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Chinese Naval Threat: Growth and Modernization Haley M. Halstead

The military evolution and modernization of China's navy highlight its increasing level of threat to the United States. The power and influence of the U.S. Navy are at risk, as are U.S. interests abroad. China's naval growth and strategic goals need to be examined in order to establish a level of threat.

China's navy has progressed significantly since the 1990s,¹⁰² with current efforts to simultaneously modernize and expand the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).¹⁰³ The Chinese navy has shifted immensely in the past two decades; it has progressed in technological advancements as well as in size, with astonishing speed. The PLAN is rapidly becoming a force that can threaten the U.S. Navy. Understanding the PLAN's history, growth and goals is essential to analyze their threat to U.S. naval interests.

In the 1990s, China initiated a military overhaul, thereby significantly expanding its military budget.¹⁰⁴ Naval expenses are relatively transparent; the PLAN purchased and continues to purchase new weapons and ships, while training personnel to operate them.¹⁰⁵ According to GlobalSecurity.org,

The Chinese military budget, at official exchange rates, is one-seventh that of the United States. But on a more appropriate purchasing power parity (PPP) basis, the Chinese military expenditure is about \$500,000,000,000, about three-quarters that of the United States.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² Ronald O'Rourke, *China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities - Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report for Congress, 2012. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33153.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2013), 3.

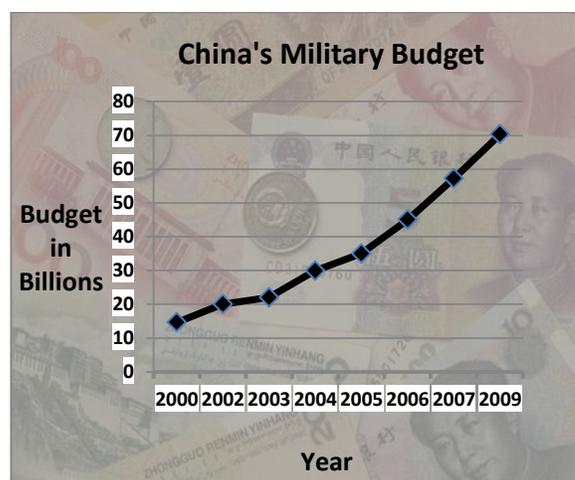
¹⁰³ *China's Navy 2007*. Office of Naval Intelligence, 2007. <http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/oni/chinanavy2007.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2013), vii.

¹⁰⁴ O'Rourke, 3.

¹⁰⁵ Louisa Lim, "China's Growing Military Muscle: A Looming Threat?" June 20, 2011. <http://www.npr.org/2011/06/20/136901727/chinas-growing-military-muscle-a-looming-threat> (accessed February 28, 2013).

¹⁰⁶ "China's Defense Budget," GlobalSecurity.org, 2013. <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/budget.htm> (accessed February 28, 2013).

These budget expansions are evident in the weapon acquisitions of the PLAN. The Chinese navy is purchasing new anti-ship ballistic missiles, anti-ship cruise missiles, land-attack cruise missiles, surface-to-air missiles, mines, manned aircraft, unmanned aircraft, submarines, aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates, patrol craft, amphibious ships, mine countermeasures ships, hospital ships, and supporting command, control, communication, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems.¹⁰⁷ In addition to this new technology, maintenance, logistics, naval doctrine, personnel quality, education and training reforms have been implemented by PLAN to modernize their forces.¹⁰⁸



Background photo: GlobalSecurity.org. Beijing Travel Blog, <http://blog.beijingholiday.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/china-money.jpg>.

The overall naval goal of the People's Republic of China is to become the dominant force in surrounding seas.¹⁰⁹ Within that broad spectrum, PLAN objectives include protecting Chinese territory, enforcing Chinese policies, eliminating the influence of the United States, and displaying a strong projection of Chinese military strength.¹¹⁰ According to Ronald O'Rourke, a specialist in naval affairs, the PLAN strives to be an "anti-access force," a strong enough force to discourage other countries, including the United States, from interfering in their affairs.¹¹¹ This includes deterring foreign diplomatic and military interference. China's desire for expanding its

¹⁰⁷ O'Rourke, 3.

¹⁰⁸ O'Rourke, 3.

¹⁰⁹ *China's Navy 2007*, vii.

¹¹⁰ O'Rourke, 5.

¹¹¹ O'Rourke, Summary.

influence and control is apparent in their recent port acquisitions. "China has either built or reportedly planned to construct vital facilities in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Maldives, Myanmar, Pakistan, Seychelles, Sri Lanka, and Thailand,"¹¹² according to Patrick Mendis. These strategic port locations, known as "a string of pearls," are strategically positioned along trade routes leading from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea.¹¹³



Map: "China's 'String of pearls' strategy to secure the ports of South Asia." *Global Balita*. <http://globalbalita.com/?s=china+string+of+pearls>.

In 2005, the Department of Defense defined this "string of pearls strategy," as a

...three pronged approach. First, China is building a series of naval bases along sea lanes to the Middle East; second, it is strengthening diplomatic ties with countries in the region. Third, the Chinese are rapidly building a blue-water navy, developing advanced missile technology, deploying new submarines, and stockpiling undersea mines to counter U.S. Navy capabilities and protect their energy security.¹¹⁴

An important issue for the U.S. to consider is how China's military goals might incur negative relations between China and

Taiwan.¹¹⁵ China and Taiwan have experienced high tension since the Chinese Revolution in 1949.¹¹⁶ The U.S. should consider China's power and animosity for Taiwan, especially in light of U.S. interest and partnership with Taiwan. Chinese President Hu Jintao declared that China desires to be a "maritime power."¹¹⁷ Bonnie Glaser, senior advisor for Asia at the Center for Strategic and International Studies stated, "This is very significant language. It creates questions of American capability."¹¹⁸ Because of U.S. partnership with Taiwan, Chinese naval forces could pose a strategic risk to the Asia-Pacific policy of the U.S.

In June 1991, Mount Pinatubo volcano erupted in the Philippines, destroying the evacuated Clark Air Base and requiring the evacuation of Subic Bay Naval Base.¹¹⁹ The evacuation of these bases signaled the beginning of the end for a strong naval presence in China's surrounding seas.¹²⁰ This poses the possibility of future conflict with the PLAN, as China's naval progression is consistently surpassing U.S. expectations.¹²¹

According to the National Intelligence Director Michael McConnell, in the near future, "China will be America's only global competitor for military and strategic influence."¹²² China has continually portrayed their military growth as a protective and defensive measure, attempting to show friendly intentions through

¹¹⁵ O'Rourke, 4.

¹¹⁶ *Online News Hour: China-Taiwan History*, PBS, March 7, 2000.

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/asia/china/china-taiwan.html> (accessed February 28, 2013).

¹¹⁷ Paul D. Shinkman, "China's New Navy: Threat or Power Grab?" November 9, 2012.

<http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/11/09/chinas-new-navy-threat-or-power-grab> (accessed February 28, 2013).

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ "Subic Bay Naval Station," *GlobalSecurity.org*, May 7, 2011.

http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/subic_bay.htm (accessed February 28, 2013).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Karen Parrish, "Navy Intel Chief Discusses China's Military Advances," *Navy.mil*, January 6, 2011.

http://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=57952 (accessed February 28, 2013).

¹²² John J. Tkacik Jr. "Chinese Military Superpower?" *Washington Times*, 2007.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2007/mar/17/2007-0317-114439-2186r/?page=> (accessed February 28, 2013).

¹¹² Patrick Mendis, "The Sri Lankan Silk Road: the potential war between China and the United States," *Harvard International Review*, Vol. 34 Iss. 2, Fall 2012. <http://www.freepatentsonline.com/article/Harvard-International-Review/305995611.html> (accessed March 2, 2013).

¹¹³ Mendis.

¹¹⁴ Lawrence Spinetta, "Cutting China's 'String of Pearls'," *United States Naval Institute*, October 2006. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/pqce ntral/docview/205980053/13E1E37D9DE74C5E8B2/1?ac countid=12085> (accessed March 2, 2013), 40-42.

diplomatic relations with their neighboring countries and the United States.¹²³

There are two questions that U.S. military leaders and foreign policy advisors must address: 1) is China, based on their military history and foreign policy, capable of military expansion without conquering or overpowering neighboring nations? 2) Is China capable of continuing peaceful relations with the U.S. once they become a force strong enough to challenge U.S. hegemony? The U.S. has always aided its allies when they face overwhelming forces. Very soon, the United States may be forced to choose between reevaluating the way in which it supports its allies and challenging the Chinese Navy.

¹²³ Dick K. Nanto and Emma Chanlett-Avery, *The Rise of China and Its Effect on Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea: U.S. Policy Choices*, CRS Report for Congress, 2006. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32882.pdf> (accessed February 28, 2013), Summary.