in building a maritime power, which the white paper did not.

However, it is unclear how the 18th Party Congress may have influenced debates or rivalries within the Chinese leadership and the PLA. In competition between the services over defense spending, or in a debate between the importance of near seas or far seas missions for the PLA(N), the articulation of the maritime power goal by China's central leadership may have created an advantage for the PLA(N) and for supporters of expanded far seas operations. As described in other papers written for this conference, many other parts of the Chinese government and private sector also have roles to play in China's maritime ambition, some of which may be more specific than that of the PLA(N).

Nonetheless, the fact the PLA(N) is deemed necessary to provide “strategic support” for China’s maritime power endeavor suggests that it is the firm foundation upon which China’s maritime power ambitions rest. Not surprisingly, the navy is the core element of China’s long-term maritime ambitions.

The greatest uncertainty surrounding Beijing’s maritime power goal is what size navy the leadership of China will decide will satisfy this objective. How many “far seas” capable ships will Beijing decide it needs? Will China want a navy capable of countering America’s “strategic advantage at sea”? Clearly, as China continues to launch an impressive array of ships well suited for “far seas” operations, it is clear that the PLA(N) is becoming a more “balanced” force: it is gradually obtaining the mix of ships, submarines, and aircraft necessary to conduct the full range of imaginable naval missions—such as defense of the homeland, sea control, power projection, protection of overseas interests (including sea lanes), humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, evacuation of citizens in danger in foreign lands, showing support for distant allies and friends, and providing a visible manifestation of China’s power and global influence. In just a few years, its projected mix of carriers, jet aircraft, nuclear-powered attack submarines, nuclear-powered submarines with ICBMs, multi-mission destroyers and frigates, large amphibious ships, and multiple large replenishment ships will make the PLA(N) look like a smaller version of the U.S. Navy. It would be a surprise if after creating such a capability, China does not use the PLA(N) in much the same way that the United States uses its navy today.