



China's Naval Success and Its Grand Strategy

by Emil Avdaliani

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 961, September 28, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: US world power rests upon its ability to dominate the seas and the world's commercial and military routes. Any power aspiring to a similar position goes against American geopolitical interests. China's naval successes in the past decade or so therefore have far-reaching effects as the country is gradually becoming more experienced in military operations in far-flung regions across the globe.

A look at the map of China shows what the country's geopolitical imperatives have been over the course of centuries.

Perhaps the first goal of all the successive Chinese dynasties was to gain and maintain control of the heartland – the Han core, which contains major Chinese rivers and is abundant with people and productive lands. The next logical goal was maintenance of influence over the buffer zones that surround the Han core. These consist of mountainous regions to the west, desert lands to the northwest, and impregnable forests to the south.

The third major imperative was historically to protect China's coastline from foreign powers. However, because this threat was quite small in the ancient and medieval periods, the country did not see a need to develop powerful naval capabilities. In an age when there were no transcontinental trade routes and the only way to connect with the Middle East and Europe was the famous Silk Road, the geographical boundaries (mountains, jungles, deserts, and the sea) on all sides made China essentially a closed country with self-sufficient economic means. The Yangtze and Yellow rivers, with their surrounding fertile lands, produced enough to feed large populations in the Han core.

If China's insularity was once a geopolitical advantage rather than a constraint, this has not been the case since the late 20th century. In the age of international trade routes and supply chains, China has to be open and in

many cases must rely upon raw materials brought from abroad via sea routes. Thence comes China's fourth geopolitical imperative: protection of international trade lines and resource hubs.

This will only be viable through two options: finding alternative land routes such as One Belt, One Road; or building a powerful military fleet capable of securing resources and global supply chains across the Asia-Pacific and elsewhere.

Building a powerful navy will mean collision with the US, whose global primacy rests upon its domination of sea lanes and relevant security alliances in Europe and the Asia-Pacific. Any diminution of US sea power will have a direct impact on the world order. This explains the importance Washington attaches to developments in foreign powers' naval capabilities.

It is true that Chinese naval technology is still substantially behind current US capabilities. The US has 11 aircraft carriers and the Chinese only one, and that one still lacks an aircraft wing capable of operating off a carrier deck. However, what is important here is the trend: China has made significant progress over several decades and is rapidly developing new destroyers, amphibious assault ships, stealth fighters, and long-range weapons. This could expand its expeditionary military operations around the globe.

China continues to construct an array of offensive and defensive capabilities to enable the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to gain maritime superiority within the first island chain in the Asia-Pacific. Those are the islands that run from the Kurils, through Taiwan, to Borneo, roughly encompassing the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea.

China's broad range of anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) and launch platforms, as well as submarine-launched torpedoes and naval mines, allow the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to create an increasingly lethal, multi-access threat against an adversary approaching Chinese waters and operating areas.

The PLAN continues to develop into a global force. It is gradually extending its operational reach beyond East Asia and the Indo-Pacific into a sustained ability to operate at increasingly long ranges. The PLAN's latest naval platforms enable combat operations beyond the reach of China's land-based defenses.

Furthermore, the PLAN now has a sizable force of high-capability logistical replenishment ships to support long-distance, long-duration deployments, including two new ships being built specifically to support aircraft carrier

operations. The expansion of naval operations beyond China's immediate region will also facilitate non-war uses of military force.

The PLAN's force structure continues to evolve, incorporating more platforms with the versatility for both offshore and long-distance power projection. China is engaged in series production of the LUYANG III-class DDG, the JIANGKAI II-class FFG, and the JIANGDAO-class FFL. China also launched its first RENHAI-class (Type 055) CG in 2017.

Even on the aircraft carrier level, despite its numerical inferiority, China continues to learn lessons from operating its lone carrier, the Liaoning, which is produced in the Ukraine. China's first domestically produced aircraft carrier, launched in 2017, will be commissioned in 2019 (according to various sources, this will be a multi-carrier force). China's next generation of carriers will probably have greater endurance and be capable of launching more varied types of fixed-wing aircraft than the Liaoning.

PLAN Aviation is also making progress on improving capabilities to conduct offensive and defensive offshore operations such as strike, air, and missile defense, strategic mobility, and early warning and reconnaissance missions.

For the moment, the PLAN's ability to perform missions beyond the first island chain is modest. Its ability is constantly growing, however, as it gains more experience operating in distant waters and acquires larger and more advanced platforms. The US will remain a dominant force for the coming couple of decades, but Chinese successes should not be underestimated.

Chinese naval successes, as reflected in the recent Congressional report, add to growing American fears that China might become a global competitor in coming decades. From the US perspective, what the Chinese are doing in Eurasia through its pivotal One Belt, One Road initiative as well as various moves to influence Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan is geopolitically significant. The Chinese are doing exactly what the Americans oppose – solidifying one-country rule in Eurasia.

Emil Avdaliani teaches history and international relations at Tbilisi State University and Ilia State University. He has worked for various international consulting companies and currently publishes articles focused on military and political developments across the former Soviet space.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family