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REVIEW ESSAY

CHINA'S NEW "IMPERIAL" NAVY

Bruce Elleman

Cole, Bernard D. *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy Enters the Twenty-first Century*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2001. 320pp. \$34.95

Kondapalli, Srikanth. *China's Naval Power*. New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2001. 252pp. (no price given)

Wright, Richard N. J. *The Chinese Steam Navy, 1862–1945*. London: Chatham, 2000. 208pp. \$48.95

At the end of the Cold War, the Soviet navy was eliminated almost overnight as the world's second most powerful naval force. Russia's Pacific fleet is now so poorly supplied and equipped that it rarely leaves port. This unprecedented re-

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versal of fortune has created a maritime vacuum throughout East Asia, leaving a wide range of regional powers, including the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, the Republic of Korea, and Japan, hoping to fill that vacuum.

Despite the current terror war, China still looms on the horizon as potentially the most important and dangerous rising power of the dawning Pacific century. The Chinese are intent upon using the fruits of their continuing economic growth to restore their historical position of regional dominance in Asia. The failure to integrate Japan (the rising power of the last century) peacefully into the international order cost the United States a world war in Asia. A similar failure

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with a nuclear-armed China could have catastrophic consequences. For the last two decades China has focused its development efforts on its economy, but recently its attention has turned toward the military, especially the navy, with the acquisition of capital ships from Russia. China is currently building a navy capable of projecting its power beyond its littorals. How it will choose to use its increasingly capable military has global implications.

Bruce Swanson's *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China's Quest for Seapower* (Naval Institute Press, 1982) and David Muller's *China as a Maritime Power* (Westview Press, 1983) were useful for their time, but the extraordinarily rapid global and Far Eastern maritime developments during the final years of the last century require an in-depth study and reevaluation of China's naval ambitions for the twenty-first century. Therefore, the publication of the three books reviewed here is particularly timely.

Richard Wright's *The Chinese Steam Navy, 1862–1945*, provides a wealth of data concerning the early history of China's modern navy. Although the bulk of this work is concerned with tracing (often in mind-numbing detail) the history and specifications of individual Chinese steamships, arsenals, and armaments, Wright emphasizes three important facets of China's early naval development: China used the navy not only to promote coastal defense but to quell domestic unrest; its fear of putting too much power into a single naval organization compelled it to divide its navy into several competing fleets; and it tended to purchase, rather than build itself, top-of-the-line ships and armaments. Each facet exhibits strong parallels with contemporary naval developments in China.

According to Wright, the initial impetus for a Chinese steam navy was not to promote China's foreign policy abroad but to quell internal unrest, the Taiping Rebellion of 1852–63. The so-called Lay-Osborn Flotilla, composed of seven British-built ships, was China's first serious effort to employ a modern fleet. Faced with an internal rebellion that threatened to overthrow the government, "it seemed logical to some of the authorities to try to acquire some proper warships to help in suppressing the revolt."

Although the flotilla never played an important role in the suppression of the Taipings and was broken up in 1863 and sold, this event emphasizes the importance of domestic factors in the construction of the Chinese navy. During the mid-twentieth century, the Nationalists tried and failed to use their navy to defeat the Communists. It can be argued that today's Chinese navy remains focused not on a foreign opponent but on a domestic one, since its most important function is to oppose what Beijing portrays as the illegal separatist government on Taiwan. Thus a constant objective of the Chinese navy during the past century and a half would appear to be the suppression of domestic rebellion.

Related to quelling domestic opposition has been China's goal to promote coastal defense. Since China is a land empire, a primary foreign policy objective throughout much of its history has been to keep other powers away from its borders—its navy has focused on a defensive role. In this regard, Japan has been one of China's traditional enemies since the sixteenth century, when Japanese "pirates" regularly raided the Chinese coast. During the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, the Japanese navy achieved a resounding victory against China, resulting in the integration of Taiwan into the Japanese empire. Finally, during the 1937–45 conflict, the Nationalists fought in vain to keep Japan out of Manchuria and central China, but the Japanese annihilated the Nationalist navy.

As China has grown in power, so has its military mission. In the last decade coastal defense has expanded to include increasingly vocal sovereignty claims over far-flung island chains. Given China's historical experience with Japan, and given its broadening regional ambitions, developing the ability to counter Japan remains a central concern of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). As recently as December 2001, Japanese coast guard ships sank a suspected North Korean spy ship in China's exclusive economic zone. Beijing protested and has sought to impede Japan's recovery of the wreckage. Immediately afterward, in January 2002, the People's Republic announced plans to purchase two additional Russian-built *Sovremenny*-class destroyers. These ships will add to China's growing capability to threaten Taiwan, on the one hand, and to reduce Japanese East Asian naval supremacy, on the other.

The historical focus of the Chinese navy on the suppression of domestic rebellion and defense against foreign invasion helps explain the PLAN's current organization and fleet structure. During the nineteenth century, the Chinese navy was divided into four fleets: one based in Canton (modern-day Guangzhou); another in Fuzhou, Fujian, the province that included Taiwan; the Nanyang, or "southern fleet," based near Shanghai; and the Beiyang, or "northern fleet," based in Port Arthur, Manchuria. Each fleet was responsible for defending a specific geographic area against attack. According to Wright the "southernmost provinces were invariably treated as entities completely separate from the central and northern sections of the country." In addition to emphasizing domestic and coastal security, this naval organization offered another advantage: subdividing the navy into regional fleets helped to ensure that these forces could not combine to challenge the central government. For China's autocratic rulers, the adage "divide and rule" was always a guiding principle.

Although dividing China's naval power may have helped its imperial rulers to insure against rebellion and dynastic overthrow, this policy proved disastrous in war. For example, during the 1880s China's northern fleet refused to help the southern fleet fight France, resulting in the loss of China's hold over its tributary

Annam (Vietnam). Ten years later, the southern fleet responded in kind, refusing to help the northern fleet during the Sino-Japanese War, and China lost control over Korea and Taiwan. As Wright observes, even a relatively simple redistribution of weapons from south to north during this war might have made “a significant improvement to the fleet’s gunnery performance.”

After World War II, the Nationalists centralized their navy only to learn the hard way of the dangers inherent in a unified Chinese navy. The flagship *Chongqing* mutinied and defected to the Communists in 1949, which spurred most of the Nationalist navy to defect during the following months. Concern over a similar embarrassment clearly motivated the Communists to divide the PLAN into northern, central, and southern fleets; should the PRC ever reunify with Taiwan, its navy presumably would become the fourth fleet, filling the former role of the Fuzhou fleet.

The PRC’s decision to reintroduce the traditional fleet organization suggests that precluding domestic rebellion is still its main concern. However, Beijing faces a tradeoff. Just as a divided navy reduces the likelihood of a military insurrection against the Chinese Communist Party, it also weakens its power against China’s enemies. Such a divide-and-rule strategy precludes the high level of fleet coordination and ship-to-ship interoperability necessary to defeat any major foreign foe.

Finally, as discussed in great detail by Wright, China’s nineteenth-century imperial navy was more bought than built, and therefore, it “could be truly said to be at the cutting edge of the technology of the Victorian era.” Beginning in the 1860s, China became a major importer of European naval technology, and by 1882 the Chinese navy consisted of approximately fifty steamships. While half were built with foreign help in China, at either the Shanghai or Fuzhou shipyard, the largest and most modern ships were purchased from abroad, especially from Britain and Germany.

By far the most important ships in the late-nineteenth-century Chinese fleet were two German-built battleships, *Ding Yuan* and *Zhen Yuan*, each displacing 7,430 tons. Because they were protected by fourteen-inch armor belts and bore four twelve-inch Krupp guns, these two ships were thought to be invincible. Certainly, they were more powerful than any battleship then in service in the Japanese navy.

Yet while these two battleships were perhaps rightfully considered formidable, they were poorly manned and did not carry sufficient ammunition either to destroy the opponent’s fleet or protect their own. As a result, China was easily defeated by Japan, losing five ships and destroying none during the 17 September 1894 battle of the Yellow Sea. Also, once China lost control of its repair docks at Port Arthur, nothing could be done to put its damaged foreign-built ships

back in service. The *Ding Yuan* was eventually scuttled, near the end of the Sino-Japanese War, while the *Zhen Yuan* was taken intact by Japan and added to the Japanese fleet.

China's contemporary navy has repeated this historical pattern of using foreign help to build its support ships, while buying warships from abroad as the vanguard. Although the PLAN appears to be justifiably proud of *Shenzhen*, its most recent Chinese-built *Luhai*-class destroyer, the PLAN's real fighting strength resides in the Russian-built *Sovremenny*-class guided-missile destroyers. China has already received two of these ships, while two more are on order and could be ready as early as 2005. No matter how powerful the *Sovremennys* might appear on paper, if they are forced to act in isolation for lack of a unified fleet, they could offer only limited resistance to a coordinated attack.

Likewise, armaments and maintenance remain a major problem. The PLAN purchased from Russia the SS-N-22 Sunburn ship-to-ship missile, currently one of China's most lethal naval weapons. The *Sovremennys* reportedly carried fifty-four Sunburn missiles upon delivery. But China does not have the facilities to repair these foreign-built ships. The destroyers would have to be returned to Russia for repairs and refitting.

Srikanth Kondapalli's *China's Naval Power* distinguishes itself by making extensive and expert use of a wide range of Chinese-language sources to look at the contemporary PLAN. Kondapalli's approach is mainly bottom-up. He discusses in great detail the PLAN's specific structure, ships, and armaments. He also devotes much attention to the command structure and organization, personnel and training, and the near and long-term strategic intentions of China's navy. Kondapalli sees the glass as half-full, arguing that "the Chinese Navy is attempting a comprehensive transition in strategy and tactics, equipment acquisition, training programmes and so on to leapfrog into higher naval capabilities." While the United States and its close allies, such as Japan, may not be directly threatened, Kondapalli warns that China's other neighbors, such as his own country of India, will certainly be affected by these changes as "tensions are bound to rise with the rise of China's naval power."

Although Kondapalli notes that the PLAN's structure, "the location of the three sea fleets, naval bases, and so on," is similar to those of earlier Chinese navies, he argues that the PLAN is an outgrowth of the PLA's infantry units, which means that "the command and control mechanisms, political and engineering techniques and logistical aspects differed considerably from their [naval] predecessors." The Chinese Communist Party, through the Central Military Commission, retains full authority over the PLAN's strategy and performance. However, since the PLAN's highest loyalty is to the party and not to the Chinese nation as a

whole, this structure closely parallels the imperial navy's loyalty to the Manchus of the Qing dynasty rather than to the Han Chinese people.

Because of the structural subordination of the PLAN, the PLA maintains authority over the navy. The naval commanders of the North Sea Fleet, the East Sea Fleet, and the South Sea Fleet act only as deputy commanders under the commanding PLA generals in the three respective military regions. During times of war, orders to the fleets would, in theory, come directly to the fleets through the military regions, not through the naval hierarchy. This PLA-dominated command structure helps guarantee the PLAN's loyalty to the party.

Each fleet is assigned separate tasks and responsibilities. For example, the North Sea Fleet, based at Qingdao, is the largest and so represents the "combat backbone" of the Chinese navy. Originally focused on the Soviet Union, the northern fleet now concentrates on the Korean Peninsula, Japan, and U.S. naval forces. The East Sea Fleet, based in Shanghai, is responsible for Taiwan. The first two *Sovremennys* were made part of this fleet and are based at Dinghai, located northwest of Taiwan. Accordingly, with the "reunification of China top on the agenda of the PRC leadership[,] . . . the East Sea Fleet is expected to play a crucial role in the coming years." Finally, the South Sea Fleet based in Zhanjiang is focused on Vietnam and the Philippines. It has responsibility for defending China's claims to the disputed South China Sea. The EP-3 incident of April 2001 took place within the jurisdiction of this fleet.

Kondapalli admits that the PLAN's division into three fleets may contribute to contemporary problems "related to logistics, training and so on," but he is optimistic that it will not hinder China's maritime progress. He even suggests that there might be benefits: "The specialized nature of warfare in the South China Sea and other areas may result in confining naval equipment and men to a particular fleet only, though redeployment in other fleets has not been unheard of." Kondapalli may be underestimating these structural problems. For example, there have been reports of unrest among southern crews assigned northern officers and among northern crews assigned southern officers. Regional loyalties still threaten Chinese naval effectiveness, just as they did a century ago in the first Sino-Japanese War.

Kondapalli also tries to evaluate the qualifications of the men and women who staff the PLAN. He allocates a significant proportion of his book to describing the background of naval officers and judging the quality of their training. He concludes that beginning in the 1950s, PLAN training was based almost completely on Soviet training manuals and procedures. Many of these Soviet techniques continue to hold sway to this day, especially with regard to the basic division of the subject materials into a "common curriculum," "professional techniques," and "tactics."

This Soviet-style training was especially important when most Chinese naval recruits were uneducated peasants. However, during the past two decades the PLAN leadership has attempted to increase the number of college graduates in its officer corps. By the mid-1990s, 85 percent of the officers in command of naval vessels reportedly had college educations. To increase the percentage of educated officers across the board, beginning in 1999 the PLAN began to recruit “1,000 officers annually from non-military universities and colleges.”

As part of a special “Captains Project,” promising officers were sent back to college for advanced study, especially in the physical sciences and engineering. The “Crack Units Project” emphasized officer training in advanced weapons systems, while in the “Thousand Generals Project,” one thousand officers, including many from the navy, were promoted to the rank of general or admiral on the theory that “these officers would [better] foresee the modernization programme of the armed forces in the coming decades.” These kinds of incentive programs are becoming more and more common as China builds for itself and purchases from abroad more advanced technology ships and weapon systems.

The PLAN continues to emphasize political training. Study of the party’s political line is required. Officers are judged for promotion in part based on how well they carry out the party’s directives. Many aspects of the political indoctrination system, such as the focus on party discipline and unquestioning obedience to party orders, were adopted directly from the Soviet Union and have continued unchanged to this day. As a result of the overall effectiveness of political training, Kondapalli concludes, “the political work system has contributed to a relatively stable, cohesive and politically vibrant navy.”

When it comes to technical training, however, China “remains far below global levels, including that of its neighbors like Japan, Taiwan, and India.” The large range of equipment, both indigenous and foreign, has greatly complicated training. China has had “mixed results” solving this problem. As China “equips itself with modern, second and probably third-generation naval vessels in the near future, this contradiction between men and material/technology becomes acute.” Kondapalli further warns, “In training, the PLAN is still beleaguered with problems of inadequate training time, limitations in live-fire exercises, insufficient missile allowances, ineffective unification of command and control, integration of different weapon systems, etc.” These views parallel Wright’s observations about China’s nineteenth-century navy.

Looking at the PLAN’s near and long-term naval strategy, Kondapalli sees significant changes from the coastal defense strategy adopted by the imperial Chinese navy. He concludes that China’s strategy has recently evolved from coastal defense and shore denial to a more general policy of “sea denial,” and that the growth of the PLAN inventory will “enable China to launch effectively into the

high seas between the second and third decades of the new millennium.” China’s decision to move toward a “blue-water navy” is generally credited to the PLAN commander, Liu Huaqing, who “is likened to Alfred Thayer Mahan for his emphasis on sea power.” Liu led the PLA’s influential “sea power faction” under Deng Xiaoping.

A large share of the credit for this maritime strategy must go to Russia, however, since PLAN purchases of Russian equipment have let it skip many developmental stages. This applies specifically to the *Sovremennys*, Sunburn missiles, Kilo-class submarines, and Su-27 and Su-30 aircraft. China has also purchased the *Kuznetsov*-class aircraft carrier *Varyag* (though for what purpose is unclear) from Ukraine. According to Kondapalli, for China to pursue an effective sea-denial policy would require “at least two aircraft carriers, two SSBNs, about six SSNs, twenty diesel-powered conventional submarines, 16–18 destroyers and about thirty frigates.” According to Kondapalli’s positive estimates, China could develop its own aircraft carrier as soon as 2005, allowing it to achieve these goals soon after 2010.

But for all his warnings of China’s projected rapid naval growth, Kondapalli also sees practical limitations to its strategy. In addition to the PLAN’s “deficiencies in power projection, the PLAN’s offensive operations are also constrained by the need to allocate and maintain at least some of its naval forces at homeports for such contingencies as opposing possible enemy expeditions against the Chinese mainland.” Thus, in the end, Kondapalli acknowledges that the requirements of China’s extensive coastal defense network may provide practical barriers to any aggressive naval strategy by the PRC government.

Bernard D. Cole’s *The Great Wall at Sea: China’s Navy Enters the Twenty-first Century* is the most recent of the three books reviewed here. Although not as heavily based on archival and Chinese sources and therefore less packed with detail than the first two books, this work does a better job following Clausewitz’s advice to avoid the “weeds” or extraneous details that can cloud our understanding and instead focus on the core issues relating to China’s future naval strategy. Cole emphasizes China’s territorial and economic interests, its doctrinal and operational goals, and its maritime strategy. Based on this top-down approach, Cole sees the glass half-empty; he is clearly less convinced than Kondapalli that China can build a blue-water fleet in the near future. He concludes, “Beijing apparently does not believe current maritime concerns are serious enough to change China’s historic dependence on continental power, or to build a modern maritime force that will dominate the Asia-Pacific.”

China’s power projection and economic interests are primarily regional, not global. Therefore, Beijing’s main focus is on the maritime regions contiguous to China. In the near future, the U.S. Navy will remain dominant in the Pacific and

East Asian waters. Beijing views Washington's security relations with Tokyo and military support for Taipei as attempts to stop China from protecting its natural territorial and economic interests throughout the Far East. This perception, whether real or imagined, has had a deep impact on Beijing's strategic concepts and plans. It sees "a hostile world in which the United States is using Europe and Japan to contain China and prevent it from attaining its rightful global status." Although this book came out immediately prior to the events of 11 September 2001, the deployment of American troops in Afghanistan and throughout Central Asia can only exacerbate such feelings of insecurity.

Viewed from this perspective, China's desire to enforce its territorial claims throughout the extensive maritime regions along its borders constitutes a key motivation for China to build a strong navy. Cole lists six of the disputed territorial claims: the Diaoyutai (known in Japan as the Senkaku Islands), Taiwan, Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands, South China Sea, and China's maritime border with Vietnam. Although Taiwan is undoubtedly China's most important political problem, the territorial dispute over the South China Sea is a close second, because of the key international sea lines of communication involved. Beijing currently claims the entire Paracel and Spratly Islands, plus all the waters of the South China Sea. China's navy has repeatedly clashed with forces from Vietnam and has had territorial frictions with the Philippines. Cole predicts that Beijing will rely increasingly on the PLAN for "ensuring the security of China's insular territorial claims in the South and East China Seas."

China's territorial and economic interests arguably go hand in hand, since major shipping lanes, extensive fisheries, and a wide variety of energy sources are located in these regions. In particular, a high percentage of China's petroleum and natural gas reserves are found beneath offshore waters. Since these areas "lie outside Beijing's normal military parameters," potential threats could only be "met by naval and air forces." Many potential energy sources have yet to be explored. Chinese estimates for energy reserves in the South China Sea are impressive—213 billion barrels of oil and two thousand trillion cubic feet of natural gas. Although Cole cautions that these estimates may be inflated, he concedes that "China's belief in these estimates is more important than their dubious accuracy, and Beijing's high expectations strengthen its determination to protect its sovereignty claims in the Spratly Islands."

Cole demonstrates that China has maritime assets that the PLAN must protect, but can China's navy do the job? Cole provides a much more cautious evaluation of the PLAN's capabilities than does Kondapalli, acknowledging significant strides in such fields as surface ships, naval aviation, and ballistic missiles but also noting serious shortfalls in antisubmarine warfare, systems integration, and maintenance and supply capabilities. Perhaps China's most

serious failing is its “platform-centric” naval and air operations, based for the most part on outdated (compared to the United States) Russian technology, such as the *Sovremennys* and Kilos. Moreover, even those surface ships and submarines produced wholly in China rely “heavily on foreign-designed/produced engineering, weapons, and sensor systems.” Thus, based on its existing force structure, “China’s Navy has a very long way to go before becoming a twenty-first-century force.”

Whether China’s navy can succeed in its overall mission of defending China’s national interests may depend not only on equipment but also on its operational doctrine. Cole believes that doctrine could help “compensate for some materiel shortfalls.” Assuming that the United States is China’s main enemy, then the PLAN would need to find an “operational schema that will allow them to defeat, or at least sidestep, U.S. naval and air power.” One possibility would be to rely on “speed, mobility, flexibility, and initiative” in order to attack preemptively a point of American weakness. While this kind of asymmetric warfare may succeed in taking the United States by surprise once, its effectiveness would diminish as the U.S. Navy brings additional assets into the theater of operations. Therefore, Cole concludes that any direct confrontation between China and the United States is unlikely. He suggests that “Chinese maritime power for at least the next fifty years will lack the capability for successful direct confrontation with U.S. forces.”

If the U.S. Navy does not have to worry about the PLAN for some time, this is not the case for other Asian powers. China can easily dominate most of its South and Southeast Asian neighbors and has already chalked up naval victories against Vietnam. India, in particular, is increasingly concerned about what it sees as China’s goal of establishing a naval presence in the Indian Ocean. However, with regard to Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, the PLAN still lags roughly ten to twenty years behind.

Cole looks to China’s maritime strategy to determine whether China will pose a future threat to the United States. In 1997 China’s president, Jiang Zemin, urged the Chinese navy to “build the nation’s maritime great wall.” Cole is quick to caution that “Beijing is learning, however, that modern navies are technology-dependent and resource-intensive; they cannot be acquired quickly.” To overcome these technical and financial shortcomings requires a coherent naval strategy. Cole suggests that China has formulated its strategy largely by learning and adopting certain preconceptions from the former Soviet Union. Also, advocates of a strong Chinese navy have attempted to use the U.S. threat to overcome the continuing army dominance of the PLAN. Far from overcoming interservice rivalries, there are those in the navy who fuel such rivalries. By focusing on U.S. naval power and by accusing the United States of using

its navy as a tool for global hegemony, they hope to acquire a “greater role . . . in the national security policy process.”

Although China cannot currently challenge the United States militarily, the PLAN hopes to develop a maritime strategy that will allow it to “overcome recognized shortcomings in doctrine, equipment, and training.” If properly executed under the right circumstances, such a strategy could allow China to negate Japan’s technological lead, retake Taiwan, secure its territorial claims to the South China Sea, counter India’s growing naval power, and protect its vital sea lines of communication. However, the impediments to such a policy are great. Cole suggests that China can attain its goals only if, first, “Beijing changes the national prioritization of resource allocation necessary to build a modern maritime force,” and second, “if Japan and the United States allow it to occur.” The chance of both these factors happening simultaneously he finds to be “extremely unlikely.”

Cole concludes that China is unwilling to invest in a real blue-water navy; this makes moot China’s regional maritime ambitions. Therefore, although he agrees with Kondapalli that the PLAN has developed quickly in recent years, its strategies remain similar to the “coastal defense” policies of the former imperial navy. In effect, Cole merges aspects of Kondapalli and Wright, since he agrees that China’s strategy is based on “sea denial”; but without an effective blue-water navy China must rely on its “flotilla defense” forces to guard its coastal waters from attack. Thus China, “like Britain circa 1907 and the Soviet Union in the 1920s, is still building a navy capable of nothing more than expanded coastal defense. The area to be defended has been increased from a few miles to more than two hundred, and the primary weapons of choice may be cruise and ballistic missiles vice torpedoes, but the concept is little changed.”

If Cole is correct, in the coming years the PLAN will function as little more than a newly modernized Chinese “imperial” navy, with the Chinese Communist Party serving in the place of a hereditary autocracy. Although it will have better ships, submarines, and missiles, the immediate goals of this navy will be much as before—putting down domestic uprisings and protecting China’s lengthy coastline from attack. This strategy will necessarily focus the PLAN’s energies against Taiwan, on the one hand, and against China’s closest Asian neighbors—Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam—on the other.

Although these three authors do excellent jobs of analyzing the Chinese navy, there are still many unanswered questions. Chinese ambitions cannot be understood outside their geopolitical context. For the last century, China, Japan, and Russia have been locked in a struggle for influence over Northeast Asia. This has involved shifting spheres of influence in Central Asia, Mongolia, Manchuria,

and Korea. Contrary to the viewpoints expressed here, which emphasize Chinese relations with the West, from the Chinese point of view the essential foreign policy concerns have been with their long and disputed border with Russia and their ambitions to reverse the verdict of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 by restoring China to its historical dominance over the Far East—that is, to supplant Japan as the premier regional power.

It is necessary to put Chinese technological acquisitions and naval development into this regional context in order to examine both China's evolving international ambitions and its current military strategies. Some inadequately answered questions are: What have been the overriding foreign policy objectives of the Chinese government? What naval strategies have the Chinese employed to realize these objectives? What technological acquisitions has China made in order to support these strategies? How have the answers to such questions changed over time?

Other important questions involve China's relations with the Soviet Union and Russia. What was the nature and amount of Soviet naval assistance to China during the 1945–1960 period, including financial assistance, technology transfers, specific military hardware, and military doctrine? What was their impact on the formation, training, and tactics of the PLAN? What was the impact of the 1960 Sino-Soviet split over Chinese naval technology and doctrine? How did the Chinese continue to use their Soviet equipment and, more importantly, to what extent did they continue using Soviet-based technology, doctrine, tactics, and training methods? How did this early period of Sino-Soviet cooperation and then competition affect the renewal of Sino-Russian relations and naval technology transfer in the late 1980s and, especially, in the 1990s?

Finally, some specific questions concerning Japan are: How has the post–World War II development of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force affected Chinese naval policy? How has the U.S.-Japan security pact, particularly the provision of advanced U.S. naval technology, impacted the force structure of the Chinese navy? How will China react to Japan's recent decision to send warships to the Indian Ocean in support of the anti-terror war?

Until the Chinese navy is put into its proper geopolitical context—which, from the Chinese point of view, has traditionally centered on Russia and Japan, and is only secondarily concerned with the United States—it will be all too easy to misjudge China's intentions.