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China Maritime Report No. 13: The Origins of "Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection"

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Summary

This report traces the origins and development of China's current naval strategy: "Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection." Near Seas Defense is a regional, defensive concept concerned with ensuring China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests. Its primary focus is preparing to fight and win informatized local wars within the first island chain. Far Seas Protection has both peacetime and wartime elements. In peacetime, the Chinese navy is expected to conduct a range of "non-war military operations" such as participating in international peacekeeping, providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, evacuating Chinese citizens from danger, and engaging in joint exercises and naval diplomacy. In wartime, the PLAN could be tasked with securing China's use of strategic sea lanes and striking important nodes and high-value targets in the enemy's strategic depth. Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection is rooted in the ideas of Alfred Thayer Mahan and Mao Zedong.

Introduction

In 2015, China publicized its current naval strategy of "Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection," which calls for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to expand the geographic and mission scope of its operations.¹ The strategy retains the PLAN's longstanding focus on defending China's mainland from attack and asserting national sovereignty claims, but adds new emphasis to safeguarding China's economic development and strategic interests by protecting sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and engaging in long-distance security missions. The concept of Far Seas Protection is guiding the PLAN's transformation into a global navy able to conduct both high-intensity combat operations and a variety of peacetime missions. This transformation is well underway and Beijing likely has established goals for its completion. However, these goals are probably not rigid because of factors beyond China's control. The pace at which the PLAN completes this transformation will depend on other countries' willingness to accommodate China's naval ambitions and on the emergence of new global missions arising from transnational security threats or humanitarian crises.

Near Seas Defense

The PLA characterizes Near Seas Defense (近海防御) as a regional, defensive strategy concerned with ensuring China's territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests.² As such, the primary focus of Near Seas Defense is preparing to fight and win informatized (信息化) local wars in the near seas, which include the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, South China Sea, and areas in and around the first island chain.³ Informatization is the PLA's concept for using networked information systems and is viewed as a defining characteristic of modern warfare. Beijing considers Near Seas Defense to be defensive because the PLA would fight to repel attack or secure territory Beijing viewed as belonging to China. This does not preclude the possibility of incorporating offensive operations.

Near Seas Defense remains essential to China's naval strategy because of the risk of future maritime conflict between China and regional adversaries in the near seas. China has longstanding sovereignty claims in the near seas. These unresolved disputes could prompt conflict over Taiwan, the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands, or disputed territories in the South China Sea.

¹ The PLA defines naval strategy as the "guidelines and approach for planning and directing the overall construction and employment of the navy." 中国人民解放军军语 [PLA Dictionary of Military Terms], (Beijing: Academy of Military Science Press, September 2011), p. 888.

² 寿晓松 [Shou Xiaosong], ed., 战略学 [Science of Military Strategy], (Beijing: Military Science, 2013), p. 208.

³ Ibid., p. 208.

Despite Near Seas Defense’s continued importance in defending core sovereignty interests, some Chinese strategists argue that the U.S. “rebalance” to Asia renders Near Seas Defense inadequate.⁴ To these observers, the rebalance concept’s requirements to deploy 60 percent of U.S. naval and air forces to Asia and strengthen its regional alliances demonstrate that Washington’s approach to China is one of containment and encirclement. Adhering solely to a Near Seas Defense strategy keeps the PLAN hemmed inside the first island chain. Well-publicized U.S. operational concepts such as Air-Sea Battle and Offshore Control likely reinforce Beijing’s concerns about the inadequacy of Near Seas Defense. Air-Sea Battle considers ways to defeat China’s anti-access and area denial capabilities and Offshore Control explores the idea of a distant blockade that would impose costs on China while avoiding near-seas engagements.⁵ Near Seas Defense’s limited geographic reach potentially leaves China vulnerable to being cut off from vital SLOCs and overseas interests.

The regional focus of Near Seas Defense is also insufficient to address the increasingly global scope of China’s economic interests.⁶ Its almost singular emphasis on preparing to fight and win local wars neglects non-traditional security missions during peacetime.



Image 1. A PLAN Type 056 corvette participates in a live-fire exercise in the East China Sea (August 2020)⁷

⁴ Zhang Feng, “Challenge Accepted: China’s Response to the U.S. Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific,” *Security Challenges*, 12, no. 3, p. 4.

⁵ T.X. Hammes, “Offshore Control: A Proposed Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict,” *Strategic Forum*, (June 2012), p. 4.

⁶ Wu Zhengyu, “Towards naval normalcy: ‘open seas protection’ and Sino-U.S. maritime relations,” *The Pacific Review* 32, no. 4 (February 2019), p. 3.

⁷ 连阿民, 周道先 [Lian Amin and Zhou Daoxian], 出击! 护卫舰海上实战化训练正酣 [“Attack! Realistic Training Exercise Conducted by Frigates Are in Full Swing], 中国军网 [China Military Online], September 10, 2020, http://www.81.cn/hj/2020-09/10/content_9900266.htm

Far Seas Protection

The addition of Far Seas Protection (远海防卫) to China's naval strategy significantly expands the geographic and mission scope of PLAN operations.⁸ PLA sources do not offer a precise definition of the far seas, leaving the boundaries open to interpretation. Although the far seas concept is theoretically global due to China's worldwide economic interests, developing a navy with global presence will likely take many years. In 2019, China's *Defense White Paper* noted the PLAN was speeding up its *transition* to Far Seas Protection, but also noted that the PLA lags in military modernization. Thus, incorporating Far Seas Protection will occur gradually.⁹ In this report, a "global navy" is capable of deploying ships for various missions anywhere on the high seas. It deploys its ships throughout the high seas regularly, although not necessarily persistently.

Currently, most of the PLAN's far seas operations take place in the northern Indian Ocean and western Pacific Ocean beyond the first island chain, where Beijing is developing new naval missions and operational concepts. Some PLA sources use the term "two oceans region" to discuss these areas.¹⁰ The PLAN has demonstrated the ability to deploy ships in most of the world's major oceans and China's new strategy will likely guide the continued expansion of its routine operating areas as China's capabilities and supporting naval infrastructure increase.

Far Seas Protection reflects Beijing's direction for the PLAN to "go global," (走出去, literally "go out"), part of a larger Chinese government policy to encourage the expansion of China's economy and cultural outreach. For at least the past decade, Beijing has pushed the PLA to "go global" in an effort to expand military-to-military relationships, conduct exchanges, and promote peace.¹¹ The emphasis on military diplomacy has contributed to a marked increase in PLAN participation in

⁸ China's 2015 Defense White Paper uses the characters 远海护卫 and the PRC-state-provided English translation is "Open Seas Protection." The 2019 Defense White Paper uses the characters 远海防卫 and the PRC-state-provided English translation is "Far Seas Protection," a more literal translation of the Chinese characters. Additionally, in Chinese the word used for protection 防卫 (*fangwei*) is often translated as defense, but is different from Near Seas Defense's 防御 (*fangyu*), which also means defense. Whereas *fangyu* conveys the idea of "resisting" or "withstanding," *fangwei* is closer in meaning to "safeguarding" or "protecting." Michael McDevitt, "Becoming a Great 'Maritime Power': A Chinese Dream," CNA, June 2016, p. 29.

⁹ 中国的军事战略 ["China's Military Strategy"] (Beijing: Office of the State Council, 2015), p. 8; 新时代的中国国防 ["China's National Defense in the New Era"] (Beijing: Office of the State Council, 2019), pp. 22-35.

¹⁰ Shou Xiaosong, *Science of Military Strategy*, pp. 245-46.

¹¹ Zhang Changwei and Shen Yi, "Chinese Military Schools Go Global With An Open Attitude," *PLA Online*, October 22, 2008, <http://english.pladaily.com.cn>; 王毅 [Wang Yi], 王毅部长在 2014 年中国外交演讲全文 ["Full Text of Foreign Minister Wang Yi's Speech on China's Diplomacy in 2014"], 新华 [Xinhua], December 25, 2015, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>; 蔡岑, 张庆宝 [Cai Cen and Zhang Qingbao], 大洋砺剑, 实战化练兵起狂澜—五年来海军部队军事训练工作综述 ["Tempering Swords in the Oceans and Stirring Up Roaring Waves During Actual Combat-oriented Training—Roundup Report on Military Training Work of Naval Units Over the Past Five Years"], 人民海军 [People's Navy], September 27, 2007; 宋忠平 [Song Zhongping], "打胜仗"令军队改革迫在眉睫 ["The Requirement for 'Winning Battles' Makes Military Reform a Pressing Concern"], 国际先驱导报 [International Herald Leader], November 24, 2013, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/herald>; 中国第六批马里维和工兵分队: 我是党员, 我在马里维和 ["The 6th Batch of Chinese Peacekeeping Engineering Contingent in Mali: 'I'm a Communist. I'm Keeping Peace in Mali'"], 中国军网八一电视 [China Military Online TV], June 29, 2018, <http://www.81.cn>; 吴胜利, 刘晓江 [Wu Shengli and Liu Xiaojiang], 建设一支与履行世界新阶段我军历史使命要求相适应的人民海军 ["Building Powerful People's Navy Adapted to Requirements of Honoring New Historic Missions of Chinese Military in New Century and New Stage"], 求是 [Qiushi Online], May 1, 2009, <http://www.qsjournal.com.cn/qs/20090501/GB/qs^502^0^3.htm>.

regional exercises, port calls, and other foreign engagement.¹² Although less frequently emphasized by Chinese experts, the military component of the “go global” strategy ensures the security of China’s foreign investments, overseas citizens, and maritime trade.¹³ Indeed, some Chinese military analysts suggest that it is imperative for the PLA to safeguard China’s overseas interests and note that sending out the PLAN is essential to establishing China’s image as a great power.¹⁴

The incorporation of Far Seas Protection expands the missions that China’s navy must perform. According to China’s 2015 *Defense White Paper*, the strategy requires the PLAN to “protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests and participate in international maritime cooperation,” themes that are reiterated in the 2019 *Defense White Paper*.¹⁵ Both peacetime and wartime missions are associated with these requirements. During peacetime, the PLAN is tasked to conduct a variety of “non-war military operations” (非战争军事行动) that serve Beijing’s political, economic, or military objectives. These activities tend to be cooperative in nature and include participating in international peacekeeping operations, providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, evacuating Chinese citizens from danger, and engaging in joint exercises and naval diplomacy. Non-war military operations also include safeguarding China’s SLOCs from non-traditional security threats such as piracy and terrorism.¹⁶

¹² 军事报道 [Military Report], CCTV-7 television broadcast, December 29, 2016; Cai Cen and Zhang Qingbao, “Tempering Swords in the Oceans and Stirring Up Roaring Waves During Actual Combat-oriented Training – Roundup Report on Military Training Work of Naval Units Over the Past Five Years.”

¹³ 如何护卫中国海权权益和海外利益? [“How Can We Protect China's Maritime Rights and Overseas Interests?”], 国际先驱导报 [*International Herald Leader*], March 18, 2012, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/herald>.

¹⁴ Luo Zheng and Yang Zurong, “PLA Deputy to NPC: Going Global Really Makes Difference,” *PLA Online*, March 10, 2013, <http://english.pladaily.com.cn>; 王逸舟 [Wang Yizhou], 和平崛起阶段的中国国家安全: 目标序列与主要特点 [“China's National Security in the Stage of Peaceful Rise: Sequence of Goals and Major Characteristics”], 国际经济评论 [*International Economic Review*], no. 3 (2012), pp. 9-20; 董子畅 [Dong Zichang], 中国空军列装运-20 飞机提升战略投送能力 [“Chinese Air Force Y-20 Airplane Outfits and Promotes Strategic Projection Capability”], 新华 [Xinhua], July 6, 2016, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>; 中国的海洋权益和海军 [“China's Maritime Rights and Navy”], 世界知识 [*World Affairs*], no. 1 (January 2009), pp. 16-25.

¹⁵ “China’s Military Strategy,” p. 8.

¹⁶ 肖天亮 [Xiao Tianliang], ed., 战略学 [*Science of Military Strategy*], (Beijing: National Defense Univ. Press, 2015), pp. 343-44; Shou Xiaosong, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 217.



Image 2. The PLAN's 35th escort task force conducts underway replenishment in the Gulf of Aden (July 2020)¹⁷

The peacetime nature of these activities can obscure Far Seas Protection's wartime applications. The concept encourages offensive operations during wartime, despite the defensive strategy its name implies. During wartime, the SLOC protection mission becomes even more critical because of the potential for a modern adversary navy to interdict China's seaborne trade. China does not control the straits and transit lanes on which its economy depends and "once a crisis or war at sea occurs, [China's] sea transport could be cut off."¹⁸ The PLA must overcome this strategic vulnerability by developing capabilities to counter enemy interdiction.¹⁹ One source urges naval forces to "control key strategic channels" far from China.²⁰ Another source advocates employing strategic "fist" forces formed around aircraft carriers.²¹ If Beijing adopts these recommendations, we should expect China will continue to emphasize the development of sea control and power projection capabilities in the years ahead.

Another wartime mission is to strike important nodes and high-value targets in the enemy's strategic depth to "ease pressure on the near-seas battlefield."²² This language suggests that Beijing intends for far seas operations to complement near seas operations. Deploying naval forces to far seas operating areas extends outward the strategic "forward edge" (前沿), complicating the enemy's ability to generate effects in the near seas and positioning the PLAN in forward areas where they can more

¹⁷ 江山、周光荣 [Jiang Shan and Zhou Guangrong], 海军第 35 批护航编队完成首次国内物资补给 ["Navy's 35th Escort Task Force Conducts First Ever Supply of Materials from China"], 中国军网 [China Military Online], July 25, 2020, http://www.81.cn/jmywy/2020-07/25/content_9860531.htm.

¹⁸ Shou Xiaosong, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 210.

¹⁹ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 273.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 408.

²¹ Shou Xiaosong, *Science of Military Strategy*, pp. 213-14.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 217.

effectively range targets in the enemy's strategic depth.²³ This is a logical mission in the context of PLA operations to counter third-party intervention during a regional conflict.

Intellectual Roots

China's current naval strategy is rooted in the ideas of Alfred Thayer Mahan and Mao Zedong. Although other Western and Chinese thinkers have also informed the PLAN's strategy, the influence of Mahan and Mao is unmistakable. Far Seas Protection's emphasis on safeguarding China's SLOCs and overseas interests echoes Mahan's thinking about the interdependency of economic prosperity and naval power.²⁴ Mahan believed that a strong nation requires a powerful navy to protect its overseas commercial interests and the SLOCs connecting those interests. He also believed the corollary, that a nation's commercial interests generate the wealth to fund a powerful navy. Beijing increasingly links China's future economic development with sea power. As described in one authoritative volume, "the seas and oceans bear on the enduring peace, lasting stability and sustainable development of China... it is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military forces structure commensurate with its national security and development interests."²⁵ Secure SLOCs are the "lifelines" of China's economic development.²⁶

Mahan further maintained that the imperative to control SLOCs would cause great powers to compete for "command of the sea," which he defined as "that overbearing power on the sea which drives the enemy's flag from it."²⁷ A nation that enjoys command of the sea can shield its seaborne trade from enemy disruption. China's strategy incorporates Mahan's concepts of command of the sea as well as sea control (these concepts are not identical; sea control is more limited in scope to temporary control of a specific area).²⁸ The PLA has long viewed command of the sea (制海权) as critical to the success of blockade or island landing campaigns against Taiwan. The PLA is now emphasizing control more comprehensively across multiple domains, in light of today's increasingly complex and informatized operations. "Comprehensive control" (综合控制权) is the ability to control the surface, undersea, air, and space domains and seamlessly integrate the forces operating in these domains through networked information and command systems.²⁹ In this expanded conceptualization of sea control, the networked systems are every bit as important as the ships and aircraft they are meant to support.

China's strategy also demonstrates the enduring influence of Mao, whose concept of active defense (积极防御) remains the PLA's guiding principle.³⁰ Active defense combines strategic defense with campaign offense and is a fluid concept; its focus shifts from defense to offense when conditions are advantageous to do so. Mao recognized that although defense is important, ultimately offense is necessary to bring about victory.³¹ This concern for the offense resonates with contemporary Chinese strategists. The authors of the 2015 *Defense White Paper* instruct the PLA to "seize the strategic

²³ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 345.

²⁴ James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century*, (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 11

²⁵ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 8.

²⁶ Shou Xiaosong, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 210.

²⁷ Robert C. Rubel, "Command of the Sea: An Old Concept Resurfaces in a New Form," *Naval War College Review*, 65, no. 4 (Autumn 2012), p. 2.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 409.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 2, 5.

³¹ James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century*, p. 83.

initiative in military struggle.”³² According to the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy*, future guidance to China’s navy will “elevate offense from the campaign and tactical levels to the strategic level.” China “cannot wait for the enemy to attack,” but rather should engage in “strategic attack activities.”³³ Similarly, another source notes that once an “opponent has already set in motion his war machine, and avoiding war is no longer possible...[China] must set in motion [its] war machine to prevent being passively caught up in war” and to control the war’s initiation and escalation.³⁴ Although China frames its military power as a means of defense, Chinese leaders and strategists provide the authority to act offensively and proactively to defend its interests.

Origins of the Strategy Under Hu Jintao

Although China’s new naval strategy was first publicly articulated in the 2015 *Defense White Paper*, the strategy’s origins can be traced more than a decade earlier to Hu Jintao’s call for the PLA to undertake “New Historic Missions” in light of China’s changing security environment and new requirements for national development.³⁵ Delivered in a speech in late 2004, the “new historic missions for the armed forces for the new stage in the new century” lay out four tasks for the PLA. It must 1) provide a security guarantee of strength to consolidate the ruling status of the Communist Party; 2) provide a strong security guarantee to safeguard the period of important strategic opportunity for national development; 3) provide powerful strategic support to safeguard China’s expanding national interests; and 4) play an important role to safeguard world peace and promote common development.³⁶

Hu’s New Historic Missions provided the impetus to drive PLAN operations into the far seas. Since 2004, Beijing’s concept of naval operations has evolved and expanded, refining and transforming the PLAN’s strategy. The New Historic Missions first appeared in the 2006 iteration of China’s *Defense White Paper*.³⁷ The concept was incorporated into China’s constitution in 2007.³⁸ In the same timeframe, China began constructing its first modern, multimission expeditionary platform, the YUZHAO transport landing dock (LPD); began renovating a Soviet-designed aircraft carrier acquired from Ukraine; and launched its first hospital ship, known as “Peace Ark.”³⁹ These three platforms—all capable of global operations—were critical pieces to enable Beijing to move forward with the implementation of its New Historic Missions and to develop the concept of far seas protection.

³² “China’s Military Strategy,” p. 6

³³ Shou Xiaosong, *Science of Military Strategy*, pp. 107, 216.

³⁴ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 228.

³⁵ James Mulvenon, “Chairman Hu and the PLA’s ‘New Historic Missions,’” *China Leadership Monitor*, 27 (January 2009), p. 3.

³⁶ Jia Yong, Cao Zhi, Li Xuanliang, “Advancing in Big Strides from a New Historical Starting Point—A Record of Events on How the Party Committee and the Central Military Commission Promote Scientific Development in National Defense and Army Building,” *Xinhua*, August 7, 2007, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>.

³⁷ 2006年中国的国防 [“China’s National Defense in 2006”], 中国政府网 [Central People’s Government of the PRC], December 29, 2006, www.gov.cn/zwgk/2006-12/29/content_486759.htm

³⁸ “Newly Revised Party Constitution Intensifies PLA’s Missions,” *Xinhua*, October 25, 2007, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>.

³⁹ 海军论坛 [Navy Forum], BBS posting by “tianmu feilong,” bbs.tiexue.net, March 23, 2006; “First Aircraft Carrier in Service Three Years from Now,” *Tung Chou Kan*, March 28, 2006; 上海发烧友论坛 [Shanghai Fans Forum], BBS photo postings by “hshcat” and “tanyonglin,” hobbyshanghai.net, September 6, 2007.



A

Image 3. A task force from the Southern Theater Command Navy conducts far seas training (February 2019).⁴⁰

In addition to approving and initiating acquisition programs, China’s military began to adjust its maritime training and operations. In 2008, the PLA promulgated a new “Outline of Military Training”, which included for the first time a requirement to prepare for “diversified military tasks” (多样化军事人物), missions which are now more commonly called non-war military operations.⁴¹ PLAN training increasingly emphasized distant sea and blue water training to better support and sustain long-distance naval operations.⁴²

Tasked by President Hu with the requirement to provide “strategic support” for national development, China’s navy began to perform non-traditional security missions in new and distant operating areas. The most prominent and enduring of these missions was the PLAN’s counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden to secure one of China’s Indian Ocean SLOCs. The PLAN initiated these operations in December 2008 and has continued them to this day.⁴³ As China’s first permanent

⁴⁰ 周启青, 周演成 [Zhou Qiqing and Zhou Yancheng], 南部战区海军远海联合训练编队: 完成训练任务返回湛江 [“Southern Theater Command Navy Far Seas Joint Training Task Force: Completes Training Tasks and Returns to Zhanjiang”], 中国军网 [China Military Online], February 19, 2019, http://www.81.cn/hj/2019-02/19/content_9468010.htm.

⁴¹ Liu Feng’an, “New Outline of Military Training and Evaluation Promulgated,” *PLA Online*, July 25, 2008, <http://english.pladaily.com.cn>.

⁴² 司彦文, 吴超 [Si Yanwen and Wu Chao], 威武舰队向“深蓝”挺进—从远航训练看海军转型发展 [“Mighty Fleet ‘Marches’ to ‘Deep Blue’—Transformation Development of the Navy Observed From Oceangoing Training”], 解放军报 [PLA Online], May 11, 2009, <http://www.chinamil.com.cn>.

⁴³ 2018年12月国防部例行记者会文字实录 [“December 2018 Defense Ministry’s Regular Press Conference Transcript”], 中国国防部新闻局 [China Ministry of National Defense News Office], December 27, 2018, <http://english.chinamil.com.cn>.

out-of-area deployment, the counter-piracy mission has served as a major milestone for the PLAN's global development and a source of profound insight into forward operational requirements. China's counterpiracy deployers have expanded their initial, limited escort role and provided support to UN World Food Program ship escort missions and engaged in other ad hoc humanitarian, search and rescue, and security missions.⁴⁴ The experience of sustaining operations overseas provided the PLAN with significant insights into the command and logistical requirements for long-term, long-distance deployments and revealed the challenges of deploying the PLAN to far seas areas for extended periods without permanent access to a forward naval facility.⁴⁵

During Hu's tenure, the PLAN also performed other non-war military operations such as supporting a noncombatant evacuation of Chinese citizens from Libya in 2011 and, largely enabled by its forward counterpiracy presence, the PLAN significantly increased its engagement in naval diplomacy activities through port calls and participation in foreign exercises.⁴⁶ Since mid-2009, counterpiracy deployers have frequently conducted goodwill deployments and supported multi-lateral exercises, international fleet reviews, and other types of naval symposiums. Separately, in 2010 China began deploying its hospital ship, *Peace Ark*, on humanitarian deployments to provide medical assistance to overseas Chinese citizens and local residents in foreign ports of call. China uses these good will visits to demonstrate Beijing's commitment to international engagement and its willingness to contribute to international security efforts. Naval diplomacy also enables China to establish and reinforce its military-to-military relationships with international partners and foster a secure and favorable environment for China's expanding overseas investments.⁴⁷

Development of the Strategy under Xi Jinping

Under Xi's leadership, Beijing has further elevated the importance of China's navy and the maritime domain. The 2015 *Defense White Paper* emphasizes that "the traditional mentality that land outweighs the sea must be abandoned" and calls for China to develop maritime forces to secure "strategic SLOCs and overseas interests."⁴⁸ This fundamental transition, which shifted the PLA's focus from the land to the sea, marks a significant change in China's perspective and likely reflects Beijing's recognition that China's navy is vital to achieving national strategic goals.

Xi has set forth the "China Dream" of national rejuvenation to make the country strong and prosperous.⁴⁹ In this era of globalization in which China's fortunes at home depend on assured access to energy resources and markets abroad, realizing this goal is not possible without a strong navy to defend these economic interests. Xi's effort to expand China's overseas economic interests through programs like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) makes this strategic rationale for building a global navy even more compelling.

Xi introduced BRI in 2013 as a program to finance and construct transportation infrastructure in countries where China has—or seeks to develop—economic interests. Beijing originally conceived of BRI as a trans-regional initiative linking China with the rest of Asia and the Middle East via a

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Christopher D. Yung, Ross Rustici, Isaac Kardon, and Joshua Wiseman, "China's Out of Area Naval Operations: Case Studies, Trajectories, Obstacles and Potential Solutions," *China Strategic Perspectives*, no. 3, (December 2010), pp. 19-21, <https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/china/ChinaPerspectives-3.pdf>

⁴⁶ "Chinese Navy Frigate Arrives Waters off Libya for Escort Mission," *Xinhua*, March 1, 2011, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>.

⁴⁷ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p 291.

⁴⁸ "China's Military Strategy," p. 8.

⁴⁹ Xiao Tianliang, *Science of Military Strategy*, p. 4.

“maritime silk road.”⁵⁰ However, BRI’s scope has expanded to include infrastructure projects in Africa, Europe, Latin America, and the Arctic.⁵¹ The pace at which China is pursuing BRI and other global economic interests has outstripped the PLA’s ability to provide security for these interests.

To better sustain global operations and provide a security guarantee for BRI investments, PLA strategists are urging China to develop “strategic strong points” (战略支点) overseas. These “strong points” are bases or facilities, like the PLA logistics support base in Djibouti or the PLAN’s outposts in the Spratly Islands, which support overseas military operations. Strategic strong points enable the PLAN to maintain a force presence in distant areas and project power from these areas to defend China’s interests. According to one PLAN source, China should eventually “connect the dots” to integrate individual strategic strong points into an overseas support system.⁵²

Under President Xi’s tenure, China has used its forward counterpiracy deployment to conduct short-notice, quick-reaction—and increasingly sophisticated—support to other missions or emergencies critical to Chinese interests. In late 2013 a PLAN ship transited to the Mediterranean Sea to provide escort security in support of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and the removal of chemical weapons from Syria.⁵³ In 2015 China’s counterpiracy ships directly evacuated Chinese and foreign citizens from Yemen, the PLAN’s first-ever naval evacuation operation.⁵⁴ Chinese ships have also been increasingly able to respond to high visibility humanitarian and search and rescue emergencies, demonstrating the PLAN’s increasing flexibility and readiness to support global missions.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ “Chronology of China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” Xinhua, June 24, 2016.

⁵¹ “China’s Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win,” Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019, p. 34.

⁵² Conor Kennedy, “Strategic Strong Points and Chinese Naval Strategy,” *China Brief*, 19, no. 6, (March 2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/strategic-strong-points-and-chinese-naval-strategy/>.

⁵³ Zheng Kaijun, “Commentary: China’s Commitment To Escorting Syrian Chemical Weapons Transportation Significant,” *Xinhua*, Dec 18, 2013, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>.

⁵⁴ “China Focus: China Withdrawing Citizens From Yemen,” Xinhua, 30 Mar 30, 2015, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>.

⁵⁵ “Roundup: MH370 Full Transcript Revealed, Chinese Escort Fleet Joins Search,” Xinhua, April 1, 2014; “China Sends Fresh Water To Maldives,” Xinhua, Dec 6, 2014, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>.



Image 4. Xi Jinping visits a Northern Theater Command Navy submarine unit (June 2018)⁵⁶

Formulation of the Strategy Post-PLA Reforms

Chairman Xi has presided over sweeping military reforms that profoundly change the way China’s military is organized and affect how naval strategy is formulated. The reforms have probably reduced the PLAN’s institutional influence over Chinese naval strategy and diffused the responsibility for its formulation among Central Military Commission (CMC) departments and theater commands, in addition to PLAN headquarters.⁵⁷ The CMC likely retains control over the approval of military and service strategies.

The development of naval strategy will likely continue to be a centralized but consultative process in which the CMC disseminates military strategic guidance and coordinates input from these organizations and PLA think tanks to devise a PLAN strategy that fulfills the requirements of the broader military strategy. The CMC’s Joint Staff Department and Strategic Plans Office will probably be integral to this process.⁵⁸ Despite having a less formal role in making strategy, the PLAN’s emphasis on Far Seas Protection will likely continue unimpeded for the foreseeable future because it aligns well with Beijing’s larger national objectives.

⁵⁶ 李宣良、吴登峰 [Li Xuanliang and Wu Dengfeng], 习近平在视察北部战区海军时强调贯彻转型建设要求 [“While Inspecting the Northern Theater Command Navy Xi Jinping Emphasizes Implementation of Requires of Transformational Construction”], 新华 [Xinhua], June 15, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2018-06/15/c_1122993111.htm.

⁵⁷ Ian Burns McCaslin and Andrew Erickson, “The Impact of Xi-Era Reforms on the Chinese Navy,” in Philip C, Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow (eds.), *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, (Washington, D.C., National Defense Univ. Press, 2019), p. 146; Yasuyuki Sugiura, “The Joint Operation Structure of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army with Focus on the Reorganization of the Chain of Command and Control under the Xi Jinping Administration,” *Journal of Defense and Security*, no. 18 (December 2017), pp. 17-18.

⁵⁸ Yasuyuki Sugiura, “The Joint Operation Structure of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army with Focus on the Reorganization of the Chain of Command and Control under the Xi Jinping Administration,” pp. 7, 15; Joel Wuthnow and Phillip Saunders, “Introduction,” in Saunders et al, *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, p. 6.

The PLA reforms diminished the Chinese navy's formal influence over strategy formulation. Prior to the reforms, PLA service commanders held seats on the CMC and participated directly in shaping military guidance. Because service commanders no longer serve on the CMC, the PLAN now has less influence over the development of strategy.⁵⁹ The reforms also stripped the services of their operational responsibilities, which have been transferred to five new theater commands.⁶⁰ This change leaves PLAN headquarters in charge of administrative "man, train, and equip" functions and likely transfers some institutional authority for shaping naval strategy to the theater commands.

A strategy role for the new theater commands diffuses influence over naval strategy development because a greater number of organizations and individuals now has input. For example, theaters under the command of army or air force officers can likely issue requirements and determine missions for naval forces in their assigned geographic areas. One outcome from the transition to a theater command construct may be that naval strategy more directly supports joint operations, the pursuit of which was a primary driver of the reforms.⁶¹ However, it is unclear how the involvement of theater commands will work in practice; only three of the five theater commands have naval forces assigned to them and these commands are responsible for near seas missions rather than far seas missions.

PLAN headquarters likely retains influence over the far seas component of naval strategy. For example, it has continued to oversee counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.⁶² PLAN headquarters can also influence naval strategy through its responsibilities for managing equipment construction and training, as both areas affect the types of capabilities and missions that China will pursue.

The new institutional arrangements that resulted from the PLA reforms may not immediately affect the current naval strategy. Major changes to PLAN strategy have occurred rarely. Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection is only the third formal naval strategy that the PLAN has had since its founding in 1949 and the previous strategy of Near Seas Defense remained in place for three decades. From this standpoint, the current naval strategy articulated in the 2015 *Defense White Paper* is relatively new. More importantly, the addition of Far Seas Protection to the current strategy creates an alignment between PLAN strategy and Beijing's overarching foreign policy goals. Beijing views the PLAN and its far seas capabilities as essential to securing China's overseas interests and protecting its maritime trade.

The PLAN's Future—Power Projection, Expeditionary Missions, and Nuclear Submarines

The PLAN's strategy of Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection and China's new priority to defend the maritime domain will likely shape the composition and employment of naval forces for decades to come. Far Seas Protection will require greater emphasis on global power projection and expeditionary capabilities. China's aircraft carrier force may become one of the most visible aspects of its modern, blue-water force and the PLAN will need to develop new concepts of operations and tactics to enable secure, integrated aircraft carrier task group operations in the far seas. Chinese military experts have advocated for a force of up to six aircraft

⁵⁹ Joel Wuthnow and Phillip Saunders, "Introduction," p. 28.

⁶⁰ Ian McCaslin and Andrew Erickson, "The Impact of Xi-Era Reforms on the Chinese Navy," p. 146.

⁶¹ Phillip Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, "China's Goldwater-Nichols? Assessing PLA Organizational Reforms," *Strategic Forum*, no. 294 (April 2016), pp. 7-8; David Finkelstein, "Breaking the Paradigm: Drivers Behind the PLA's Current Period of Reform," in Saunders et al, *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, p. 54.

⁶² Ian Burns McCaslin and Andrew Erickson, "The Impact of Xi-Era Reforms on the Chinese Navy," p. 136.

carriers, including nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, by the mid-2030s in order to better accomplish China's national defense missions and sustain blue-water operations.⁶³



Image 5. The PLAN's first aircraft carrier, *Liaoning*, operating under escort⁶⁴

In addition, Far Seas Protection will require the PLAN to refine and enhance its ability to support global expeditionary operations to secure China's national strategic and economic interests, including defense or interdiction of SLOCs and force projection in littoral areas around the world. China will acquire large, multi-mission expeditionary platforms such as LPDs and LHAs for this purpose. These ships will likely carry out a variety of missions including counter-piracy, troop insertion, and HA/DR and medical response.

As the PLAN continues its effort to “go global” to fulfill the requirements of the new naval strategy in the far seas, Beijing will likely identify additional missions for its nuclear submarine force. The PLAN has already begun to deploy submarines into the Indian Ocean to support on-going security operations.⁶⁵ If Beijing wishes to extend the distance or increase the number of its far seas submarine deployments, the PLAN will likely need to acquire additional nuclear submarines because they have greater endurance than conventional submarines, which make up most of China's current submarine force.

⁶³ “Expert: China should have four aircraft carriers,” PLA Online, Feb 5, 2015, <http://english.pladaily.com.cn>; “PLA Navy To Have At Least 5 Carriers: Experts,” Global Times Online, Dec 5, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/>.

⁶⁴ 航妈好帅，三胎快来！ [“The Carrier is Gorgeous, Let the Third Come Quickly!], 中国军网 [China Military Online], December 18, 2020, http://www.81.cn/hj/2020-12/18/content_9955844.htm.

⁶⁵ 2014年9月国防部例行记者会文字实录 [“September 2014 Defense Ministry's Regular Press Conference Transcript”], 中国国防部新闻局 [China Ministry of National Defense News Office], September 25, 2014, www.mod.gov.cn/affair/2014-09/25/content_4539895.htm

Beijing's Timeline to Advance Its Naval Strategy

China likely adheres to a clear timeline for aspects of naval development over which Beijing exerts direct control, such as platform construction and far seas deployments. During his speech to the 19th Party Congress in October 2017, Xi outlined requirements for the PLA to become a mechanized force by 2020, a fully modernized force by 2035, and a “world-class” force by 2050.⁶⁶ Beijing conveys more specific near-term guidance through its Five Year Plans, which direct research, development, and acquisition, and through the Outline for Military Training.⁶⁷ Each service of the PLA likely has a force modernization strategy and training plan linked to these directives.

However, certain aspects of Far Seas Protection are outside of Beijing's control either because they rely on foreign partnerships and cooperation or because they are driven by circumstances. For example, China's pursuit of overseas basing and port access agreements is opportunistic and depends on the willingness of potential host countries to accommodate the PLAN. Although Beijing might seek to influence favorable responses from these countries through infrastructure investment, diplomatic and military engagement, and other economic incentives, the potential host's receptivity to China's naval presence is ultimately beyond Beijing's control. Furthermore, unless Beijing changes its longstanding aversion to formal alliances, other countries have no binding incentive to aid China during wartime.

Security cooperation efforts similarly rely on regional or international consensus to implement. The UN endorsed international counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, enabling foreign navies to conduct security operations in Somalian waters. Without this type of top-level support, and the underlying security crisis that required action, the PLAN may never have embarked on a continuous far seas mission in 2008. In contrast, since at least 2012 Beijing has publicly called for international support to combat piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, working through the UN, bilateral exchanges, and other forums to open a debate and seek consensus on a cooperative security effort.⁶⁸ China's 2015 *Defense White Paper* pledged to help African countries ensure navigational security in the Gulf of Guinea.⁶⁹ However, despite these efforts, Beijing has not succeeded in gaining the regional and international support to establish a security coalition in the Gulf of Guinea. The emergence of security threats, international unrest, natural disasters, and other humanitarian crises cannot be predicted or directed, but all of these provide opportunities to engage military forces, often in new ways and in new areas of the world.

⁶⁶ Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”—Speech Delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, China Daily Online, October 18, 2017, www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm

⁶⁷ “十三五”国家科技创新规划 [“13th Five-Year’ Plan for National Science and Technology Innovation”], 中国政府网 [Central People's Government of the PRC], July 28, 2016, www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2016-08/08/content_5098072.htm

⁶⁸ Oghogho Obayuwana, “China Wants To Partner Nigeria on Gulf of Guinea;” “President Xi Jinping Holds Talks With Togolese President Faure Essozimna in Beijing,” China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, May 30, 2016, www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zzjg_663340/fzs_663828/gjlb_663832/3104_664234/3106_664238/t1368380.shtml; “UN Security Council Meeting On Gulf Of Guinea Piracy Helps Cooperation: China,” Xinhua, April 27, 2016, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>; “China-Africa Cooperation: A Model for Asia-Africa Relations,” China Ministry of Foreign Affairs, October 22, 2016, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/.t1408039.shtml

⁶⁹ “Full Text: China's Second Africa Policy Paper,” Xinhua, December 4, 2015, Part III 6 (3), pp. 13-14, <http://news.xinhuanet.com>

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