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China Maritime Report No. 8: Winning Friends and Influencing People: Naval Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics

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Summary

In recent years, Chinese leaders have called on the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to carry out tasks related to naval diplomacy beyond maritime East Asia, in the "far seas." Designed to directly support broader strategic and foreign policy objectives, the PLAN participates in a range of overtly political naval diplomatic activities, both ashore and at sea, from senior leader engagements to joint exercises with foreign navies. These activities have involved a catalogue of platforms, from surface combatants to hospital ships, and included Chinese naval personnel of all ranks. To date, these acts of naval diplomacy have been generally peaceful and cooperative in nature, owing primarily to the service's limited power projection capabilities and China's focus on more pressing security matters closer to home. However, in the future a more blue-water capable PLAN could serve more overtly coercive functions to defend and advance China's rapidly growing overseas interests when operating abroad.

Introduction

On October 8, 2018, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) hospital ship *Peace Ark* arrived in St. George, the capital of Grenada, for its second trip since first visiting in 2015. Over the ensuing eight days, the Chinese crew carried out medical examinations and treatments for thousands of local residents. The *Peace Ark*'s port call reflected, in part, a modernizing navy's pride in its ability to showcase its sleek, sturdy ships and build international good will. But why did Beijing send the *Peace Ark* to a tiny Caribbean island 16,000 km away not once, but twice, in five years? The decision is even more puzzling when one considers that the PLAN did not send a single ship to neighboring Japan, a mere 1,000 km away, over the same time period.¹ Neither economics nor feasibility explains the disparity. The trade volume with Grenada is negligible from Beijing's perspective, while Japan remains a top trading partner. And the distance from China to Grenada is 16 times farther than to Japan.

Foreign policy concerns and politics provide the most compelling explanation. The low level of naval diplomatic activity between China and Japan reflects the reality of the problematic relationship between the two historic rivals. Similarly, Grenada's role in the longstanding diplomatic feud between China and Taiwan informs Beijing's decision to send the *Peace Ark* on multiple voyages to the distant island. In 1989, Grenada's government switched recognition back to Taiwan after normalizing relations with Beijing in 1985, but it reversed course again in 2005, dropping formal ties with Taiwan and restoring them once again with Beijing. A grateful China provided a grant of \$8.7 million in 2013.² Two years later, Beijing arranged the first of the two *Peace Ark* visits to build popular support and further demonstrate the material benefits of formal ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Underscoring the political value of the visits, China's ambassador to Grenada hailed the *Peace Ark*'s 2019 visit for "spreading the concepts of peace, development, cooperation, and win-win."³

¹ As of May 2019, China last sent a PLAN ship to Japan in 2007. See "Missile Destroyer Sets off for Visit to Japan," *China Daily*, November 21, 2007.

² "China Giving Grenada US\$8.7 Million Grant While Considering Other Assistance," Government of Grenada website, June 3, 2013, https://www.gov.gd/egov/news/2013/jun13/03_06_13/item_3/china_grenada_us_8m_grant%20.html.

³ "Chinese Hospital Ship Peace Ark Visits Grenada," *Seawaves*, October 9, 2018, <http://seawaves.com/2018/10/09/chinese-hospital-ship-peace-ark-visits-grenada/>



Image 1. Chinese hospital ship *Peace Ark* arrives in St. George's, Grenada (October 2, 2018)⁴

As this example shows, acts of naval diplomacy involve the PLAN at its most political. Considerations of foreign policy and political meaning weigh on virtually every aspect of naval diplomacy, from decisions about which ports to visit, to schedules and cancellations of high-level visits, to the location, timing, and content of bilateral and multilateral exercises. Recent diplomatic and political developments also provide crucial context for understanding the meaning of specific acts of naval diplomacy. As China's interest in foreign policy and international leadership takes a more activist turn, the role of the PLAN as an instrument of foreign policy appears poised to ascend new heights, which elevates in importance the study of China's naval diplomacy.

This report provides an overview of the PLAN's approach to naval diplomacy, focusing on its activity outside maritime East Asia, in what it calls the "far seas." It begins by briefly reviewing the concept of "naval diplomacy," noting the emphasis on both coercive and persuasive dimensions in writings by naval theorists. It next examines the particularities of Chinese naval diplomacy, by discussing the primary drivers that have led China to pursue naval diplomacy and sharing insights from the writings of Chinese theorists on the topic. The report then outlines elements of the PLAN's practice of naval diplomacy through the following four aspects: the political and strategic context of Chinese naval diplomacy, the core tasks of Chinese naval diplomacy, the personnel and platforms involved, and the range of activities related to naval diplomacy. The report concludes with some observations about the implications of China's naval diplomacy for the U.S. Navy.

What is Naval Diplomacy?

Early analysts of naval power such as Julian Corbett and Alfred Thayer Mahan appreciated the importance of maritime forces in peacetime. However, only in the Cold War did thinkers begin to theorize about how naval assets could contribute to a nation's foreign policy through actions short of

⁴ 海军和平方舟医院船时隔三年再访格林纳达 ["Navy's Hospital Ship Peace Ark Visits Grenada Again Three Years Later"], 中国军网 [China Military Online], October 3, 2018, www.81.cn/jwgz/2018-10/03/content_9303331_2.htm.

war. In his influential 1971 book, James Cable elaborated a theory of “gunboat diplomacy” in which national leaders employ—or threaten to employ—limited naval force to secure some advantage in an international dispute.⁵

More recently, scholars have pointed out that although the term “gunboat diplomacy” is often used interchangeably with “naval diplomacy,” the two differ in meaning. Historically, the term “gunboat diplomacy” has referred to instances in which a great power deployed naval assets in a coercive action against another state. Naval diplomacy is a broader concept that includes non-coercive applications. In 1974, Edward Luttwak described naval diplomacy as non-war actions aimed at affecting the perceptions of target audiences towards either deterrent or “supportive,” i.e., persuasive, ends.⁶ Soviet Navy Admiral Sergey Gorshkov similarly emphasized the soft power potential of naval diplomacy. He regarded the Soviet navy as an “instrument for a peace-loving policy and friendship of the people.”⁷

In short, naval diplomacy may be regarded as a broad, inclusive concept that applies to both coercive and influence-oriented activities by any maritime power. For the purposes of this study, “naval diplomacy” will thus be defined as the “use of naval forces in a manner short of combat operations to primarily fulfill some foreign policy-related goal.” This admittedly broad definition includes all forms of coercive diplomacy by naval means, as well as passive and subtler demonstrations of naval power meant to persuade or otherwise incur goodwill.

Defining Chinese Naval Diplomacy

For the first few decades following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the PLAN’s lack of interest in naval diplomacy stemmed, in part, from its limited ability to sail beyond coastal waters. However, since the 2000s, interest in military diplomacy and the sub-discipline of naval diplomacy has expanded dramatically.

For the PLA, naval diplomacy is a form of “military diplomacy” (军事外交). The 2011 edition of *PLA Military Terminology*, the Chinese military’s authoritative lexicon, defined military diplomacy as the

external relationships pertaining to the military and related affairs between countries and groups of countries, including military personnel exchange, military negotiations, arms control negotiations, military aid, military intelligence cooperation, military technology cooperation, international peacekeeping, military alliance activities, etc. Military diplomacy is an important component of a country’s foreign relations.⁸

Chinese officials emphasize that military diplomacy is not limited to peacetime activities. In a 2011 interview, Ministry of National Defense Director of Foreign Affairs Qian Lihua listed alliance-building activities and diplomatic efforts to build political support in World War II and the Korean War as examples of war-time applications of military diplomacy.⁹ However, the wartime examples

⁵ James Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy: Political Applications of Limited Naval Forces*, (London: Palgrave, 1971), p.14

⁶ Edward Luttwak, *The Political Uses of Seapower*, (Washington, DC: John Hopkins Press, 1974), p. 3.

⁷ Kevin Rowlands, “Decided Preponderance at Sea: Naval Diplomacy in Strategic Thought,” *Naval War College Review*, vol. 65, no. 4 (Autumn 2012), pp. 1-17.

⁸ 中国人民解放军军语 [*PLA Military Terminology*], (Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences Press, 2011), p. 1063.

⁹ 新中国军事外交：回顾与前瞻：专访国防部外事办公室主任钱利华少将 [“New China Military Diplomacy: Retrospect and Prospects: Interview with Defense Ministry Foreign Affairs Director Major General Qian Lihua”], 新华 [Xinhua], February 27, 2011, http://www.gov.cn/jrzq/2011-02/27/content_1812282.htm.

cited involved primarily diplomatic activities to support relevant war efforts. Combat operations obviously also aim to support political and foreign policy objectives, but Chinese authors generally regard combat as beyond the scope of military diplomacy. Yet Chinese authors do describe crisis prevention and management as falling within the scope of military diplomacy, as these activities involve diplomatic and military actions short of combat to manage dangerous situations.¹⁰

The PLA maintains a distinction between “military diplomacy” and “military foreign affairs work” (军队外事工作). The 2011 *PLA Military Terminology* defined the latter as “the military’s work in conducting foreign exchanges and cooperation within the military domain.” Relevant activities include “personnel exchanges, defense consultations, military assistance, arms control, military technology exchanges and cooperation, and foreign military propaganda.”¹¹ As the definitions show, the two concepts overlap considerably. The difference lies in the area of emphasis and mode of operation. Military diplomacy may best be thought of as a broad, overarching concept that connects all of the military’s foreign affairs work to the nation’s diplomacy. Given its close relationship with foreign policy, it carries a stronger political and theoretical connotation and is properly the domain of central leaders, national strategists, and both foreign policy and naval theorists. Reflecting the full range of diplomacy, it may involve all types of activities, including those with potentially hostile intentions. In contrast, military foreign affairs work focuses principally on the practical, technical aspects of executing the relevant tasks, rather than the political connotation of relevant actions, and its formulation and execution generally resides with the military leadership.

The PLAN’s approach follows this logic closely. Since the “diplomacy” aspects of “military diplomacy” is principally determined by central leaders, the PLAN defers to the central leadership to define the “diplomacy” (i.e., national strategic and foreign policy) goals of naval diplomacy as well. Accordingly, senior naval officers rarely use the term “naval diplomacy” in media reports. Instead, they tend to use the term “naval foreign affairs work” (海军外事工作), which underscores their responsibility for the primarily operational and technical details of the same work.

Because this report focuses on issues of foreign policy, politics, and strategy, it will employ the term “naval diplomacy,” while bearing in mind the different terms in PLAN media reports. Drawing from both Western theoretical sources and Chinese sources, this report defines “Chinese naval diplomacy” as the “set of non-combat missions and tasks performed by the PLAN that aim primarily to *persuade* or *dissuade* foreign political actors in accordance with the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) foreign policy goals within a specific domestic and international context.”

The link between naval activity exclusive of combat and a foreign policy goal is essential to the concept of naval diplomacy because navies engage in all kinds of non-war activities, such as training and maintenance, unrelated to foreign policy. Distinguishing an act of naval diplomacy is complicated by the fact that some activities can serve more than one purpose. For example, disaster relief missions can aim to ease human suffering and provide operational experience for sailors, but they can also serve foreign policy goals such as bolstering bilateral ties or enhancing a nation’s influence with a partner country. For an activity to be considered one of naval diplomacy, foreign policy considerations should be paramount, although this does not exclude the possibility that the same act could concurrently serve other purposes.

¹⁰ 储永正 [Chu Yongzheng, ed.], *军事外交学 [Military Diplomacy]*, (Beijing, China: NDU Press, 2015), pp. 117-125.

¹¹ *PLA Military Terminology*, p. 1063.

The definition highlights two distinctive features of China's approach to naval diplomacy. First, it emphasizes how the Navy's diplomatic activity serves the political goals of the CCP. This stands in contrast to navies such as the United States Navy, in which the practice of naval diplomacy serves the nation's interest, rather than that of any particular political party. In practice, the CCP has defined its mission largely in terms of furthering the nation's interest, but there remains the possibility that the Navy could be sent on missions to bolster the party's political agenda. The deployment of the *Peace Ark* hospital ship to weaken Taiwan's diplomatic ties may be an example of how naval diplomacy can in some cases aim, in part, to strengthen the CCP's political narrative and vision of unification. A second distinctive feature of China's approach to naval diplomacy is the tendency to link coercive practices to issues related to ongoing territorial and maritime disputes. Because China has no such disputes outside of Asia, its practice of naval diplomacy tends to favor friendly and cooperative approaches in the far seas while featuring a blend of coercive and cooperative actions along China's maritime periphery, in the near seas. However, the definition does not exclude the possibility that China might apply naval diplomacy for coercive or deterrent purposes in the far seas.

Drivers of China's Naval Diplomacy

Reflecting the country's rapid surge in economic and national power, China's leaders at the turn of the century concluded that the country faced a two-decade "period of strategic opportunity" in which the country could achieve rapid development. At the 16th Party Congress (November 2002), the Central Committee outlined a vision of "national rejuvenation" in which the CCP oversaw an increase in the standards of living for the population and the nation's revitalization as a great power by mid-century.¹² Official Chinese documents of the time also redefined security in terms of the nation's basic security, sovereignty and territory, as well as in terms of an expanding array of overseas economic, cyber, space, and other interests needed to sustain growth.¹³ Officials concluded that China accordingly needed to more actively shape an international security environment in a manner that featured cooperation on transnational threats, frequent dialogue, and the peaceful settlement of disputes.¹⁴

Central leaders directed the military to adjust its role to meet these needs more effectively. In 2004, General Secretary Hu Jintao's outlined a series of "historic missions of the armed forces," which expanded the variety and type of military tasks to include peacekeeping, anti-terrorism, and an array of tasks later deemed within the scope of "military diplomacy."¹⁵

Since then, the imperative to expand China's role in shaping the international security environment has grown even more urgent. At the 18th Party Congress (November 2012), Chinese leaders outlined ambitions to expand China's involvement in the world economy and global governance.¹⁶ Beijing subsequently announced major initiatives to expand infrastructure and extend trade pacts, such as the

¹² "Full Text of Jiang Zemin's Report at the 16th Party Congress," *Xinhua*, November 17, 2002, <http://www.china.org.cn/english/features/49007.htm>.

¹³ "China's Defense White Paper," State Council Information Office, December 9, 2002, <http://china.org.cn/e-white/20021209/index.htm>.

¹⁴ "China's Position Paper on the New Security Concept," PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2002, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/xw/t27742.htm>.

¹⁵ Timothy Heath, "Towards Strategic Leadership: CCP-PLA Relations in the Hu Jintao Era," in Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Travis Tanner, eds., *Assessing the People's Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2014), pp. 399-440.

¹⁶ Timothy Heath, "The 18th Party Congress: Policy Blueprint for the Xi Administration," Jamestown Foundation *China Brief*, vol. 12, no. 23 (November 30, 2012), www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40182&cHash=15c31780cea335c08645f1644ef17799#.Vhe7yek4SM4.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—a potentially massive project to expand infrastructure and trade across the Eurasian continent.¹⁷ These developments provided a powerful incentive for the Chinese military to contribute to the building of a favorable security environment, in part through naval diplomacy.

“Naval Diplomacy” in Chinese Discourse

Reflecting the focus on broader foreign policy and political concerns, Chinese media reports frequently invoke the term “naval diplomacy” to describe overseas missions undertaken by the PLAN such as humanitarian assistance, port calls, and counter-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden.¹⁸ A 2019 article described how the PLAN is “leading the charge on naval diplomacy” by executing a broad range of missions to address transnational threats and promote stability. A Chinese scholar interviewed for the story claimed acts of naval diplomacy such as the search for Malaysian Airlines MH370 “debunked the myth of ‘China Threat’ and ‘Chinese naval nationalism.’”¹⁹ Similarly, the term “naval diplomacy” is also sometimes used in a narrative sense to connect operations such as counter-piracy to broader foreign policy goals of “promoting world peace and stability.”²⁰

Since the 2000s, Chinese scholars have shown a keen interest in the topic of “naval diplomacy.” A search of the term “naval diplomacy” (海军外交) in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database of academic journals resulted in about two dozen articles that focus principally on the concept, almost all of which appeared after 2012. Several of these principally analyzed relevant experiences from the United States and other seafaring powers. A handful explored the theoretical application of the concept for China. The following section provides a sample of the analysis contained in the latter group of writings.

One paper, authored by Yang Zhen, a researcher at the Zhejiang University Non-Traditional Security and Peaceful Development Center, and Cha Liang, an associate researcher at the Shanghai International Research Center, explored the topic of “great power naval diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.” Endorsing a conclusion commonly seen in western writings, the authors recommended surface ships as more valuable than submarines or aircraft for naval diplomacy. While highly recommending cooperative practices, the authors also emphasized the importance of deterrence. They observed, “Although under modern conditions, naval diplomacy has trended towards non-violence, modern naval diplomacy does not preclude the direct use of naval deterrence.” The authors concluded that “enhancing the effectiveness of maritime deterrence could greatly improve the effectiveness of naval diplomacy.”²¹

In 2016, Zhang Yanhuan and Liu En, two professors at Shandong University’s Law School, published a paper titled, “On the Game Theory and Legal Basis of Naval Diplomacy.” Zhang and Liu recommended three types of activities in particular. The first is “friendly diplomacy” (友好型外交),

¹⁷ Liang Fei and Chang Meng, “AIIB and OBOR Hotly Debated at Boao Forum,” *Global Times*, March 27, 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/914299.shtml>.

¹⁸ Zhang Zhihao, “PLA Navy Generates a Wave of Goodwill Worldwide,” *China Daily*, April 22, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/22/WS5cbd32a5a3104842260b7844.html>.

¹⁹ “Chinese Naval Escort Fleets Ensure Maritime Security,” *CGTN*, April 23, 2019, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d674e7849544d34457a6333566d54/index.html>.

²⁰ 梨波三十载：我和人民海军三代驱逐舰的故事 [“Thirty Years of Libo: The Story of a PLA Navy’s Third Generation Destroyer and Me”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], August 12, 2017, http://www.chinamil.com.cn/bqtd/2018-12/17/content_9476425_3.htm.

²¹ 杨震, 蔡亮 [Yang Zhen and Cai Liang], 中国特色大国海军外交 [“Great Power Naval Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics”], 社会科学 [*Social Science*], no. 12 (2016), pp. 22-30.

which consists of activities that “promote friendship” between China and another country. Relevant activities included port calls and humanitarian assistance missions. The authors observed that this type of diplomacy has a “great potential for expansion” due to a pressing need to counter negative perceptions of China’s rise and “bear witness to China’s peaceful nature.” A second type, which the authors labeled “cooperative diplomacy” (合作型外交), aims to demonstrate China’s willingness to “be an active contributor to international peace and security.” They recommended employing this approach in Asia in particular, observing that “engaging in cooperative naval diplomacy in Asia could become a model of security cooperation” that “gradually becomes an important factor in international relations.” Principal activities that belong to this group includes participation in naval-oriented multilateral meetings, such as the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, and involvement in bilateral and multilateral exercises against transnational threats. The authors cited as examples of the latter PLAN exercises with Pakistan in 2004, India in 2005, and with Russia in 2005. They stated that the significance of the exercises is “not limited to the training value and to the fact that they are not alliance-type activities, but in that they blend military security cooperation and serve as a form of preventive naval diplomacy.” The authors identified a third type, “preventive diplomacy” (预防型外交), which they said consisted of actions taken to defuse a potentially dangerous situation through early warning (预警性) and preventive measures. In these actions, the PLAN demonstrates its armed strength and communicates political intent and deterrence against opponents. The authors cited as an example the November 2003 dispatch of a *Ming*-class submarine to waters near Kyushu, which the authors stated “partially surfaced to show the red flag” and “assert China’s rights of maritime passage according to international law.” The authors concluded China needed to “have the capability” to “take preventive naval diplomatic measures” to protect China’s maritime rights and interests.²²

Xu Lite, a professor at Jilin University, authored an article on naval diplomacy in a Central Party School journal that affirmed deterrence as a key principal, upholding the “safeguarding of national security and development interests” as a key consideration. His invocation of “development interests” suggests deterrence could be applied to the protection of economic interests in the far seas. The article reminded readers that naval diplomacy aims to “create a good maritime strategic environment for national development and the nation’s rejuvenation.” The article also urged practitioners use naval diplomacy to improve the military’s combat readiness. It stated that “foreign exchanges and cooperation” should serve as a “bridge” to further naval modernization. It recommended that “standards for combat effectiveness” be integrated into “all areas of foreign exchanges and cooperation.” It also emphasized the importance of naval diplomacy in facilitating China’s ability to shape international rules and laws. It stated the Navy should “abide by international law and fulfill corresponding international obligations,” but also called for “creating international rules” and “participating in the formulation and improvement of international rules in a more proactive manner” to “build a fairer and more reasonable international maritime order.”²³

In 2019, Du Bo, a lecturer at the PLAN Command College, authored an article that reviewed the Chinese Navy’s history with naval diplomacy. Citing instances of bilateral training, technical and educational exchanges, and mine-clearing operations near Vietnam during the Cold War, Du emphasized that naval diplomacy is a longstanding mission for the PLAN. However, Du recognized that the type and variety of naval diplomatic activities surged after 1979, and especially since the start of the 21st century. Du noted that in the current era naval diplomacy aims in part to shape a

²² 张晏瑄, 刘恩 [Zhang Yanhuan and Liu En], 论海军外交的博弈与法律基础 [“On the Gaming and Legal Basis of Naval Diplomacy”], 国际法研究 [Chinese Review of International Law], no. 4 (2016), pp. 46-58.

²³ 郑宏 [Zheng Hong], 海军外交的成就与启示 [“Navy Diplomacy’s Achievements and Insights”], 学习时报 [Study Times], April 22, 2019, p. 6.

“peaceful and stable international environment.” He explained that a robust program of naval diplomacy could help China to exert a dominant role in “global ocean governance” (全球海洋治理). He argued that the PLAN could do this by expanding a dense array of cooperative security mechanisms, exchanges, training, assistance, and other activities with foreign countries, especially those affiliated with the BRI. More provocatively, Du also explored how China’s adroit use of naval diplomacy could help create a “new global maritime order” (世界海洋新秩序).²⁴

This sample of Chinese scholarly writings reflects several common themes. First, Chinese analysts tend to view naval diplomacy as potentially serving a variety of friendly, cooperative, and coercive purposes in both the near and far seas. Second, analysts view naval diplomacy as an important instrument for enabling the CCP central leadership to achieve its foreign policy goals, including promoting stability and enabling efforts to shape global rules and norms. Third, at least some analysts have emphasized the intelligence value of naval diplomacy, citing the potential of learning skills and knowledge through foreign engagements. How much these writings inform PLAN operations remains unclear, but at the very least they reflect the intellectual climate on a topic of interest to PLAN practitioners and theorists.

Political and Strategic Context for PLAN Diplomacy

The political and strategic context are the details of China’s domestic and international situation that strongly influence the execution of the PLAN’s diplomatic activities. The context affects both the decision-making of Chinese political and military leaders, and the perception of the countries affected by Chinese naval diplomacy. The context can be so important to decisions regarding naval diplomacy that it is difficult in many cases to understand individual acts without reference to the broader context. The factors that inform decisions regarding naval diplomacy span both domestic and international topics. Some of these contextual factors are long-lasting and persistent, while others may fluctuate according to recent developments. The following section briefly surveys a sample of such important considerations.

China-Related Factors

The PLAN’s approach to naval diplomacy is informed by China’s foreign policy, its own limitations, and the country’s relationship to the global economy. As one example, the legacy of China’s “independent foreign policy of peace” has left the country virtually without treaty allies.²⁵ This factor limits the demand for combat fleets stationed abroad. Another factor that affects the PLAN’s approach to naval diplomacy is the fact that China’s sovereignty and territorial disputes are all located in Asia. Since China has tended to rely on coercive actions involving military platforms principally in sovereignty and maritime disputes, the lack of such issues outside of Asia results in a lower demand for such coercive uses of naval power in the far seas. However, the growing importance of sea lines of communication and overseas interests raises the possibility that the PLAN will increase its use of deterrent actions in the far seas. The implication for naval diplomacy is that the PLAN is likely to rely more on cooperative forms of naval diplomacy in the far seas, while employing a mix of coercive and cooperative forms in the near seas. This does not exclude the possibility of deterrent actions in the far seas, but in general these can be expected to comprise a smaller portion of naval diplomatic actions than in the near seas.

²⁴ 杜博 [Du Bo], 70 年来的人民海军外交：历程、经验和展望 [“People’s Navy Diplomacy in the Past 70 Years: History, Experience and Prospects”], 世界与海洋研究 [Journal of Boundary and Ocean Studies], vol. 4, no. 6 (November 2019), pp. 61-77.

²⁵ North Korea is nominally one, but China’s commitment to it remains unclear.

Limitations in the PLAN's power projection capabilities pose additional constraints. China only has two aircraft carriers, and its ability to maintain flight operations in distant waters remains nascent at best. Moreover, China only has one overseas naval base, in Djibouti. China has ample inventories of destroyers and frigates that can sail (with an oiler) long distances, but these cannot project power inland to the degree carrier-launched aircraft can. Such limitations pose a constraint on Chinese options for the PLAN to exercise coercive diplomatic functions in crisis situations, although it does provide a strong deterrent presence along key trade routes. The limited availability of oilers and overseas bases also provides an incentive for the PLAN to concentrate diplomatic activities along the route of its escort task force near the Gulf of Aden.

International Factors

International contextual factors that might influence the PLAN's execution of naval diplomatic activities include major foreign policy initiatives, the vulnerability of citizens and assets abroad, international developments, and the state of China's relations with specific countries.

In terms of major foreign policy initiatives, China's increasing involvement in South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, as part of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, provides a strong incentive for PLAN planners to steer naval diplomacy activities to countries in those regions.

The reality of China's dependence on the global economy and its growing array of overseas interests are important factors underpinning the PLAN's diplomatic activity. As Chinese citizens work and live in dangerous parts of the world, Beijing seeks ways of improving security for them. Naval ships can provide support through evacuations and humanitarian assistance, or by ferrying small units of troops for small-scale, specialized missions to counter threats. Naval diplomacy can help build political goodwill in partner countries. As relations grow friendlier, host nation governments could in turn have a stronger incentive to control domestic threats that also threaten Chinese citizens and their assets.

Increasing international disorder and a proliferating array of transnational issues have elevated for Chinese authorities the importance of non-traditional threats, such as terrorism, natural disasters, humanitarian crises, and regional conflict. By their nature, these dangers touch on many countries, suggesting any response will require coordination by different parties. This reality raises the incentive for naval planners to prioritize engagement through multilateral venues to promote stability and address threats. China's desire to bolster its leadership, credibility, and prestige incentivizes naval leaders to invest in symbols of national power, such as aircraft carriers, as well as to increase the visibility of Chinese ships throughout the world. These developments also raise the possibility that the PLAN will employ more deterrent actions in the future to protect vulnerable Chinese people and discourage actors from threatening Chinese interests.

The state of China's relations with specific countries can be a critical factor in naval diplomacy as well. In some ways, naval diplomatic activity may be viewed as a barometer of China's relationship with maritime countries. For example, the collaboration between the Russian and Chinese navies in combat-focused exercises reflects the deepening partnership between the two countries. Similarly, intensifying competition with the United States provides an incentive for Beijing to seek non-threatening exercises that might stabilize the relationship, while manipulating the promise of senior leader engagements as a tool to signal approval or dissatisfaction with the state of U.S. policy. Competition with the United States could also spur officials to bolster efforts to shape rules and norms in maritime-related multilateral dialogues. The U.S. is also likely to be an important factor in China's efforts to step up cooperation or coercion against other countries, especially countries allied with the United States.

Developments in current events might provide opportunities for naval diplomacy. For example, when Venezuela faced intense international pressure for its defiant refusal to permit humanitarian aid from the United States and recognize a democratically-elected leader in 2018, Chinese media emphasized the peaceful intentions behind the *Peace Ark*'s port call to Venezuela. The reports implied that China sought peaceful relations with countries like Venezuela, while suggesting the United States and its allies favored more confrontational policies.²⁶

In sum, contextual factors related to China's domestic and international situation suggest that the PLAN may seek a distinct set of platforms and activities to serve its needs in the far seas. Chinese leaders have a strong incentive to increase high-level engagements and involvement in maritime-related, multi-lateral dialogues, and Beijing is likely to prefer platforms and activities that aim to evoke gratitude and good will towards China. At the same time, ambitions for national revitalization encourage Chinese leaders to develop powerful naval ships such as aircraft carriers as symbols of national power. While China to date has emphasized mostly cooperative actions in the far seas, the expansion of its fleet and the addition of capabilities including aircraft carriers raises the likelihood that the PLAN will increase its use of coercive and deterrent diplomacy in the far seas in the coming years. For example, Chinese warships can be expected to step up patrols along the Indian Ocean to deter rival navies from threatening merchant traffic.

The Core Tasks of Chinese Naval Diplomacy

The core tasks of Chinese naval diplomacy were most-recently defined in February 2015, at the PLAN Foreign Affairs Work Conference. This conference followed the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference (November 2014) and the All-Military Foreign Affairs Work Conference (January 2015). The PLAN Foreign Affairs Work Conference likely represented the Navy's efforts to apply the general principles outlined in the earlier conferences to the specific roles and missions of the PLAN.²⁷ Indeed, in his remarks at the conference, Admiral Wu Shengli acknowledged that the PLAN's response to foreign-related events would have "have more prominent political characteristics" than other activities and would be "subject to higher policy requirements."²⁸

Speaking at the February 2015 event, Admiral Wu Shengli stated that "work coordination and planning" for the Navy's foreign affairs work would have "greater strategic significance."²⁹ As is typical for these events, the deputy commander followed Wu's speech with more detailed guidance on the missions and tasks for the service. PLAN Deputy Commander Jiang Weilie translated the directives from higher-level authorities into eight principal tasks for naval diplomacy (see table below). In particular, these eight tasks likely expand and elaborate on the missions given to the military by Xi Jinping at the All-Military Foreign Affairs Work Conference. In the table below, the author has offered suggestions of assets and activities associated with those tasks.

²⁶ "Chinese Naval Hospital Ship 'Peace Ark' Makes Maiden Visit to Venezuela," *China Military Online*, September 25, 2018, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-09/25/content_9297699.htm#:~:text=25%20\(ChinaMil\)%20%2D%20After%20successfully,day%20friendly%20visit%20to%20Venezuela](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-09/25/content_9297699.htm#:~:text=25%20(ChinaMil)%20%2D%20After%20successfully,day%20friendly%20visit%20to%20Venezuela).

²⁷ Timothy R. Heath, "An Overview of China's National Military Strategy," *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, edited by Joe McReynolds, (Washington DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2016), pp. 18-20.

²⁸ 任晓航 [Ren Xiaohang], 海军司令员吴胜利在海军外事工作会议上强调深入贯彻习主席重要讲话精神努力开创海军外事工作新局面 ["At the PLAN Foreign Affairs Work Conference, Commander Wu Shengli Emphasizes Deeply Implementing the Spirit of Chairman Xi's Important Speeches"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], February 13, 2015, p. 1.

²⁹ Ren Xiaohang, "At the PLAN Foreign Affairs Work Conference," p. 1.

Table. PLAN Tasks from Navy Foreign Affairs Work Conference, 2015

#	Naval Foreign Affairs Tasks	Possible Responsible Naval Assets (Assessed)	Possible Military Diplomacy Activities (Assessed)
1	Promote new-type naval relations; deepen strategic trust	Senior leaders; staff; surface ships; technicians	Senior leader visits; dialogues; port calls; personnel exchanges
2	Handle affairs on the periphery; create a better security environment	Senior leaders; surface ships; submarines; naval aviation	Security dialogues; senior leader visits; patrols; port calls; exercises; training; patrols
3	Stress multilateral platforms; expand comprehensive influence	Senior leaders; staff; surface ships; submarines	Maritime dialogues; multi-lateral exercises; multilateral security missions
4	Closely link naval foreign affairs work with missions and tasks; strengthen joint exercises, foreign visits	Senior leaders; surface ships; submarines; naval aviation; personnel/technicians;	Multilateral security missions; bi-lateral and multi-lateral exercises; senior leader visits; port calls
5	Expand scope of exchanges; learn from others' experience	Personnel/technicians; senior leaders; academics; surface ships; submarines	Personnel exchanges; bi-lateral and multi-lateral exercises; training
6	Do a good job in technical assistance; consolidate partnership network	Senior leaders; personnel/technicians	Personnel exchanges; senior leader visits; dialogues; training; exercises
7	Strengthen external propaganda; create a favorable public opinion environment	Senior leaders; surface fleet; personnel/technicians	Port calls; high level visits; press conferences; propaganda
8	Deepen study of theory; regularize naval foreign affairs work	Academics; personnel/technicians	Training; education; research

Chinese Naval Diplomacy: Personnel and Platforms

To carry out naval diplomacy-related actions, activities, and operations, PLAN leaders select commanders, staff, ships, submarines, and aircraft based on the political goal sought and informed by the political and strategic context.

Personnel

Senior naval leaders, naval attachés, crew members, and academic and technical personnel carry out many of the diplomatic activities for the PLAN.

Senior officers carry out many of the bilateral and multi-lateral engagements. In some cases, the PLAN commander may serve as a delegation lead in hosting counterparts from other navies. The PLAN commander has tended to only undertake one or two trips abroad per year. Other PLAN commanders, such as the North, East, or South Sea Fleet commanders, may take part in military delegations featuring multiple services.³⁰

The PLAN defense attaché corps carries out the day-to-day work of administering many naval-related diplomatic activities, such as providing military advice to ambassadors, and performing an array of duties related to military diplomacy, such as coordinating exchanges and visits. The Chinese

³⁰ Jeffrey Becker, David Liebenberg, and Peter Mackenzie, *Behind the Periscope: Leadership in China's Navy*, Center for Naval Analysis, 2013, p. 233.

military has attachés in 110 countries world-wide, but the exact number of PLAN personnel remains unknown.³¹

Technicians from the PLAN's armaments and logistics departments may serve as advisors or trainers. Instructors and students at PLAN educational institutions may participate in academic exchange programs. These exchanges can further goals of gaining knowledge and expertise to support naval modernization, influence-building, and partnership-building.

Commanders and crew from operational units carry out the bulk of the PLAN's diplomatic activities. These individuals operate the ships that conduct port calls, patrols, and other non-war missions. They also participate in dialogues, exercises, and training with personnel from other countries.

Platforms

Surface vessels such as frigates, destroyers, amphibious ships, hospital ships and training ships are the most commonly-used platforms in Chinese naval diplomacy. Aircraft carriers could someday provide options for diplomatic coercion and intimidation, although limited basing options will continue to constrain the geographic range of Chinese carriers. Shipborne helicopters can provide a useful capability for certain non-war missions as well.

Aircraft carriers: Chinese writers give high regard to the deterrent quality of an aircraft carrier, especially in a crisis. Xu Qi, a researcher at the Naval Research Institute, noted in an article in a CCP journal that in an international crisis an "aircraft carrier can quickly anchor in international waters" and "maintain a war-preparedness status for a long time." Xu also praised carriers as "symbols of military strength" capable of "cruising, patrolling, and traveling around the world."³² In the future, China could not only sail carriers through the disputed East and South China Seas for purposes of deterring rivals, but also carry out goodwill visits to bolster political support throughout the Indo-Pacific and possibly to Africa and the Middle East.

Destroyers and frigates: China's ample inventory of modern destroyers and frigates carry out a range of naval diplomatic activities. These combatants serve as highly visible symbols of Chinese naval might and are well-suited to carrying out port calls and escort missions against transnational threats such as pirates. China's lack of military bases and small numbers of oilers poses the biggest constraint on the long-distance deployment of these ships.³³

Amphibious ships: China's six *Yuzhao* LPD amphibious landing ships can each embark several air-cushioned landing craft and up to four helicopters. In terms of military diplomacy, their size permits the storing of large amounts of relief supplies and their ability to deliver these supplies through landing craft and helicopters make them well suited to HA/DR missions and NEOs.³⁴

Resupply ships: Limited overseas basing capacity has made replenishment ships a critical enabler of naval diplomatic missions involving long-distance voyages, such as escort task force operations in the Gulf of Aden.³⁵

³¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, 2018, p. 22, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/16/2001955282/-1/-1/1/2018-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT.PDF>.

³² 徐起 [Xu Qi], 航母入列开启蓝色征程 ["An Aircraft Carrier Enters Service and Starts a Blue Journey"], *瞭望* [Outlook], no. 1 (October 8, 2012), pp. 8-10.

³³ *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China*, p. 29.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁵ "Sustained Support: the PLAN Evolves Its Expeditionary Logistics Strategy," *Jane's* 360, March 29, 2016.

Hospital ships: The hospital ship serves as an important conveyer of Chinese political goodwill and friendship. The *Peace Ark*, also known as the Type 920, is the PLAN's only purpose-built hospital ship and a frequent traveler to other countries.³⁶

Training ships. The Type 679 *Zheng He* and the *Qi Jiguang* (commissioned in 2017) cadre training ships regularly conduct out-of-area port calls. The Type 679 vessel typically carries over 300 cadets from several PLAN affiliated universities and may take aboard cadets from other countries as well.³⁷

Other platforms: Of the PLAN's aviation assets, shipborne helicopters can play an important role in ferrying personnel and supplies for HA/DR and other missions. Submarines can conduct out-of-area deterrent patrols, but in general their low visibility and limited storage makes them less useful for military diplomacy purposes.

Types of Naval Diplomacy Activities

To carry out naval diplomacy, PLAN personnel and platforms perform a range of operations, actions, and activities. Some simply involve the engagement of senior leaders and their staffs ashore, while in other cases ships or aircraft may be involved. As with the selection of personnel and platforms, the selection of appropriate operations and activities reflects political calculations, but the choice of specific actions can also directly support multiple operational and foreign policy objectives. For example, the PLAN's deployment of the *Peace Ark* to provide medical assistance in the aftermath of a natural disaster may both aim to relieve suffering and concurrently support broader foreign policy goals of partnership and influence building.

Senior Leader Engagements

Senior level engagements consist of meetings between PLAN senior officers and their counterparts, either in China or abroad. Such visits allow senior leaders to build rapport with their counterparts, advance Chinese political perspectives, and contribute to a strengthening of overall bilateral relations. The PLAN commander rarely ventures out of China to carry out a senior leader engagement more than once a year, although the PLAN commander occasionally hosts visiting counterparts and delegations. Chinese media reports of such visits tend to emphasize themes of cooperation and practical achievements in relationship-building, and thus may be seen as a barometer of the overall bilateral relationship.

³⁶ Kyle Mizokami, "Peace Ark: Onboard China's Hospital Ship," *USNI News*, July 23, 2014, <https://news.usni.org/2014/07/23/peace-ark-onboard-chinas-hospital-ship>.

³⁷ "Chinese Naval Training Ship Qi Jiguang Completes Ocean-Going Mission," *China Military Online*, December 8, 2017, [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-12/08/content_7860659.htm#:~:text=8%20\(ChinaMil\)%20%2D%2D%20The%20Chinese,nautical%20miles%20in%2082%20days](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-12/08/content_7860659.htm#:~:text=8%20(ChinaMil)%20%2D%2D%20The%20Chinese,nautical%20miles%20in%2082%20days).



Image 2. Vice Admiral Shen Jinlong at the 2018 International Seapower Symposium (September 2018, Newport, RI)³⁸

Maritime Security Dialogues

Maritime security dialogues consist of institutionalized gatherings of senior leaders to discuss issues of concern. The PLAN has shown a growing interest in these venues as opportunities to demonstrate Chinese leadership, shape rules and norms, manage risks, and build partnerships. Some of the security dialogues are conducted bilaterally. For example, since 2012 China has held ten iterations of the “Consultations on Maritime Affairs” with Japan.³⁹ Since 1998, China has also held the Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) with U.S. air and naval forces to discuss safety issues related to U.S. and Chinese interactions at sea.⁴⁰ China has also become more involved in multilateral dialogues. Examples include China’s involvement in the Western Pacific Naval Symposium, featuring participation by 25 countries.⁴¹ Chinese scholars observe that participation in such venues allows the PLAN to extend China’s influence, shape rules and norms, and demonstrate the country’s commitment to cooperating with other countries to address shared threats.⁴²

Personnel Exchanges

Academic and educational exchanges between PLAN and foreign military personnel provide opportunities for the Navy to learn from other navies, build rapport with foreign sailors, enhance bilateral cooperation, and contribute to the strengthening of the bilateral relationship. PLAN personnel may also gather intelligence and information on host countries through such activities. Chinese media describe personnel exchanges as a useful means of promoting cooperative bilateral relations, expanding China’s influence, and building trust. A 2018 Xinhua report surveying military personnel engagements tailored its interpretations according to the state of bilateral ties. For Russia, Chinese military engagements “further enhanced mutual trust and traditional friendship. By contrast,

³⁸ U.S. Naval War College, Flickr account, September 19, 2018, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/usnavalwarcollegeri/44757315782>.

³⁹ “China, Japan to Hold Talks on Maritime Affairs,” *China Military Online*, December 14, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-12/14/c_137674589.htm

⁴⁰ “PACFLT Holds MMCA Talks, Enhances Cooperation with PLA,” U.S. Navy website, May 26, 2016, https://www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=94868.

⁴¹ The Western Pacific Naval Symposium, Website of Chinese Ministry of Defense, <http://wpns.mod.gov.cn>.

⁴² Zhang and Liu, “On the Gaming and Legal Basis of Naval Diplomacy,” pp. 46-58.

engagements with Japan “had resumed” and aimed to “open new prospects for the stable development of relations.”⁴³

Multilateral Security Operations

The PLAN’s involvement in a variety of multilateral security missions serves both foreign policy and security goals. Missions such as the escort of chemical weapons from Syria in 2014 and the search and rescue efforts for Malaysia Airlines MH370 in 2014 enhance China’s reputation as a provider of public goods and leader in multilateral approaches to security.

In terms of naval diplomacy, the most important multilateral security operations in which the PLAN participates are the counter-piracy activities near the Gulf of Aden and humanitarian missions. Since 2008, the PLAN has sustained a counter-piracy force off the Gulf of Aden, which has typically consisted of two surface combatants and a replenishment vessel. The permanent deployment not only highlights the PLAN’s contribution to promoting maritime security along an important global shipping lane; it also enables PLAN task forces to carry out numerous port calls and conduct (mostly) non-war combined military exercises with host navies.⁴⁴ Chinese analysts and media have highlighted the impact of the patrols on China’s international reputation. A typical story praised the Gulf of Aden operations for strengthening the “image of China as a responsible great power.” It noted how the PLAN ships “abided by relevant provisions of international law and UN resolutions” and provided emergency rescue and assistance to foreign merchants.⁴⁵

Deterrent Patrols

While cooperative activities predominate in the PLAN’s practice of naval diplomacy in the far seas, maintaining persistent presence of combatants along key shipping lanes represents a form of patrolling for deterrent purposes. The Chinese press acknowledges that the patrols in the Gulf of Aden aim to deter pirates from attacking ships.⁴⁶ However, China’s deployment of a submarine to Sri Lanka in 2014 had little application for countering piracy.⁴⁷ More likely, the deployment aimed to serve as a deterrent patrol against other navies in the region, most notably that of India. Should the PLAN deploy carrier task forces to the Indian Ocean, such patrols could be aimed at deterring India and other navies along a critical sea line of communication.

Military Exercises

In the far seas, the PLAN carries out exercises that can serve a variety of political and operational objectives. Politically, exercises serve foreign policy goals of building influence, strengthening bilateral relationships, and bolstering the credibility of PLAN deterrence.

⁴³ 综合消息：阐释和平理念，加强军事交流-我驻外使馆举行招待会祝建军 91 周年 [“Comprehensive News: Explaining the Concept of Peace, Strengthening Military Exchanges-Our Embassies Celebrate the 91st Founding of the Military”], 新华网 [Xinhua], July 30, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-07/30/c_129923121.htm.

⁴⁴ Andrew Erickson and Austin Strange, *Six Years at Sea... and Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China’s Maritime Commons Presence* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation Press, 2015).

⁴⁵ 护航十年：中国海军让最危险海域变成黄金航道 [“Ten Years of Escort: The Chinese Navy Has Turned One of the Most Dangerous Areas Into Golden Waterways”], Xinhua, December 21, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2018-12/21/c_1210021317.htm.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Shihar Aneez and Ranga Sirilal, “Chinese Submarine Docks in Sri Lanka Despite Indian Concerns,” Reuters, November 2, 2014, [https://www.reuters.com/article/sri-lanka-china-submarine/chinese-submarine-docks-in-sri-lanka-despite-indian-concerns-idINKBN0IM0LU20141102#:~:text=COLOMBO%20\(Reuters\)%20%2D%20Sri%20Lanka,the%20Indian%20Ocean%20island%20nation.](https://www.reuters.com/article/sri-lanka-china-submarine/chinese-submarine-docks-in-sri-lanka-despite-indian-concerns-idINKBN0IM0LU20141102#:~:text=COLOMBO%20(Reuters)%20%2D%20Sri%20Lanka,the%20Indian%20Ocean%20island%20nation.)

The PLAN has carried out both bilateral and multi-lateral exercises.⁴⁸ These drills tend to focus on noncombat activities, such as search and rescue exercises (SAREX). For example, a Chinese frigate coordinated with naval ships from Bangladesh, Iran, and India to practice searching for missing boats in November 2017 as part of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium.⁴⁹ While not technically an exercise, the PLAN's "maritime parade" in April 2019 featured coordinated maneuver between ships from 13 countries and thus shared some features common to multilateral exercises.⁵⁰

The PLAN's most complex, combat-oriented international exercises remain the Maritime Cooperation (海上联合) exercise series held with the Russian Navy. In September 2016, the two navies trained with surface ships, amphibious forces, and helicopters in the northern part of the South China Sea near Hainan Island.⁵¹ The second phase of the 2017 iteration of the exercise involved 11 ships, two submarines, four maritime patrol aircraft, and four shipborne helicopters.⁵² China and Russia have in recent years planned these combined combat-oriented exercises in part to signal the strength of the bilateral relationship. According to a PRC Ministry of Defense spokesperson, a Russian-Chinese naval exercise held in April 2019 aimed to "consolidate and develop the comprehensive partnership of coordination between China and Russia" and "deepen pragmatic naval cooperation."⁵³

⁴⁸ Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, "Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016: Trends and Implications," *China Strategic Perspectives* No. 11, July 17, 2017, p. 30.

⁴⁹ "Chinese Naval Ship Arrives at Bangladesh for International Naval Exercise," *China Military Online*, November 27, 2017, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2017-11/27/content_7845199.htm.

⁵⁰ Bill Birtles, "China Celebrates 70th Anniversary of its Navy with Huge Parade as it Challenges US Supremacy at Sea," ABC Online, April 23, 2019, www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-24/china-flaunts-escalating-military-strength-with-naval-parade/11037724

⁵¹ "Russia-China Drills to Strengthen Regional Stability: Russian Foreign Ministry," Xinhua, September 15, 2016, http://english.pladaily.com.cn/view/2016-09/15/content_7259695.htm.

⁵² "Second Stage of Russian-Chinese Naval Exercise to Involve 11 Ships, 2 Submarines," *Russian News Agency*, September 18, 2017, <https://tass.com/defense/966020>.

⁵³ "China, Russia to Conduct Joint Naval Exercise," Xinhua, December 11, 2019.



Image 3. Opening ceremony of China, Russia, and South Africa naval exercise in Cape Town, South Africa (Nov. 25, 2019).⁵⁴

Port Calls

PLAN ships that visit foreign ports provide opportunities for the Navy to conduct training, build rapport with sailors in other navies, and contribute to the strengthening of overall bilateral relations. PLAN officials and the Chinese press generally characterize the visits in terms of building friendly relations with the host country. A typical statement can be found in the remarks of the commander of an escort task force that conducted a port call to the Philippines. The commander stated that the visit would “enhance military to military exchanges and mutual trust, deepen friendship, and strengthen cooperation between our two navies.”⁵⁵

The escort mission in the Gulf of Aden has dramatically impacted how the PLAN conducts its port calls. The majority of the PLAN’s port calls are now conducted by task forces in transit to and from the Gulf of Aden.⁵⁶ Typically, the PLAN has carried out port calls in conjunction with training deployments or as part of goodwill tours.

A small number of port calls involve vessels not associated with the Gulf of Aden escort task forces. The PLAN *Peace Ark* hospital ship has received considerable press as a vehicle for soft power, due to the medical aid and assistance that the ship has provided in most of its port calls.⁵⁷ In a rare

⁵⁴ 荆晶, 高原 [Jing Jing and Gao Yuan] 中俄南非三国在开普敦举行海上联合演习 [“China, Russia, and South Africa Hold Maritime Exercise in Cape Town”] 新华网 [Xinhua], November 26, 2019, http://m.xinhuanet.com/2019-11/26/c_1125273505.htm.

⁵⁵ “Chinese Naval Escort Fleet Pays Friendly Visit to Philippines,” Xinhua, January 17, 2019.

⁵⁶ Allen, Saunders, and Chen, “Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003-2016: Trends and Implications,” p. 34.

⁵⁷ “PLAN’s Hospital Ship Peace Ark Sets Sail for ‘Harmonious Mission 2018,’” *China Military Online*, June 29, 2018, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-06/29/content_8075465.htm.

occurrence, a PLAN submarine made a port call to Sri Lanka in 2014, sparking criticism and some anxiety in the local press.⁵⁸

Conclusion and Implications for the United States

Building on trends that began in earnest at the turn of the century, the PLAN has increased the frequency and variety of activities related to naval diplomacy. PLAN senior leaders take part in many multilateral forums and hold high level visits with counterparts every year. Academics, technicians, and experts routinely carry out exchanges. PLAN ships patrol in counter-piracy operations near the Gulf of Aden. And PLAN vessels have increased the frequency of port calls throughout Asia, the Indian Ocean, and even more distant locales. For all these activities, considerations about foreign policy goals and the political and strategic context inform decisions about the pace and timing of engagements, personnel and platforms, and the types of activities and operations undertaken. China's shift to a more active foreign policy to better protect its interests around the world and favorably shape the international order, along with the establishment of the country's first overseas naval base in Djibouti, raises the likelihood that the PLAN's involvement in naval diplomacy will only increase in the coming years.

For U.S. decision-makers, the political nature of naval diplomacy presents both opportunities and challenges. On their own, these activities pose little threat to the United States. Some naval diplomatic activities undertaken by the Chinese may even be regarded as opportunities to advance U.S. interests. For example, participation in the MMCA can help reduce risks for U.S. sailors and airmen operating near China. Participation in non-war multilateral exercises featuring Chinese ships, such as the Amman series of exercises, can also highlight the U.S. commitment to serve as a stabilizing force in the region.

However, other Chinese naval diplomatic actions support broader foreign policy efforts designed to erode U.S. influence, and these could harm American interests. The impact of such naval diplomacy efforts would depend on the purpose of the activity. In some cases, efforts to bolster PLAN ties with a host country could carry an implied goal of undermining U.S. security ties with the same country. Given the reality of intensifying competition with China, the U.S. Navy may find little choice but to step up its involvement in this contest for influence. Moreover, given the growing overseas Chinese presence, the PLAN is likely to increase deterrent and coercive naval diplomacy to protect its interests in the far seas, such as deterrent patrols and intimidation through shows of force. These may not aim directly at the United States, but U.S. decision-makers may find it difficult to avoid involvement in cases featuring Chinese intimidation of U.S. allies and partners.

The U.S. can leverage China's desire to engage in naval diplomacy to influence its behavior. Decisions about whether or not to interact with the PLAN can incentivize desirable Chinese behavior, as the U.S. tried when it invited China to RIMPAC in 2014. These decisions can also signal dissatisfaction with Chinese behavior, as the U.S. did when it disinited China to RIMPAC in 2018 over China's island building activities in the South China Sea.

Naval diplomacy can also be used to bolster U.S. alliances and partnerships, strengthen deterrence, and shore up U.S. influence around the world. Bilateral and multilateral exercises, senior leader engagements, academic exchanges, port calls, and non-war missions to promote stability and control threats to allies and partners may grow even more important for the U.S. Navy amidst a fragmenting international order and deepening strategic competition with China and Russia. Indeed, U.S. decision makers may find naval diplomacy an efficient use of military power to promote the nation's interests

⁵⁸ Aneez and Sirilal, "PLAN Submarine Docks in Sri Lanka, Despite Concerns."

and counter Chinese influence, especially in light of perpetual constraints on defense budgets and the unaffordable risks of great power war. U.S. planners will need to think creatively about ways to use America's advantages more effectively in the coming era of naval diplomatic competition.

About the Author

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Heath has published numerous articles and one book. Fluent in Mandarin Chinese, he has extensive experience analyzing China's national strategy, politics, ideology, and military, as well as of Asian regional security developments. He earned an M.A. in Asian studies from George Washington University and a B.A. in philosophy from the College of William and Mary. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in political science from George Mason University.

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