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**The PLA over the China Seas and
Maritime Sovereignty Dispute**

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The near sea of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in this paper is conceptualized as the vast sea areas between China's coastline and the first island chain. It includes Bohai, the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea. Each of the five sea area has had long history but different nature of disputes, different countries and their interests have been involved, different compositions and levels in the balance of naval and air forces, and different characteristics of possible contingencies.

The Bohai is considered a Chinese inner lake and the gateway to the political-military center of gravity. The Yellow Sea has a direct linkage between China and the Korean Peninsula which has long being regarded as lip and teeth relationship. The East China Sea between China and Japanese archipelagos touches the nerves of the long historical rivalries between the two East Asian giants and connects to the parameter of U.S.-Japan security alliance. The Taiwan Strait has been a demarcation zone that divided the two ethnic Chinese nations, but in recent decades, a pathway of flourishing bilateral trade activities. The South China Sea has been not only a battleground for surrounding states in the contests of sovereignty and resources, but also one of the major passages of global maritime trade.

The above mentioned five segments of sea areas, or the PRC's near sea, are distinctive contingencies in diplomatic, economic and security terms; but to the Chinese, the near sea areas are with common fundamentals, i.e. the inherited historical concept of "haifang" or "maritime defense" in national defense deliberation, the origin of more than 170 years of historical humiliation inflicted by foreign maritime powers, and most of all, China's claim of sovereign waters.

Today, with China's rapid growing maritime trade and military capabilities, the near sea becomes the venue toward both prosperity and potential conflict, and the area that Chinese military maritime power may pivot from purely defensive nature to both defensive and offensive capabilities.

China's Near Sea Contingencies

Due to its relatively weak military capabilities, in the past century, China's maritime contingencies had been entirely limited to the near sea areas. By strict definition, in its warfighting history, the PLA Navy has never engaged in a war with any modern Western navy. Until the end of 20th century, the PLA Navy had encountered only two navies – Taiwan and Vietnam, both small and weak. In geographic terms, the PLA Navy's warfighting was conducted primarily in two geographic contingencies. From 1949 to 1965, the Chinese Navy

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engaged in battles only with Taiwan (naval) forces in gaining control of several dozens offshore islands located along the coast of Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangzhou. From 1974 to 1988, the PLA Navy engaged in several sporadic, small-scale skirmishes with the Vietnamese naval forces in the Paracels and the Spratlys in the South China Sea. The PLA Navy has, therefore, not been forced into a large-scale battle at sea with any strong maritime power.¹

The near sea contingencies, in the past, involved primarily China's sense of defending its coastlines and maritime sovereignty claims. After 30 years of economic reform and opening up to the outside world, China's maritime interests have been widely expanded alongside with its growing international influence, the rapid economic growth and military modernization. Even though China has its interests around the globe, maritime contingencies that may pose direct threats and impacts on China's national security remains in the near sea areas. By reviewing events and incidents China encountered in recent years, we can identify five types of near sea contingencies today.

■ Encounter with foreign naval and air forces

With the large increase of China's defense expenditures and improved force projection capability, China's PLA forces has been flown and sailed further away from its coasts to conduct training and exercises and naturally increased the probabilities of contacts, especially those unplanned, unexpected, or even unfriendly encounters, with foreign forces operating in the China seas.

A contact of PLA Navy's Han-class submarine with U.S. Navy's Kitty Hawk aircraft carrier battle group in the Yellow sea area in October 1994, and the crash of U.S. EP-3 maritime reconnaissance aircraft with the PLA Naval Air Force J-8II fighter near the South China Sea have been tow of many cases of this kind.

■ Freedom of navigation and Chinese EEZ

Different understanding and interpretations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) have led to quarrels between China and the U.S. on whether the U.S. ocean surveillance ships have the rights to conduct operations within China's exclusive economic zones (EEZ) as defined by the UNCLOS. Those ocean surveillance ships, with low frequency active sonar systems onboard, operating near China's waters of course raised suspicions and anxieties of China worrying for the military-sensitive intelligence collections.

¹ Alexander Chieh-cheng Huang, "PLA Navy at War, 1949-1999: From Coastal Defense to Distant Operations," in Mark Ryan and Michael A. McDevitt, eds., *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949*, M.E. Sharpe, 2003, PP. XX-XX.

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The most notable case was the incident involving USNS *Impeccable* in March 2009 when Chinese PLA Navy ships and airplanes, law enforcement agencies' vessels and some fishing boats tried in consecutive days to chase the *Impeccable* away from waters of China's EEZ.²

■ Maritime resources competition

Potential energy and mineral resources under seabed in the vast areas of China's seas have been major causes for maritime disputes in the region. Except for the territorial sea and adjacent area, neighboring countries have had engaged fierce competition in claiming islands and isles, defining the demarcation of EEZ lines, attracting foreign energy companies for exploitation.

China has had disputes in numerous sea areas with its neighbors, especially with Japan over the Chunxiao Gas Field in the area of claimed overlapping EEZs, and with Vietnam over several offshore blocks open for bidding by foreign companies.

■ Disputing maritime claims

Since the end of the Cold War, China has engaged in negotiations with countries sharing land borders and has been able to settle most of the borderline demarcation and resolved land border disputes. In the case of maritime, however, overlapping claims over islands and waters are far from resolved but cause sporadic conflicts among claimants.

■ Disasters and crime at sea

Natural-caused and human-made disasters at sea have been getting more attentions. Ship collisions, oil spills, piracy, severe weather-caused and many other natural disasters have raised awareness of sea-going countries. As China's international profile rises, either by demonstrating its big power responsibility or by that fact that itself has the need, China in recent years has had actively involved in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) exercises in the near sea areas by itself and with neighbors.

Between 2002 and 2012, China has participated in 54 non-traditional security joint exercises with foreign countries, including 22 joint HA/DR exercises with foreign navies at sea though most of them were conducted as part of the PLA Navy's port call visits to other countries beyond the near sea areas.³

Maritime Sovereignty Dispute: Diaoyutai Ship Collision, 2010

² Footnote to be added.

³ Tang Cheng, "PLA & Foreign Military Joint Exercise: non-traditional security cooperation," Chinese Communist Studies (zhonggong Yan jiu 中共研究), Vol. 45, No. 7, July 2011, p. 85. More footnote to be added.

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- Primary period: September 7 – September 24
- Parties directly involved: Japan Coast Guard ships vs. Chinese Fishing boat
- Key Development:

Japanese Coast Guard ship *Mizuki*, on September 7, 2010, encountered a Chinese fishing boat *Minjinyu 5179* and found it sailed 7.5 miles northwest of the disputed Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands, and was outside the agreed area for Chinese fishing, and within undisputed Japanese territorial waters. The Chinese fishing boat defied the order by Japanese Coast Guard ship to stop and receive inspection, and attempted to flee from the scene. During the chase and interception, *Minjinyu 5179* collided with JCG's ships. On September 8, 2010, JCG boarded the Chinese trawler and arrested its captain Zhan Qixiong for obstruction of performance of public duty and illegal fishing. The trawler, the captain, and 14 crew members, were transported to Ishigaki Island of Japan for detention.

In response to the arrest, the Chinese government made a series of diplomatic protests, demanding the immediate release of the trawler and all its crew. China summoned Uichiro Niwa, the Japanese ambassador to China in Beijing, six times. The trawler and 14 of the crew members (but not the captain, Zhan) were released after the sixth summons on September 13, 2010. The captain of the trawler remained in Japanese detention and was finally released on September 24, 2010.⁴

- PLA Activities: No immediate response or direct engagement

In this high profile and widely watched episode, there was little room for China to react militarily. However, there were a series of naval exercises conducted by the PLA Navy's North Sea Fleet and the East Sea Fleet during and immediately after the dispute that may have put certain pressure on Japan, assisting China's strong diplomatic protest. Events in the exercises included ship maneuver, shipboard missile firing, and combined arms training involving naval air force. The noteworthy one was an "island assault" exercise conducted by the East Sea Fleet on September 29, practicing various types of ships for amphibious landing operations.⁵

Maritime Sovereignty Dispute: Scarborough Shoal Standoff, 2012

- Primary period: April 10 – late June

⁴ Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010_Senkaku_boat_collision_incident

⁵ *Chinese Communist Yearbook 2011* (Zhonggong Nianbao 中共年報), PP. 3-110 – 3-112.

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- Parties directly involved: Philippine Navy ships vs. Chinese fishing boats and Chinese Maritime Surveillance ships
- Key Development:

On April 8, 2012, A Philippine Navy surveillance plane spotted eight Chinese fishing vessels docked at the waters of Scarborough shoal. The Philippine Navy frigate *BRP Gregorio del Pilar* (former USCGC *Hamilton*) on the same day was sent to survey the vicinity of the shoal, confirmed the presence of the fishing vessels and monitored the activity of these vessels. On April 10, 2012, *BRP Gregorio del Pilar* came to inspect the catch of the fishing vessels. The inspection team discovered illegally collected corals, giant clams and live sharks inside the first vessel boarded by the team. *BRP Gregorio del Pilar* reported that they attempted to arrest the Chinese fishermen but were blocked by Chinese maritime surveillance ships, China Marine Surveillance 75 (*Zhongguo Haijian 75*) and China Marine Surveillance 84 (*Zhongguo Haijian 84*) happened to cruise in nearby waters. Since then, tensions continue for several months between the two countries.
- PLA Activities: No immediate response or direct engagement

Along the course of dispute events in the relative long standoff, China mostly relied on its maritime law enforcement ships. However, according to Japanese source, it was reported that, on May 2, PLA sent a large formation of combatants southward without clear destination. The flotilla included The five warships are said to include: two type 052B destroyers, Guangzhou (168) and Wuhan (169); two escort vessels, Yulin (569) and Chaohu (568); and a type 071 landing ship, Kunlunshan (998).⁶

Maritime Sovereignty Dispute: Japan's Nationalization of Diaoyutai, 2012

- Primary period: April 16 – September 11
- Parties directly involved: Japanese Coast Guard ships, Chinese maritime law enforcement ships, Hong Kong fishing boats, and Taiwan fishing boats and escorting

⁶ “China sends five warships to the disputed Scarborough Shoal” *What's on Shenzhen*, May 10, 2012.

<http://www.whatsonshenzhen.com/news-2423-china-sends-five-warships-to-the-disputed-scarborough-shoal.html>

Phoenix TV Network citing source from Japan's Ministry of Defense; see <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%B8%AD%E5%9B%BD%E6%B8%94%E6%94%BF%E8%88%B9%E4%B8%8E%E8%8F%B2%E5%BE%8B%E5%AE%BE%E6%8A%A4%E5%8D%AB%E8%88%B0%E5%AF%B9%E5%B3%99%E4%BA%8B%E4%BB%B6#.E4.BA.8B.E4.BB.B6.E7.BB.8F.E8.BF.87>

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Coast Guard ships.

■ Key Development:

The most recent dispute on sovereignty over the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands were ignited by a speech at Heritage Foundation in Washington DC on April 16, 2012, given by then Tokyo governor Shintaro Ishihara, a right wing politician advocating a more proactive role of Japan in international affairs and being tough on China. Audience, especially those in China and Taiwan, was sharply surprised when Governor Ishihara announced his intention to buy the three islands in the East China Sea from Japanese landowners in his speech.⁷

With an intension to prevent escalation and a way to curtail Ishihara's political maneuver, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda initiated a process of nationalization, i.e. purchase the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands by the central government. Citizens across China, Taiwan and Hong Kong organized different scales of public protests; some activists lease fishing boats to land on the Diaoyutai/Senkaku and got arrested (but soon released) by the Japanese Coast Guard; Taiwan's Yilan County Fisherman Union orchestrated massive boat formation to protest Japan's infringement of their fishing rights near the Diaoyutai/Senkaku.⁸

The Japanese government signed a ¥2.05 billion contract on September 11, 2012, with the so-called owner of three of the five Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, effectively nationalizing the territory, it immediately drawing a strong protest from Beijing, which sent surveillance ships to the area.⁹ The dispute was continues.

■ PLA Activities: No immediate response or direct engagement

In addition to strong diplomatic protests, China showed its strength basically through sending maritime law enforcement ships to the vicinity of the Diaoyutai/Senkaku area and there has been no evidence that PLA was employed to handle the situation. However, according to Japan's Joint Staff Office, between April and September in 2012, the Chinese military aircraft had flown near Japan's air defense

⁷ "Ishihara thumbs his nose at the central government," *The Asahi Shimbun*, April 18, 2012,

http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/politics/AJ201204180054

⁸ Footnote to be added.

⁹ "China enraged, sends ships: ¥2 billion deal nationalizes the Senkakus," *The Japan Times*, September 12, 2012, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/nn20120912a1.html>

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identification zone 69 times, 54 among them were in the period between July and September when the “nationalization of Senkaku” issue was heavily quarreled between the claimants.¹⁰

In addition to the events in the air, the PLA Navy has also conducted four distant water cruising exercises, though maybe routine, passing through the Japan archipelagos into the Pacific,¹¹ they did send strong messages to Tokyo when the dispute was heightened.

2012/4/30	430 km west of Yakushima Island	2 JIangkai-II FFG 1 Intelligence-gathering ship	After exercise with Russia
2012/5/8	650 km south of Okinawa	2 Luyang-I DDG 2 JIangkai-II FFG 1 Type-071LSD	
2012/5/14	110 km NE of Miyako Island	2 JIangkai-II FFG 1 Intelligence-gathering ship	Same to 2012/4/30
2012/11/28	Near Miyako Island	2 DDGs Hangzhou & Ningbo 2 FFGs Zhoushan & Maanshan 1 AOR Boyanghu	Same to 2012/4/30

Furthermore, on September 23, 2012, China’s State Oceanic Administration announced that it has approved a pilot program of using drones to undertake remote-sensing marine surveillance in Lianyungang, a costal city in eastern Jiangsu Province. With the experience learned from the pilot program, the SOA would try to form a managerial system and technical regulations in a bid to set up UAV surveillance and monitoring bases in provinces along China's coastline by 2015. In addition, the SOA would step up efforts to enhance its surveillance of the islands and islets including the Diaoyu Islands and Huangyan (Scarborough) Island.¹²

Maritime Law Enforcement Agencies

¹⁰ Japan News Networks, <http://www.ribenxinwen.com/html/g/201210/19-14526.html> (can be further verified)

¹¹ Various sources, to be added.

¹² “China to promote drones for marine surveillance,” Xinhua News, September 23, 2012,

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-09/23/c_123750476.htm

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During the 2004-2005 disputes over the Cunxiao gas field with Japan in the East China Sea, China sent PLA Navy ships to the area, about 290 nm Northwest of Kume Island, Okinawa Prefecture.^[3] The group consisted of a the new SOVREMENNIY class destroyer No. 137, two older JIANGHU class frigates, the new replenishment ship No. 886 and a new electronic/signals intelligence and space tracking ship No. 851.¹³ Japan sent only its Coast Guard ships.

That was the last time China used naval assets to deal with maritime territorial disputes. Since then, maritime law enforcement agencies began to take the driver's seat and serve as the first-response front-line units in all sovereignty related events and areas. It was believed that China realized the use of non-military vessels can be tenable in the international public opinion, and at the same time can avoid escalation of such conflict. Thus, the PLA Navy has been kept away from the frontline in managing maritime territorial disputes, and is considered as the last resort.

The PRC has five major maritime law enforcement agencies, used to be referred to as “five dragons in the sea” (wulong chuhai 五龍出海). Unlike the system in the United States, China's does not have a unified institution to oversee and implement maritime affairs and law enforcement. The five agencies are under different ministries with diverse and complicated chain of commands, funding resources, areas of responsibility, and personnel systems.

Agency	Ministry/Department	Primary Missions/Ships
Marine Surveillance (zhongguo haijian 中國海監)	State Oceanic Administration	Law enforcement within the PRC's territorial waters, exclusive economic zones (EEZ), and shores. Protecting the maritime environment, natural resources, navigation aids and other facilities, and can carry out maritime surveys. Ship name: Haijian (海監) 1000 tons: 27

¹³ Richard Fisher, “Growing Asymmetries in the China-Japan Naval Balance,” International Assessment and Strategy Center, November 22, 2005, http://www.strategycenter.net/research/pubID.83/pub_detail.asp

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		Total: 280
Maritime Safety Administration (zhongguo haishiju 中國海事局)	Ministry of Transportation	Coordinates maritime search and rescue in the territorial waters Ship name: Haishi (海事) or Haixun (海巡) 1000 tons: 8 Total: 800
Fisheries Law Enforcement Command (zhongguo yuzheng 中國漁政)	Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries Management Administration	Law enforcement concerning fishing and maritime resources in PRC territorial waters and exclusive economic zones (EEZ). Protecting Chinese fishing vessels and personnel, resolving disputes in fishing activities, preventing illegal fishing, and protecting maritime resources Ship name: Yuzheng (漁政) 1000 tons: 3 Total: 140
China Coast Guard (zhongguo haijing 中國海警)	Ministry of Public Security People's Armed Police	Maritime Paramilitary Police Ship name: Haijing (海警) 1000 tons: 3 Total: 250
Customs (zhongguo haiguan 中國海關)	General Administration of Customs	Maritime anti-smuggling Ship name: Haiguan (海關)

Source: Gao Zhiguo, et al., eds., "China's Maritime Law Enforcement," *China Maritime Development Report (2010)*, Beijing: Ocean Press, pp.441-456. Also National Institute for Defense Studies, *China Security Strategy Report (2012)*, Japan Ministry of Defense.

Among the five non-military maritime law enforcement agencies, the Marine Surveillance and the Fisheries Law Enforcement Command are the two primary units designated to the management of China's maritime sovereignty disputes – or the peacetime contingencies in the near sea.

Assessment of the operational doctrines and tactics of China's maritime law enforcement agencies, their the professional education, training, promotion, and logistics, as well as their operating sequence, duration, shifts and operational coordination, all require

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numerous sets of studies with more open sources available, before one can assess their capacity and prospects.

Naval Strategy Based on Near Sea Contingencies

Maritime sovereignty disputes, as stated in the beginning of the paper, are not China's only contingencies in the near sea area. Even though sitting in the back seat, the PLA's fundamental roles and missions cannot be forgotten, and its growing warfighting and force projection capabilities cannot be overlooked.

In contemplation of China's potential near sea contingencies today, one would be appreciate to review on what bases the PLA naval strategy was formulated back in 1985, and how true the functions and applications of such strategy remain sound.

The PLA Navy's modern strategy was formulated under the leadership of Admiral Liu Huaqing during his tenure as commander. The PLA Navy's strategic concept of "active defense, offshore operations" (jiji fangyu, jinhai zuozhan 積極防禦, 近海作戰) was first incepted in his speech, entitled "On Several Issues Related to the Navy's Implementation of the Strategic Guideline of Active Defense" (guanyu haijun guanche jiji fangyu zhanlue fangzhen de jige wenti 關於海軍貫徹積極防禦戰略方針的幾個問題), at a senior executive course (gaoji ganbu junshi yanjiuban 高級幹部軍事研究班) around October 1983.¹⁴ Through a series of consultations with his own staff and with the General Staff Department, he formally rolled out the new naval strategy of "offshore defense" (jinhai fangyu 近海防禦) at a PLA Navy table-top exercise on December 20, 1985.¹⁵

According to Liu Huaqing, the form (leixing 類型) PLA's naval strategy is "area defense [or area offense]" (quyu fangyu [huo quyu jingong] 區域防禦[或區域進攻]), neither "costal defense" (jinnan fangyu 近岸防禦), nor "distant ocean offense" (yuanyang jingong 遠洋進攻). In other words, the strategy was designed for near sea contingencies. When we try to understand the Chinese military thinking and actions in recent maritime disputes in the near sea areas, it would be interesting to review some key contents (neirong 內容) of the strategy revealed 27 years ago.¹⁶

- Strategic Objectives (zhanlue mudi 戰略目的)
 - To safeguard national unification and territorial integrity.

¹⁴ Liu Huaqing, *Memoir of Liu Huaqing (Liu Huaqing Huiyilu)*, Beijing: PLA Publisher (jiefangjun chunbanshe), 2004, p. 434.

¹⁵ *Memoir of Liu Huaqing*, p. 435.

¹⁶ *Memoir of Liu Huaqing*, pp. 437-438.

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- To fight local war at sea (haishang jubu zhanzheng 海上局部戰爭).
- To deter and defend invasion from the sea by imperialists and hegemonies.
- To maintain peace in the Asia-Pacific region.
- Strategic Missions (zhanlue renwu 戰略任務)
 - Peacetime Missions
 - ◆ Realize and safeguard national unification including Taiwan.
 - ◆ Serve the purpose of China’s foreign policy.
 - ◆ Deter invasion from the sea by potential enemies.
 - ◆ Conduct potential local war at sea.
 - ◆ Support the State’s socialist construction.
 - Wartime Missions
 - ◆ Conduct operations independently or coordinately with the Army and the Air Force.
 - ◆ Protect China’s own sea lanes of communication.
 - ◆ Participate in strategic nuclear counterstrike under the high command.
- Sea area of Operations (zuozhan haiqu 作戰海區)¹⁷
 - From today¹⁸ to a relatively long period: the first island chain, its peripheral, and the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea areas within the island chain.
 - The extension of the area of operations from “coastal defense” to “offshore defense” would favor China in terms of conducting defense operations at sea (haishang fangyu zuozhan 海上防禦作戰) in the “main operational directions” (zhuyao zuozhan fangxiang 主要作戰方向).
 - In the future, with stronger economy and level of technology: Gradually extend to the north Pacific and the second island chain.

From the promulgation of PLA Navy’s “offshore active defense strategy” to the maritime disputes in the East China Sea and the South China Sea today, one could conclude that objectives, missions, and especially the areas of operations are largely the same – for near sea contingencies.

Advancement of operational doctrines

The PLA Navy has been a beneficiary of China’s military doctrinal changes. To fight and to win a local war under high-tech and informationized conditions, the PLA Navy was given higher priorities in resources and procurements in order to fulfill its increasingly expanded

¹⁷ The term “sea area of operations” here can be understood as the concept of “area of responsibilities” (AOR) in the West.

¹⁸ The timeframe here is believed to mean the time around mid-1980s.

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missions. Under the PLA's overall military strategic guidelines, for more than a decade, the PLA Navy has engaged massive efforts to adapt to new security environments and requirements, and to develop new operational concepts as part of doctrinal enrichment and refinement.

1. Primacy of Technology

The PLA Navy, since the new military strategic guidelines was promulgated, has emphasized to fight and win a local war at sea under modern, and especially under high-tech conditions.¹⁹ In the new century, informationization has been identified as the core of modern naval warfare theory.²⁰ Parallel to the emphasis of “strengthening the army with science and technology” (keji qiangjun 科技強軍), the PLA Navy has advocated the importance of developing technologies and capabilities in electronic, electro-magnetic, and precision munitions, advanced command, control, surveillance and reconnaissance, all of which aiming at new capabilities for future naval operations far away from the Chinese coast.

2. Advocacy of Offensive

The PLA Navy continues to identify its strategy is defensive in nature, but at the campaign level, many have advocated that offensive operations are necessary at the campaign level and battle level.²¹ To fight a joint campaign at sea under informationized conditions, one PLA writer argues that the PLA Navy should establish a operational doctrine of “integration of offensive and defensive, but with offensive as the focus” (gongfangjiehe, yigongweizhu 攻防結合, 以攻為主), insisting that initiative (zhudong 主動權) can only be obtained through preemptive and offensive actions in an information operations at sea.²²

3. Emphasis of Jointness

The PLA Navy recognizes local war under informationized conditions can no longer rely on a single service, but joint operations. Modern naval operations has to combine information, platforms, intelligence, communications, firepower, logistics and to be

¹⁹ “PLA Navy Commander Shi Yunsheng on Naval Development Strategy,” Hong Kong Zijing Monthly, August, 2001. See <http://www.zijing.com.cn/200108/GB/08-02.htm>

²⁰ Liu Shengru, Liu Zheng and Wang Lei, “Innovation and Development of Naval Operations Doctrine under Informationized Conditions” (xinxihua tiaojianxia haijun zuozhan lilun de chuangxin yu fazhan), *Journal of National Defense University*, No. 11 (General No. 183), 2004, p.44.

²¹ Quan Jinfu, “Innovative Development of Our Naval Strategic Theory in the New Century” (xinshiji woguo haijun zhanlue lilun de chuangxin fazhan), *Journal of PLA Nanjing Institute of Politics*, No. 3, Vol. 20, 2004, pp. 82-83.

²² Wang Zheng, “Some Issues Concerning Information Operations in the Joint Naval Campaign” (haishang lianhe zhanyi xinxi zuozhan de jige wenti), *Journal of National Defense University*, No. 10 (General No. 182), 2004, p. 44.

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conducted in the form of integrated joint operations.²³ Establishing an “information operations coordination and command center for joint campaign at sea” (haishang lianhe zhanyi xinxi zuozhan xietiao yu zhihui zhongxin 海上聯合戰役信息作戰協調與指揮中心) and numerous related recommendation had been put forth for fighting a better coordinated local war at sea.²⁴

4. Expanded Area of Responsibilities

The PLA Navy considers the threats to China’s maritime interests have been much greater in the new century, including maritime territorial disputes and demarcations, piracy and terrorist activities at sea, security of sea lanes of communication and energy transportation.²⁵ China has been reported to contemplate a “string of pearls” strategy, securing cooperation and gaining access to locations from Pakistan to Bangladesh, Burma, Thailand, and Cambodia, along the energy sea lanes of communication for East Asian countries.²⁶ Regardless of the reliability of such report, the PLA Navy would sail beyond the area of responsibility defined by Admiral Liu Huaqing, and the “offshore” concept will be re-conceptualized.

5. Strive for Access Denial

When the PLA Navy’s “offshore active defense strategy” was first introduced, the depth of defense at sea was expanded from China’s coastal waters to the first island chain. In the past decade, as China’s fear of Taiwan moving toward *de jure* independence increased and the U.S.-Japan alliance consolidated, discussions in the PLA Navy over building up anti-access and area denial capabilities began to surface. Many had argued that China should increase long-range precision strike capability to dissuade possible third-party intervention in a conflict in the Taiwan Strait, and deny access of enemy force from force projection against China.²⁷

²³ Liu Shengru, Liu Zheng and Wang Lei, “Innovation and Development of Naval Operations Doctrine under Informationized Conditions,” p.44.

²⁴ Wang Zheng, “Some Issues Concerning Information Operations in the Joint Naval Campaign,” p. 45.

²⁵ Wu Shengli and Hu Yanlin, “Endeavor to Build a Powerful People’s Navy that Can Adapt to Its Historical Mission” (duanzao shiying wojun lishi shiming yaoqiu de qiangda renmin haijun), Special Edition in Commemorating the 80th Anniversary of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, *Qiushi Magazing*, No. 14, 2007, p. 32.

²⁶ For the concept of “string of pearls” strategy, please see: Edward Cody, “China Builds a Smaller Stronger Military: Modernization Could Alter Regional Balance of Power, Raising Stakes for U.S.” *Washington Post*, April 12, 2005, p. A1. See also, Institute of International and Strategic Studies, There’s a new game in Asia: India, Indian Ocean and China’s “string of pearls.” May 31, 2005 at <http://www.iiss.org/confPress-more.php?confID=514>; and Sudha Ramachandran, “Strategy of pearls” *The Standard*, March 5-6, 2005 at <http://www.thestandard.com.hk/stdn/std/Weekend/GC05Jp18.html>.

²⁷ Du Chaoping, “The Island Chain and Its Impact on Chinese Navy” (daolian dui zhongguo haijun de

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6. Robust Modernization Programs

The PLA Navy since the early 1990s, has engaged in very robust modernization programs: building large tonnage surface combatants equipped with modern sensors and weapons systems at very impressive speed, expanding the submarine fleet with better warfighting capabilities, improving anti-submarine warfare and fleet air defense capabilities, acquiring aero-refueling and expanded undersea replenishment capabilities.²⁸ All these increased assets and capabilities have enabled strategists and war planners to further develop new

Observations and Reflections

■ The PLA is not at the frontline

Regarding the escalated tensions in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, the deputy director of the contingency office in the PLA's General Staff Department publically stated that "China is opposed to the use or threat of use of force." Responded to the press inquiry in the same Ministry of Defense press conference on whether China is ready to launch a war in the South China Sea, Spokesman Geng Yansheng also stated that the core issue of the South China Sea issue involves sovereignty disputes over the Spratly Islands and demarcation of maritime rights, and these issues should be resolved through bilateral negotiations between the parties concerned. Geng said "China is willing to work with ASEAN to develop friendly and cooperative relations, including defense and security, jointly promote regional peace, stability and prosperity; and at the same time, the Chinese military is opposed to any military intervention in the region."²⁹

■ PLA on Scarborough

When the Scarborough Shoal dispute irrupted, Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie was in his "research tour" in the two provinces that border the South China Sea, Guangdong and Guangxi, from April 6 to 16. In a speech, he said: "Use the military with

yingxiang youduoda), *China's Navy Today*, May 2004, p. 40.

²⁸ For the analyses of the massive modernization of the PLA Navy's platforms and systems in the past decade, please see: Bernard Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy Enters the Twenty-First Century*, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001, pp. 92-112. Also, Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities," *CRS Report for Congress*, Order Code RL33153, updated October 18, 2007.

²⁹ Chi Le-yi, "PLA Oppose to Resolve South and East China Sea Disputes by Force," *China Times*, May 10, 2012,

<http://tw.news.yahoo.com/%E5%85%B1%E8%BB%8D-%E5%8F%8D%E5%B0%8D%E5%8B%95%E6%AD%A6%E8%A7%A3%E6%B1%BA%E5%8D%97-%E6%9D%B1%E6%B5%B7%E7%88%AD%E8%AD%B0-213000793.html>

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carefulness, gauge the situation when using the military, and use the military according to the law.” These, and other statements hinting at the use of military, may have caused the situation in the South China Sea to intensify.³⁰

PLA’s preference of diplomatic solution could be seen when Gen. Liang Guanglie met with his Philippine counterpart Voltaire Gazmin on the sidelines of the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting in Cambodia, a time when the disputes persisted in the South China Sea. Liang said the Philippines is an important neighbor of China and his country has made great efforts to improve the relationship between the two. Liang pointed out that Huangyan (Scarborough) Island is an inherent part of China’s territory. He ask the Philippines to resist from escalating the issue. Gazmin suggested that the two sides continue to open lines of communication and look for a peaceful solution.³¹

■ PLA on Diaoyutai

When meeting with U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta on September 18, 2012, Chinese Defense Minister Liang Guanglie finally spoke up the PLA’s position on the Diaoyutai dispute lingering from April. He blamed that Japan intention to “nationalize” the Diaoyutai Islands and heated up the dispute and China “firmly oppose the U.S. position that the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty applies to the Diaoyutai Islands.”³²

■ Does the PLA eager to fight?

Chi Le-yi, a veteran PLA watcher and senior report of the China Times made an interesting observation on China’s dilemma in handling the Scarborough standoff, arguing that China would become “paper tiger” if a use of force cannot bring about victory over the much weaker Philippines. He disagreed with many who argue that China was waiting for the Philippines to fire the first shot, instead China was exactly afraid of that first shot and being

³⁰ “Control of Chinese Regime’s Armed Forces Raised by Dispute With Philippines

During standoff in South China Sea top military officer pledge loyalty to Hu Jintao,” *The Epoch Times*, English edition, May 17, 2012

<http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/china-news/control-of-chinese-regimes-armed-forces-raised-by-dispute-with-philippines-231843.html>

³¹ “Chinese, Philippine Defense Ministers talk over peaceful solution of Huangyan Island dispute,”

CCTV.com-English Service, May 29, 2012, <http://english.cntv.cn/program/asiatoday/20120529/122946.shtml>

³² “Liang Guanglie: Japan is fully responsible in the Diaoyu Island dispute,” *China Review* (中國評論 zhongguo pinglun), 2012-09-19 09:09:39

<http://www.chinareviewnews.com/doc/1022/4/0/0/102240076.html?coluid=7&kindid=0&docid=102240076>

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forced to take a military option. He argued, a stalemate in a possible military conflict over the Scarborough would not only break the myth of “PLA is invincible” as Chinese propaganda claimed, but also undermined the reputation of the Communist Party.³³

■ Practical thoughts

In an interview with the *Modern Ship* (現代艦船 xian dai jian chuan), former chief of the PLA Navy’s equipment and technology department Rear Admiral Zhneg Ming (鄭明) raised five critical questions China needs to conduct further studies.³⁴ They are:

1. Should China deploy troops on those vital and strategically important, but uninhabited islets and shoals?
2. Should China build up production and logistic base on the Spratly Islands to support fishing and maritime scientific research activities?
3. How to maintain regular patrols of PLA Navy and maritime surveillance and law enforcement ships in the South China Sea.
4. How to find solutions or create a *fait accompli* against the piecemeal annexation by other claimants of South China Sea islands?
5. Should diplomatic measures and negotiations be always the first priority in dealing with future maritime disputes?

■ PLA-Civilian agencies collaboration

Analyzing China’s management of maritime sovereignty disputes can bring about more observations on civil-military relations – between the PLA and the non-military maritime affairs agencies. Though the PLA may not take the front seat, but it definitely maintains a close operational relationship with its civilian partners.

1. PLA is the ultimate guarantor for civilian maritime operations at sea, as a deterrent and as the back-up forces.
2. PLA can provide logistic support for civilian agencies, from ship transfer, professional education and training, to materials and munitions.
3. Civilian agencies can be advocate for PLA modernization, as we witnessed 20 years ago that the State Oceanic Administration has always voiced support of aircraft carrier building

■ Strategic Calculus: East is different from the South

Although both Diaoyutai and Huangyan (Scarborough) islands are involved with same

³³ Chi Le-yi, “If Not Total Victory, It Means Defeat,” China Times, May 10, 2012,

<http://news.chinatimes.com/mainland/11050506/112012051000189.html>

³⁴ Diaoyudao and Huangyandao incidents Might Be the Cut-in Point for the Formation and Implementation of Maritime Development Strategy,” *Modern Ships* (xiandai jianchuan) Vol. X, 2012, pp. 16-17.

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issue of maritime territorial claims, their strategic implications are far from the same. The Huangyan Island might be kept at the level of sovereignty claims or even less at the level of fishing disputes; the Diaoyutai however touches the boundary of the U.S.-Japan security alliance, and may directly lead to military conflict between the world's two largest economies and two nuclear powers.

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