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CHINA'S NAVY: A SERIOUS THREAT TO U.S. NAVAL SUPERIORITY?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- In 2020, the PRC's Naval forces, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), surpassed the U.S. Navy in size. This does not pose an existential threat to U.S. Navy superiority at the present time, but it is a cause for concern over possible development of Chinese maritime capabilities in the Western Pacific.
- The PRC military strategy is described as "active defence", but it essentially aims to dominate the South China Sea under the nine-dash-line claims and establish its role as a regional hegemonic power. The PRC views the U.S. presence in the area as a threat that further fuels its ambition to become a world-class military by 2049.
- The U.S. is advised to apply the conventional deterrence posture and re-assess its naval composition for deterrence operations in the Western Pacific. While strengthening and unifying alliances, the U.S. should defend regional sea bases and integrate the Tri-service maritime strategy through advanced training and education of naval forces. Furthermore, control of contested territories and critical chokepoints needs to be gained and maintained, along with an effort to modernize technology, including pursuing artificial intelligence and autonomous systems to gather intelligence on activities in the region.

1. CHINA'S NATIONAL POLICY

The People's Republic of China's (PRC's) overarching objective, known as "the Chinese Dream," is a long-held national aspiration to pursue political and social modernity that includes initiatives to further its overall development, strengthen its armed forces, and take a more active role in global affairs.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA's) objective is to become a world-class military by the end of 2049 – a goal first announced by General Secretary Xi Jinping in 2017. It is likely that the PRC will seek to develop a military by mid-century that is equal/superior to the U.S. military, or that of any other great power that the PRC views as a threat.

The PRC's leadership sees U.S. policy towards China as a critical factor affecting China's national strategy. The PRC has implemented a strategy and approach

that aims at U.S. maritime power. It seeks to undermine international maritime governance, control the use of key chokepoints, discourage U.S. involvement in regional disputes as in the case of the South China Sea, and compete with the U.S. as a preferred partner in countries around the world.

China deploys a multilayered fleet that includes: the People's Liberation Army Navy, the China Coast Guard, and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia – in some cases disguised as civilian vessels. It continues to militarize disputed territory in the South China Sea and East China Sea and assert maritime claims inconsistent with international law.

2. CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY

China has embraced a new diplomatic framework that it terms “Major Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics in the New Era”. The overall goal of the PRC’s foreign policy is to shift the international system towards the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP’s) principles for how nations should interact.

Throughout 2019 and 2020, the PRC’s leaders continued to push diplomatic efforts to strengthen China’s economic connectivity across the Indo-Pacific region. For example, China promotes One belt One road (OBOR) which serves to strengthen China’s strategic partnerships, enlarge its network of strategic partners, and advance reforms to the international order

to support China’s strategy. China also officially ratified a significant trade agreement, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), in 2020.

The CCP desires the PLA to become a practical instrument of its statecraft, with an active role in advancing the PRC’s foreign policy and highlighting the increasingly global character that China ascribes to its military power. The PLA’s growing global presence can be recognized on many levels. For example, the PRC is seeking to establish a more robust overseas logistics and basing infrastructure to allow the PLA to project and sustain military power at greater distances.

3. CHINA'S DEFENCE AND MILITARY STRATEGY

China’s efforts for modernizing the military, including the PLA’s efforts to modernize the Navy, are assessed, if necessary, as aimed at developing capabilities – e.g., to address the situation with Taiwan. Also, to exercise greater control or dominance over China’s coastal region, the 200-mile-long naval Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), Chinese Commercial Maritime Communications Lines (SLOCs) and promoting China’s position as a leading regional power and a major world power.

Consistent with these goals, observers believe that the CCP wants its Navy to be designated as part of China’s anti-access/area-denial (A2 / AD) – forces that may, for example, deter U.S. intervention in a conflict in

China’s maritime areas or reduce the effectiveness of intervening U.S. forces.

Chinese military strategy is based on “active defence”; in other words, while remaining a defensive force, China will develop and transform the Navy to protect sovereignty claims, aiming to fully modernize its military by 2035. The People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is, as of 2020, the world’s largest Navy with approximately 350 ships, compared to the 293 in the US Navy in 2020. The vessels used by PLAN are smaller in size and tonnage than the U.S. Navy, but they fulfill the ambition to dominate regionally, on occasion disguised as civilian vessels.

4. MISSIONS AND TASKS

China continues to seek regional dominance in the Western Pacific and is increasingly threatened by the presence of the U.S. and its allies in the region, citing it as an interference with regional affairs and provocation from the West. Most recently the announcement of British, French and German ships heading to the region further stirred concerns and it remains difficult to anticipate the lengths to which China will be willing to pursue regional hegemony in the Western Pacific and specifically the claimed nine dash-line zone.

China’s Navy is a formidable military force within China’s near-seas region, and it is conducting a growing number of operations in more-distant waters, including the broader waters of the Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and waters around Europe. China’s Navy is, by far, the largest of any country in East Asia.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The clear CCP national strategies, visions and plans that China adheres to, although the pandemic has significantly slowed down their advancement, are the key to the development of Chinese maritime capabilities. The question of the future development of the Chinese Navy must, however, be taken into account. Despite the size of PLAN at present, it does not pose an existential threat to the U.S. Navy; however the concern remains that it will become a strong competitor and opponent. It should be considered that PLAN's fleet relies on smaller classes of ships, which are widely considered not to be major surface combatants. Its number advantage comes from its coastal patrol ships which, while not insignificant, have limited capacity to project power beyond China's near seas. Further, the U.S. maintains an advantage with a massive carrier fleet. However, given the growing threats from China's submarines, strike aircraft and anti-ship missiles, U.S. carriers may be held farther from the Chinese coast, particularly during the early stages of a conflict.

It is also important to consider that the U.S. has several formal alliances within the Indo-Pacific region - Australia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand. For reference, China's single formal ally - North Korea, maintains only a handful of submarines and coastal patrol vessels.

Here are the policy recommendations we propose to maintain and improve the presence and functioning of the U.S. Navy:

1. Apply the conventional deterrence posture by conducting offensive and defensive operations associated with the maritime domain including achieving and maintaining sea control, to include subsurface, surface, land, air, space, and cyberspace.
2. Reconsider if the fleet's current composition and posture of U.S. forces in the region adequately achieves a realistic deterrence against Chinese behaviour to fulfill the commitment to U.S. allies.
3. Establish, maintain, and defend sea bases in support of naval, land, air, or other joint operations as directed – e.g. Diego Garcia military base.
4. U.S. alliances and partnerships must be strengthened to achieve unity towards a common goal – the key strategic advantage in this long-term strategic competition.
5. Support and pursue the reconceptualization of the U.S. Navy military capabilities – integrating Tri Service Maritime Strategy (The Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard): The Naval Service will develop an integrated all-domain naval force through training and education; capabilities and networks; plans, exercises, and experiments; analysis and wargaming; investments and innovation; and force design.
6. Establish, maintain, and exploit sea control in contested environments from the littorals to open ocean, including critical chokepoints. Investments in increased lethality, capacity, targeted capabilities, and transformed naval expeditionary forces capable of sea control and sea denial will support this effort.
7. Modernizing the future force that would deliver innovative approaches to new technologies, training and education.
8. Actively pursue an information and decision advantage in artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, and battle management aids that will enable near real-time awareness in the information environment.