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China's New Navy: A short guide for Australian policy-makers

Sam Roggeveen



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China's New Navy: A short guide for Australian policy-makers

Sam Roggeveen

Executive Summary

- ✦ China's focus on developing a large ocean-going surface fleet indicates its growing ambitions. While China's maritime modernisation was previously weighted more towards capabilities that would make it difficult for the United States and its allies to operate close to China, Beijing now also wants to signal its status as a great power and have the ability to pressure its neighbours.
- ✦ China already has the second most powerful navy in the Pacific and is developing the capability to match America's maritime strength in the Pacific. America's naval predominance will erode in North Asia and give way to a multipolar balance, but in Southeast Asia Beijing will itself become predominant.
- ✦ China may already be building a 'post-American navy', one designed not to confront US naval predominance in the Pacific, but to inherit it as the US balks at the increasing cost of continued regional leadership.
- ✦ Thanks to China's rise and America's relative decline, Australia faces its most challenging maritime security environment since World War II. To meet the challenge, the ADF needs a force structure that is itself inspired by lessons from China.

Policy Recommendations

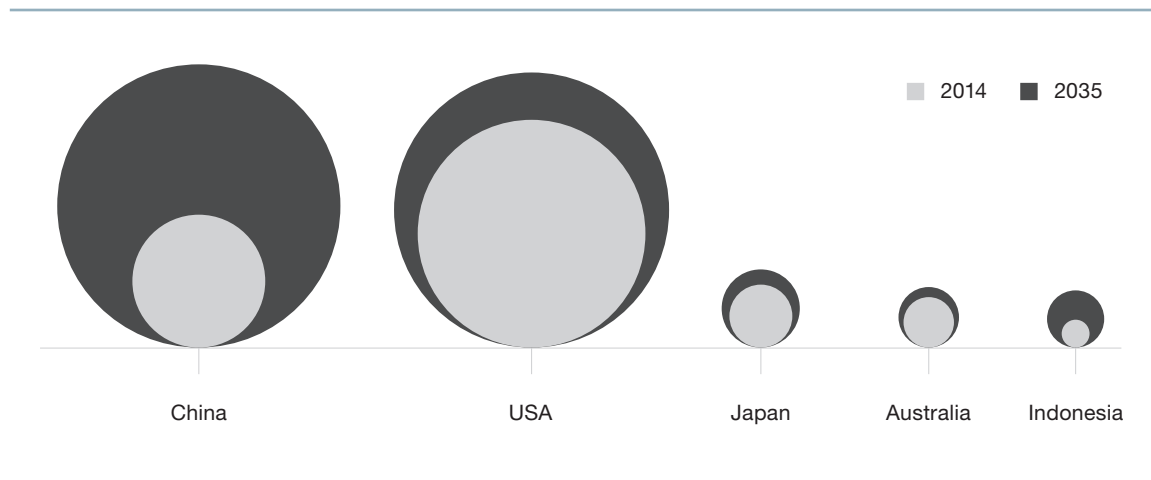
- ✦ Australia must plan for a future in which its major ally is not the uncontested maritime leader in our region, and in which America's will to maintain a pre-eminent place in the region will be severely tested. Maritime power in North Asia will in future be balanced between the United States, China and several middle powers, and Southeast Asia will be vulnerable to coercion by Chinese maritime forces.
- ✦ Australia should follow China's example by focusing its maritime force structure on anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities. The plan to double the size of Australia's submarine fleet is welcome, but given the leaps in Chinese capability, there are major questions surrounding the pace of this program.
- ✦ Australia cannot pursue an A2/AD strategy without Indonesia's consent, and preferably its cooperation. Our defence diplomacy should be concentrated on Jakarta.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that China is surpassing the United States as an economic power. That this shift is also leading to a rebalance of military power is perhaps less appreciated, because the difference between the two countries remains so extreme. For instance, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the United States spent US\$611.2 billion in 2016 while China spent US\$215.7 billion. In raw measures of military power, such as numbers of nuclear weapons, foreign bases, aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines, and forces that can be deployed at short notice anywhere on earth, the United States remains far ahead of China.

However, the 2016 Australian Defence White Paper estimated that the defence spending gap between the United States and China will be closed by 2035 (figure 1). That doesn't mean China will equal the United States as a military power by 2035—China would need to sustain spending at that level over many years to match the United States—but it does indicate a clear and dramatic trend, one compounded by the fact that China has no evident ambitions for a global defence presence, so unlike the United States, it will concentrate far more of its resources in a single region. (It is also worth noting in figure 1 that Indonesian defence spending will match Australia's in the same period; Indonesia will need to play a key role in Australia's response to China's naval expansion, a subject we will return to in the closing section of this Paper.)

FIGURE 1 Indicative Defence Spending to 2035



Source: Australian Department of Defence, *2016 Defence White Paper*, p. 49.

Perhaps just as important as the raw number is *how* China is working towards parity with US defence spending. Compared to America's Cold War rival, the Soviet Union, China is not distorting its economy in an effort to keep up. The Soviet Union was a military superpower with the economy of a middle power. We cannot say the same of China, which has kept its defence spending at roughly 2% of GDP, a figure which seems comfortably sustainable.

For Australia, the most significant manifestation of this growing military capability will be in maritime power. For decades Australia has enjoyed a maritime edge in its immediate neighbourhood, and in more distant parts of the Pacific and Indian Oceans it could count on its ally the United States, which possessed by far the biggest navy and air force in the world.

Thanks to China, that period is now rapidly drawing to a close, so it is critical to understand *why* Beijing has embarked on such a dramatic expansion of its naval capabilities. China's public statements offer some clues as to its ambitions, but China's political system is far from transparent, and Beijing probably calculates that maintaining ambiguity about its capabilities and intentions works in its favour. Therefore, we have to look elsewhere to understand Beijing's ambitions. Naval power can reflect a nation's identity and hint at the bureaucratic power of the navy and its supporters. But it is also a material expression of a nation's foreign policy aims. The analysis that follows briefly examines strategy, force structure and even the design of some of its new warships in order to find clues to Beijing's broader ambitions.

The scale of Chinese expansion

The US Naval Institute's Andrew Erickson estimates that the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy is "poised to become the world's second largest navy by 2020, and — if current trends continue — a combat fleet that in overall order of battle is quantitatively and even perhaps qualitatively on a par with that of the US Navy by 2030."¹ Yet in the sheer number of combat vessels, the PLA Navy has not grown much. The true measure of its growth is in capabilities. In the last two decades, it has replaced vessels which would long have been considered obsolete in Western navies with ships that are approaching the levels of sophistication seen in the West, and surpassing those of Russia.

In 2015, the US Office of Naval Intelligence judged that, of the 78 destroyers and frigates in the PLA Navy fleet, 56 (or 72%) could be considered modern.² That percentage continues to increase because China is adding new ships quickly; IISS recently reported that in the last four years alone China has added enough new combat and auxiliary vessels to equal the size of the French Navy.³ There are still major doubts about PLA Navy capability—can it deploy naval forces safely and consistently over long distances and long time periods? Are its officers and sailors trained to the highest standard? Can it match the command & control capabilities of the best navies? Can it integrate its operations with the other arms of the PLA?—but the direction of movement is clear.

Some high-profile examples illustrate the point. Note that the emphasis here is on surface ships rather than submarines, for reasons that will become clearer in the following section on why China is staging this dramatic expansion of capabilities:

- **Aircraft carriers:** China will soon be just the second nation on earth operating more than a single large aircraft carrier.⁴ China's first carrier, CV-16, is operational, while the second (CV-17) is likely to enter service in 2020. The carriers that follow are likely to abandon the more primitive 'ski jump' method of launching aircraft in favour of catapults, which allow for more launches of heavier aircraft, thus increasing combat capability. Future Chinese carriers are likely to have similar capabilities to US vessels, though China may not build as many as the United States.
- **Type 055:** A new class of cruisers, each with 112 vertical-launch cells for anti-aircraft, anti-ship, and land-attack missiles (which at present, is only slightly fewer missile cells than the Royal Australian Navy has in its entire fleet).⁵ The first ship will commence sea trials soon and it is likely at least eight will be built.⁶ The exact tonnage of these ships is still contested but they are probably larger than the US Navy's *Ticonderoga*-class, though with fewer missile cells.
- **Type 052D:** Destroyers in roughly the same weight and capability class as Australia's three planned *Hobart*-class ships. Thirteen Type 052Ds have been launched. One credible source says 26 are on order. China also operates six 052Cs, an earlier version of this class.
- **Type 054A:** Frigates roughly comparable to Australia's eight upgraded ANZAC-class. China has inducted 26 copies into service since the mid-2000s, with more known to be under construction. Credible reports suggest production will soon be halted in favour of an upgraded version known as the Type-054B, of which more than twenty may have been ordered.
- **Type 901 replenishment ship:** Only the US Navy currently fields replenishment ships of over 40,000 tonnes, which allow for long-range and long-term deployment of combat vessels, but China now has one of these ships in trials and a second fitting out. More are likely to follow as the aircraft-carrier fleet expands.
- **Type 071 amphibious transport dock:** 25,000 tonne ships which can transport 5-800 troops as well as armoured vehicles over long distances, put them ashore and then support the landing with command facilities and logistics. Four are already in service and two more are fitting out. More may follow, though there are strong rumours of a Type 075 ship which will look similar to the RAN's *Canberra*-class but will likely be substantially larger.



Altogether, by 2020 we are on track to see a PLA Navy equipped with two aircraft carriers, two cruisers and around sixty destroyers and frigates, all of which can be broadly defined as modern vessels. This fleet will be supported by a growing number of replenishment ships, at least one overseas base in Djibouti and perhaps several more in Pakistan, Tanzania, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.⁷ In the Pacific, of course, China is constructing artificial islands in the South China Sea which can support naval and air deployments.

What's it all for?

To understand why China is dramatically expanding the capability of its navy and particularly its surface fleet, it is worth beginning with the observation that China has done more than any other modern military force to make large surface ships vulnerable, some would even say obsolete. This has been the aim of China's so-called anti-access, area-denial (A2/AD) forces. A2/AD has been defined as a "family of military capabilities used to prevent or constrain the deployment of opposing forces into a given theatre of operations and reduce their freedom of manoeuvre once in a theatre."⁸ To put it another way,

A2/AD is designed to weaken the ability of an adversary to achieve sea control, which is the means to operate in a given maritime area without interference from hostile forces. Importantly, A2/AD is not itself an attempt to impose sea control, but merely to challenge the ability of others to exercise it.

China has done more than any other modern military force to make large surface ships vulnerable.

China has developed a suite of capabilities that would, in the event of conflict, deny the United States or other adversaries the ability to control the oceans near Chinese territory. This is particularly important because the United States has so much capability to project power from the sea onto land, primarily through its aircraft carriers but also with cruise-missiles carried aboard surface ships and submarines, and with amphibious forces. By focusing on A2/AD, China has made it increasingly difficult for large, ocean-going surface fleets to operate safely. Such is the capability of these systems that some observers now regard large surface ships as expensive follies or floating targets.

What does China's A2/AD fleet look like? It is centred around anti-ship weapons (torpedoes; fast sea-skimming missiles; and, most notoriously, the DF-21D 'carrier killer' ballistic missile) and small, agile or stealthy platforms to carry them (short-range surface ships, including catamarans that derive from Australian designs; strike-fighters and bombers; and quiet diesel-powered submarines). These weapons and carrying platforms are knitted together by a network of sensors—on submarines, surveillance aircraft, satellites, and in future a network of remote underwater sensors—designed to give China visibility of its maritime approaches and the ability to target hostile forces with great accuracy.

Despite the fearsome reputation of China's A2/AD capabilities, the effort to make China's maritime approaches impassable territory for hostile navies is far from complete; the further an adversary gets from the Chinese landmass, the less dangerous the PLA's capabilities become. That is one reason why Chinese island-building in the South China Sea is so concerning.⁹ It is also why Taiwan, just 160km from the Chinese coast, is so vulnerable. Back in 1996, the United States was able to sail aircraft-carrier groups through the Taiwan Strait as a protest against Chinese missile tests during Taiwan's election campaign. The US Navy could do this knowing it could defend itself against any threat from China. But the United States cannot have such confidence today. Indeed, the risk to US maritime forces in the event of a US-China military clash over Taiwan is now so great that America's implicit security guarantees to Taiwan are under severe strain. China's A2/AD capabilities now make it doubtful that the United States could intervene in such a conflict at an acceptable cost.

Clearly, though, A2/AD has not been the PLA Navy's exclusive focus; it is also in the process of building a powerful surface fleet. In fact, China's 2015 Defence White Paper declared openly that China would "gradually shift its focus from 'offshore waters defense' to the combination of 'offshore waters defense' with 'open seas protection'", thus signalling that China was moving decisively away from its focus on A2/AD.¹⁰

But this raises a crucial question: given how much effort China has put into undermining the very viability of surface warships, why has the PLA Navy invested so heavily in those very forces? Why is China seemingly unconcerned that its adversaries will adopt the same A2/AD formula that China has itself used successfully around its coastline? There are various possible answers to this question, some overlapping or mutually reinforcing, others mutually exclusive.¹¹

- 1. Challenge US sea control:** *Having first developed the ability to deny the United States control of the seas, China now wants a fleet with the capability to forcefully replace the US Navy as the hegemonic military force in the region.*¹²

This would require a fleet that could dominate the Asian maritime domain at the expense of all others. China would need the ability to defeat the US Navy and its allies in a Midway-style pitched naval battle,¹³ which would be both massively costly and geopolitically risky. Even at the present high pace of Chinese capability development, it would take several decades for China to achieve such capability, and given the ability of the United States and regional adversaries to respond, it may never be achievable at an acceptable cost.

- 2. Inherit US sea control:** *China wants a fleet that can take on the mission of US forces in Asia as the US position in the region erodes.*

China may be betting that it will never need to fight for sea control; rather, it may believe it can wait for the United States to cede such control over time.¹⁴ China may calculate that, as its forces grow, the United States essentially gives up on its current strategic posture in the Asia Pacific through an unwillingness to pay the ever-increasing cost of maintaining its position of leadership. America's alliances will weaken as allies start to lose faith that the United States is willing to stand up to an ever more powerful China, and US investment in its military won't keep up with China's growth. The United States won't leave the region entirely, but bit by bit, Washington will accept China's status as regional strategic leader. China cannot occupy this space with an A2/AD-focused navy alone, so it is building a surface fleet not so much to challenge the United States as to inherit its position. This is less resource-intensive than option 1, since China would only need the ability to dominate its regional neighbours.

- 3. A focus on regional adversaries:** *China wants a surface fleet not to challenge the United States, but in order to overwhelm smaller Southeast Asian adversaries.*

Beijing may be calculating that even if the United States retains its military capability in Asia Pacific, its will to intervene in local disputes is flagging. That feeling may have hardened in the wake of Chinese island-building in the South China Sea, which the United States has done little to oppose. So even if China's surface fleet looks vulnerable against the United States, it would be formidable against a small regional adversary which cannot count on US support. The Philippines is one such country, and Vietnam may be another (though it is working to bolster maritime capabilities, largely with Russian help). Against smaller adversaries, even nascent capabilities such as China's small aircraft-carrier fleet would give China an important advantage in a military confrontation.

Of course, China would prefer to avoid such confrontation altogether. So the new fleet is also intended as a tool of coercion: convince an adversary not to fight by demonstrating that the adversary is at a hopeless disadvantage, making confrontation highly costly.¹⁵ That effect is difficult to achieve with A2/AD forces alone. China's ability to coerce Southeast Asian states in regard to the South China Sea dispute, for instance, is reinforced by a carrier-centred fleet with long-range and staying power, and by the development of amphibious forces that could threaten small pieces of territory at great distance from the Chinese mainland. A force built around submarines and anti-ship missiles has less coercive potential.

- 4. 'Costly signalling':** *China wants a powerful surface fleet to signal to the region and the world its great-power ambitions, thereby eroding incentives to resist China's agenda.*

The theory of costly signalling arises from the natural world: Darwin, it is said, was baffled by the ornate plumage which he observed in some bird species, which actually made it more difficult to fight or flee

China is building a surface fleet not so much to challenge the United States as to inherit its position.



from predators. But plumage or display can signal health, strength or aggression, which may deter rivals or predators. Of course, such signals depend on an audience that will understand and interpret them unambiguously, and in the realm of international security, a large surface fleet centred on aircraft carriers does just that. The fact that China is investing in capabilities that might be seen as vulnerable can even reinforce the sense that China is committed to what might be a costly course.¹⁶

Implications for Australia

None of these four accounts are reassuring for Australia. The first would be the most serious but it is also the least likely, while the second will depend largely on the pace and scale of America's relative regional decline. Unless there is a crisis, there will be no trigger for the United States to reconsider its military commitment to Asia, so decline is likely to continue gradually. But conflict on the Korean Peninsula, or in Taiwan or the South China Sea, in which the United States lost a major asset (such as a military base or carrier battle-group) might see a more sudden American re-assessment of its commitments in Asia. The third and fourth scenarios are to varying degrees already a reality—China is using its naval capabilities to coerce its Southeast Asian neighbours and to demonstrate that standing up to China is too costly.

The 2016 Australian Defence White Paper, which announced a boost in defence spending and a greater focus on maritime capabilities, gave some indication that the government is aware of the challenge China's navy poses. But the "more capable" ADF of which the White Paper boasts is based on a sleight of hand. Yes, the ADF of 2035 will be able to do things that the ADF of today cannot, but historical comparisons are beside the point. What matters is not capability relative to history, but relative to potential adversaries. And as the White Paper's own numbers demonstrate (figure 1), Australia will go backwards between now and 2035.

The scale of Australia's challenge is compounded by growing uncertainty about the future of the US presence in the Asia Pacific. These concerns have in recent times centred on President Trump and his hostility to US allies including Japan and South Korea. But it is a mistake to focus on Trump because it implies that the United States could return to its traditional leadership role in the post-Trump era, and because it suggests that the future regional order will be decided primarily by decisions made in the White House.

The change to the regional order is first and foremost a function not of American decline but of China's rise. This shift began well before Trump and will continue long after his term of office. If strategic power is largely a product of economic power, then the United States simply cannot keep up with the pace of change—the 2017 Australian Foreign Policy White Paper predicts that by 2030, China will have a US\$42 trillion economy, while the US economy will be worth about US\$24 trillion. So the means which America has at its disposal to maintain its historic leadership role in the region are eroding, and that will continue even if Trump is succeeded by a president who embraces America's Asian allies and reinforces the US military presence in the region. For America to maintain its maritime edge in the Pacific against a rising Chinese navy would require a scale of investment that would be economically damaging and politically unattractive.

It has been argued¹⁷ that even with American decline taken into account, Asia's US-aligned middle powers can, in concert, do a lot to blunt China's maritime rise. Japan, South Korea and Australia have substantial wealth on their side and have already invested in formidable maritime forces; they have the time and the resources to do more. However, the question of whether Australia, Japan and South Korea can indeed be counted together is very much open: are their interests in aligning to constrain China's maritime power stronger than their interests in maintaining good relations with Beijing? This question is even more acute in Southeast Asia, where economic inducements combined with coercion and 'costly signalling' is encouraging states such as Cambodia and the Philippines to bandwagon with China because they see China as too strong to resist.

Given America's continued relative decline and the uncertainty around the question of whether regional states will coalesce against China, it follows that if Australia wants to counter China's growing maritime power, it must to a large degree act independently. Fortunately, in terms of maritime strategy and force structure, China itself has provided a ready template for how this can be done. The effectiveness of China's A2/AD strategy illustrates that smaller powers can deny maritime space to a larger adversary, and it can be done without undue distortion of the national budget because modern maritime strategy and technology favour the defence - it is both easier and cheaper to deny sea control to a large surface fleet than it is to impose such control.

For Australia, a maritime strategy based around A2/AD would represent a return of sorts to the Defence of Australia doctrine of the 1980s, with its emphasis on defending the sea-air gap to our north. In the post-9/11 period, when counter-terrorism became a higher priority and the maritime environment was more benign, Australia's emphasis shifted to improving its expeditionary capabilities. We built a force that could be moved quickly and in large numbers to distant theatres of operation; the two *Canberra*-class large amphibious ships represent the culmination of this trend. But in a maritime environment in which China is rising and ambitious, and in which our major ally is in relative decline, those capabilities look like expensive luxuries. Australia must build an A2/AD force structure with the capabilities to resist any Chinese attempt at coercion.

Such a force structure is achievable and affordable for Australia if we choose to pursue it.¹⁸ But there is a diplomatic challenge attached, one which represents an important caveat to the rule that Australia must develop more independent maritime power in future. For if Australia is to return its defence focus fully to its north and build more formidable capabilities to disrupt shipping and air activity there, it must be done with Indonesia's tacit consent, and preferably its cooperation. Indonesia is already a major regional power and could become the world's fourth-largest economy by 2050.¹⁹ Well before then, it is likely to become a much more significant regional defence power. As such, Australia cannot afford to alarm or provoke its northern neighbour by failing to make its intentions clear—Australia won't be able to focus its defence capabilities on China's maritime power if this arouses suspicion from Jakarta, or if its broader relationship with Indonesia remains so vulnerable to derailment by petty disputes.

This is not just about neutralising Indonesia. Unlike smaller Southeast Asian states, Indonesia is a major power with the capacity and will to resist Chinese coercion and carve out its own distinct and independent regional role. Indonesia and Australia may never be allies, but they must be much closer partners in a common enterprise to counter-balance Chinese maritime power in our region.

Australia won't be able to focus its defence capabilities on China's maritime power if this arouses suspicion from Jakarta.



Policy Recommendations

- ✦ Australia must plan for a future in which its major ally is not the uncontested maritime leader in our region, and in which America's will to maintain a pre-eminent place in the region will be severely tested. Maritime power in North Asia will in future be balanced between the United States, China and several middle powers, and Southeast Asia will be vulnerable to coercion by Chinese maritime forces.
- ✦ Australia should follow China's example by focusing its maritime force structure on anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities. The plan to double the size of Australia's submarine fleet is welcome, but given the leaps in Chinese capability, there are major questions surrounding the pace of this program.
- ✦ Australia cannot pursue an A2/AD strategy without Indonesia's consent, and preferably its cooperation. Our defence diplomacy should be concentrated on Jakarta.

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To understand contemporary insurgencies in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan this course establishes a strong historical framework by examining earlier conflicts from North America to Southeast and South Asia. It encourages students to evaluate contemporary counter-insurgency practice, including those campaigns being waged as part of the attempt to defeat transnational terrorism, against the backdrop of the evolution of counterinsurgency strategies.

Other courses you can study in your degree include: Strategic Studies; The Resort to Force: Understanding Military Power; Australian Strategic and Defence Policy; Great and Powerful Friends: Strategic Alliances and Australian Security; Strategic Studies Internship; Special Topics in Strategic Studies; Intelligence and Security; Nuclear Strategy in the Asian Century; China's Defence and Strategic Challenges; Why and How We Fight: Understanding War and Conflict; Contemporary Issues in Australian Defence Policy.

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