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# Correspondence: Debating China's Naval Nationalism

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# Correspondence

## Debating China's Naval Nationalism

Michael A. Glosny  
and  
Phillip C. Saunders  
Robert S. Ross

*To the Editors (Michael A. Glosny and Phillip C. Saunders write):*

In "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response," Robert Ross seeks to explain why "China will soon embark on a more ambitious maritime policy, beginning with the construction of a power-projection navy centered on an aircraft carrier."<sup>1</sup> Ross argues that geopolitical constraints should lead China, a continental power, to pursue access denial as its optimal maritime strategy. He relies on "naval nationalism" to explain China's development of naval power-projection capabilities, which he describes as a suboptimal choice given China's geopolitical position.

We argue that "naval nationalism" is an underdeveloped and unconvincing explanation for China's pursuit of expanded naval capabilities. Instead, China's development of a limited naval power-projection capability reflects changes in China's threat environment and expanded Chinese national interests created by deeper integration into the world economy. In our critique, we first identify flaws in Ross's geopolitical analysis. Second, we discuss shortcomings in his causal argument. Lastly, we briefly present Chinese rationales for the development of limited power-projection capabilities, which are consistent with a proper understanding of Chinese interests.

### A FLAWED GEOPOLITICAL ANALYSIS

Ross's analysis overlooks both recent changes in China's threat environment and its global economic integration. In addition, it artificially limits Chinese interests and arbitrarily restricts the range of potential Chinese naval strategies. As a result, his analysis underemphasizes China's increasingly important maritime concerns and interests. This oversight leads Ross to exaggerate the degree to which geopolitical constraints should force China to behave as a typical continental power.

First, Ross overlooks recent changes in China's threat environment. Continental concerns were dominant during most of China's history and did constrain naval develop-

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1. Robert S. Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall 2009), pp. 46–81 at p. 46. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

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ment, leading China to adopt an approach of “attach[ing] importance to land and treat[ing] the sea as unimportant” (*zhongluqinghai*).<sup>2</sup> Recent improvements in China’s continental threat environment, however, have reduced constraints on its ability to develop sea power. These constraints should be determined empirically, not assumed based on geography (p. 48).

Virtually all Chinese and U.S. analysts agree that China’s continental threat environment has improved dramatically. In the mid-1980s, Chinese leaders shifted the focus of China’s “military strategic guidelines” (*junshi zhanlüe fangzhen*) from the Soviet Union to broader regional threats, placing greater importance on the sea.<sup>3</sup> In the post-Cold War era, China solved all of its land border disputes except those with Bhutan and India,<sup>4</sup> and it stabilized relations with continental neighbors through confidence-building measures, strategic partnerships, and regional organizations.<sup>5</sup> According to two Chinese experts, “The security environment on China’s northwest and southwest land border is the best since 1949 and maybe even the best in China’s history,” providing China the opportunity to “concentrate its resources on developing sea power.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to downplaying these improvements, Ross exaggerates future threats to China and overstates the cost of internal security missions. He cites “revived Russian ground forces,” “[the danger India could present to China] if India should stabilize its conflict with Pakistan,” and a “united Korea” as potential threats (p. 55). These may become challenges in the long term, but China would have time to adjust. Moreover, although the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) plays a role in frontier defense, internal security, and other domestic missions,<sup>7</sup> it serves as the “last line of defense” with much less expensive security forces bearing primary responsibility.<sup>8</sup>

As continental pressures on China have diminished, strategic pressures from the sea

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2. Senior Capt. Hao Yanbing and Lt. Yang Zhirong, *Haishang Liliang yu Zhonghua Minzu de Weida Fuxing* [Sea power and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation] (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2005), p. 204.

3. For an authoritative article from the early 1990s, see Maj. Gen. Peng Guangqian, *Zhongguo Junshi Zhanlüe Wenti* [Issues in Chinese military strategy] (Beijing: PLA Press, 2006), p. 96. See also David M. Finkelstein, “China’s National Military Strategy: An Overview of the ‘Military Strategic Guidelines,’” in Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell, eds., *Right Sizing the People’s Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China’s Military* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2007), pp. 69–140; and Paul H.B. Godwin, “From Continent to Periphery: PLA Doctrine, Strategy, and Capabilities towards 2000,” *China Quarterly*, No. 146 (June 1996), pp. 464–487.

4. M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China’s Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

5. Robert G. Sutter, *China’s Rise in Asia: Promises and Perils* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).

6. Liu Zhongmin and Wang Xiaojuan, “Chengqing Zhongguo Haiquan Fazhan Zhanlüe de san da Sixiang Fenqi” [Clarifying three big differences in thinking on China’s sea power development strategy], *Xuexi Yuekan* [Study monthly], No. 9 (2005), p. 32.

7. On frontier defense, see M. Taylor Fravel, “Securing Borders: China’s Doctrine and Force Structure for Frontier Defense,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 30, Nos. 4–5 (August–October 2007), pp. 705–737.

8. Murray Scot Tanner, “How China Manages Internal Security and Its Impact on PLA Missions,” in Roy Kamphausen, David Lai, and Andrew Scobell, eds., *Beyond the Strait: PLA Missions Other Than Taiwan* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, April 2009), pp. 39–98.

have become more salient.<sup>9</sup> In addition to Taiwan independence, China's greatest perceived security threats come from the naval and air forces of the United States and its allies. China has maritime disputes with several neighboring countries, most notably in the East China Sea and South China Sea. Even Ye Zicheng, whom Ross cites as an advocate of China's continental orientation, has observed that "currently, the main threats to China's national security are from a maritime direction."<sup>10</sup>

Second, Ross adopts a narrow conception of China's national interests that minimizes the impact of China's integration into the world economy and the expansion of its national interests. Fundamental changes in the structure of the Chinese economy have made maritime interests much more important for China's development and for regime survival.<sup>11</sup> China is now the world's largest exporter and third largest importer (behind the United States and Germany). Its trade dependence almost doubled in the last decade (from 40 percent in 2000 to 73 percent during the 2006–08 period), giving China the second largest ratio of international trade to gross domestic product in the world.<sup>12</sup> Some 80–90 percent of this trade is carried by ship.<sup>13</sup>

In his brief discussion of economics, Ross understates China's dependence on overseas oil and dismisses the importance of seaborne energy imports. Although imported oil represents only 10 percent of China's total energy consumption, its transportation and some industrial sectors are completely dependent on it. China's growing demand for energy is projected to increase the country's dependence on imported oil from approximately 50 percent today to 75 percent by 2030.<sup>14</sup> Ross suggests that an "increasing share" of China's imported oil will come from overland sources, but 86 percent of its oil imports currently arrive by ship.<sup>15</sup> In 2007 China also became a net importer of gas. Projected growth in China's overall gas demand will also increase its dependence on imported gas, much of which will be carried by liquefied natural gas tankers.<sup>16</sup>

Ross suggests that only extremist naval nationalists view China's national interests

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9. For a similar analysis, see Michael McDevitt, "The Strategic and Operational Context Driving PLA Navy Building," in Kamphausen and Scobell, *Right Sizing the People's Liberation Army*, pp. 481–522. For an analysis of the growing importance of the maritime domain for China, see Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, eds., *China Goes to Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2009).

10. Ye Zicheng and Mu Xinhai, "Dui Zhongguo Haiquan Fazhan Zhanlüe de jidian Sikao" [Some points of reflection on China's sea power development strategy], *Guoji Zhengzhi Yanjiu* [Studies of international politics], No. 3 (August 2005), p. 17.

11. For a similar critique of Ye Zicheng's continentalist arguments, see Ni Lexiong, "Cong Luquan dao Haiquan de Lishi Biran: jian yu Ye Zicheng Jiaoshou Shangque" [The historical inevitability of transition from land power to sea power: A discussion with Professor Ye Zicheng], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World economics and politics], No. 11 (2007), p. 31.

12. World Trade Organization, "China Country Profile," December 2009, <http://stat.wto.org>.

13. "Sea Change in Thinking about China's Navy," *China Daily*, April 23, 2009. In 2009, six of the world's ten busiest ports were in China. See United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), "Special Chapter: Asia," in *Review of Maritime Transport* (New York: United Nations, 2009).

14. International Energy Agency (IEA), *World Energy Outlook, 2008* (Paris: International Energy Agency, 2008), pp. 93, 103.

15. UNCTAD, "Special Chapter: Asia."

16. China's dependence on imports for natural gas will also rise to 40 percent by 2030. See IEA, *World Energy Outlook, 2008*, pp. 110, 115. For an excellent analysis of Chinese energy demands, see Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea: China's Navy Enters the Twenty-first Century*, 2d ed. (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, forthcoming), chap. 3.

as expanding. Yet Chinese leaders and researchers regularly acknowledge the growing importance of “overseas interests” (*haiwai liyi*) as a result of increases in trade, overseas investment, Chinese companies “going out” (*zouchuqu*), and Chinese citizens living abroad.<sup>17</sup> These issues have become an important focus of official meetings on China’s foreign affairs. Moreover, expanding the focus from national security to regime security highlights the connection that Chinese leaders see between continued economic growth and regime survival.

Most recent geopolitical analyses by Chinese military officers and civilian strategists explicitly take these changes into account. These experts, as a result, often refer to China as both a land power and a sea power. Other characterizations include “land-sea hybrid country” (*luhai fuhe guojia*), “nation of both sea and land” (*hailu jianbei guojia*), and “continental and coastal country” (*dalü binhai guojia*).<sup>18</sup>

Third, Ross arbitrarily restricts the range of China’s potential naval strategies. His realist focus on great power war leads him to emphasize the question of whether countries can build a “battle-capable surface fleet” (p. 54) able to reach “military parity with the [dominant] maritime power” (p. 53). This implies that naval power-projection capabilities have value only if they produce supremacy over the most powerful maritime adversary. This all-or-nothing approach overlooks the potential utility of a more limited power-projection capability that could protect significant Chinese interests. China (like most countries) is concerned about a range of maritime threats, many of which do not involve the United States.

#### NAVAL NATIONALISM: AN UNCONVINCING EXPLANATION

Given that his geopolitical framework cannot explain China’s development of naval power-projection capabilities, Ross instead relies on “naval nationalism” as the explanation.<sup>19</sup> We agree that nationalism may play a role in increasing support for China’s naval buildup, but Ross’s argument about its causal role is underdeveloped and the limited evidence he presents unpersuasive. Ross offers no explicit definition of nationalism and appears to lump all supporters of Chinese efforts to build an aircraft carrier

17. “Zhongyang Waishi Gongzuo Huiyi zai Jing Juxing, Hu Jintao zuo Zhongyao Jianghua” [Foreign affairs work conference convened in Beijing, Hu Jintao gives important speech], Xinhua news agency, August 23, 2006; and Senior Col. Wang Lidong, *Guojia Haishang Liyilun* [On national maritime interests] (Beijing: NDU Press, 2007). According to the authoritative “China Academic Journals” database, from 1994 to 2003, an average of 21.2 articles per year contained a reference in the text to “overseas interests,” with a high of 35 in 2002. From 2004 to 2009, 89.7 articles per year included a reference in the full text, with a low of 69 in 2004.

18. Shao Yongling and Shi Yinong, “Jindai Ouzhou Luhai Fuhe Guojia de Mingyun yu Dangdai Zhongguo de Xuanze” [The fate of modern European land-sea hybrid countries and contemporary China’s choices], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World economics and politics], No. 10 (2000), pp. 47–52; Senior Col. Feng Liang and Lt. Col. Duan Tingzhi, “Zhongguo Haiyang Diyuan Anquan Tezheng yu Xinshiji Haishang Anquan Zhanlüe” [The characteristics of China’s sea geo-security and maritime security strategy in the new century], *Zhongguo Junshi Kexue* [China military science], No. 1 (2007), pp. 22–29; and Fang Kun, “Zhanlüe Diyuan yu Zhongguo Haijun Jianshe” [Geostrategy and the construction of China’s navy], *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World economics and politics], No. 8 (2004), pp. 43–48.

19. For earlier discussions of China and aircraft carriers, see Ian Storey and You Ji, “China’s Aircraft Carrier Ambitions: Seeking Truth from Rumors,” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Winter 2004), pp. 77–93; and Andrew S. Erickson and Andrew R. Wilson, “China’s Aircraft Carrier Dilemma,” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Autumn 2006), pp. 13–45.

in the nationalist camp. By characterizing all Chinese pro-carrier arguments as nationalist, Ross makes it impossible to determine the relative importance of nationalism as a causal factor.

Ross mentions two causal pathways through which nationalism can drive policy decisions: (1) elite prestige strategies to distract the masses, and (2) popular nationalism pressuring policymakers. The elite prestige strategies pathway suggests that governments try to "shore up [their] prestige at home by seeking victories abroad."<sup>20</sup> The literature on Chinese nationalism suggests that if China faced a domestic crisis, the leadership might lean more heavily on nationalism to bolster its legitimacy, which could potentially cause China to become belligerent.<sup>21</sup> Despite recent domestic pressures in China, we do not see problems so severe that the regime would be forced to rely on extreme prestige strategies. Empirical evidence in the international relations literature supporting this phenomenon is mixed and contradictory; this view also ignores the possibility that governments can develop other sources of legitimacy, such as economic growth.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the literature suggests that elites are most likely to resort to prestige strategies during domestic political transitions, a condition that does not exist in the case of China.

The popular nationalism pathway suggests that nationalist pressures can drive governments to adopt assertive and belligerent policies. This proactive conception of Chinese nationalism, however, contradicts the dominant interpretation of Chinese nationalism as reactive, and as a constraining influence on policy.<sup>23</sup> Even Peter Gries and Susan Shirk, among those most worried about Chinese nationalism, believe that the effect of popular nationalism in China would be to constrain choices and make compromises more difficult.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, this vision of popular nationalism driving policy also contradicts the international relations literature, which argues that public opinion can constrain policy by setting limits on possible options, but it rarely if ever drives or determines policy.<sup>25</sup>

A major analytical problem is that although Ross frames his article in terms of

20. Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, "Democratization and the Danger of War," *International Security*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer 1995), p. 33.

21. Thomas J. Christensen, "Chinese Realpolitik: Reading Beijing's Worldview," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 5 (September/October 1996), p. 41; and Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng, "The Rise of China: Theoretical and Policy Perspectives," in Ross and Zhu, eds., *China's Ascent: Power, Security, and the Future of International Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 303.

22. Jack S. Levy, "The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique," in Manus I. Midlarsky, ed., *Handbook of War Studies* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 259–288; and M. Taylor Fravel, "The Limits of Diversion: Rethinking Internal and External Conflict," *Security Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (May 2010), pp. 307–341.

23. Joseph Fewsmith and Stanley Rosen, "The Domestic Context of Chinese Foreign Policy: Does 'Public Opinion' Matter?" in David M. Lampton, ed., *The Making of Chinese Foreign and Security Policy in the Era of Reform* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 155; and Yinan He, "History, Chinese Nationalism, and the Emerging Sino-Japanese Conflict," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 16, No. 50 (February 2007), p. 19.

24. Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); and Susan L. Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower: How Internal Politics Could Derail Its Peaceful Rise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

25. Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, "The Relationships between Mass Media, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 11 (June 2008), pp. 39–65.



China's move to a "more ambitious maritime policy" (p. 46), he does not identify a specific policy decision or describe a decisionmaking process for which nationalism could be one of many potential explanations. Ross provides little evidence of nationalism driving the expansion of the PLA Navy (PLAN), and he offers no other examples in which nationalism has forced Chinese leaders to take belligerent actions. China's lack of transparency makes such analysis difficult, but Ross's limited evidence provides only minimal support for his causal argument. His strongest evidence comes from interviews with individuals who may or may not have information about China's decisionmaking process. He writes, "Chinese academics, government analysts, and military officers believe that in this nationalist environment, it will be difficult for Chinese leaders to continue to defer construction of China's first aircraft carrier without degrading their nationalist credentials" (p. 64). He also writes, "A senior Chinese intelligence officer remarked that the leadership can 'hardly resist the pressure' from society" (*ibid.*). These statements appear to be based on speculation rather than insider knowledge of the actual decision process or evidence of how nationalism drove that process.

Finally, Ross offers no compelling explanation for why, in his view, nationalism has forced the Chinese leadership's hand this time but not on previous occasions. Chinese popular nationalism has spiked repeatedly over the last twenty years and has regularly included appeals to develop an aircraft carrier; yet past waves of nationalism did not force China to build a carrier or push Chinese leaders to adopt aggressive policies.<sup>26</sup> Given this history, Ross needs to provide a better explanation for why nationalist forces have supposedly overwhelmed the leadership this time.

#### CHINESE RATIONALES FOR A LIMITED POWER-PROJECTION CAPABILITY

Ross characterizes a Chinese decision to develop aircraft carriers as a transition to a "carrier-centered navy" (pp. 61, 80). We believe that the PLAN is much more likely to develop a limited power-projection capability that increases China's ability to defend regional interests in contingencies not involving the United States, to protect expanding overseas interests, to perform nontraditional missions, to conduct military diplomacy, to demonstrate international responsibility, and to increase China's prestige. Such a limited power-projection force is unlikely to include more than a few aircraft carriers or to be organized into carrier strike groups challenging the U.S. Navy for control of the sea. Ross's focus on a "carrier-centered navy" and defining the utility of naval forces in terms of challenging the U.S. Navy leads him to dismiss such rationales.

Chinese authors make a number of arguments consistent with this kind of limited power-projection force. They not only cite the maritime threats discussed above but also point to new demands on the PLA to protect China's expanding overseas interests. Hu Jintao's 2004 "New Historic Missions" (*xin de lishi shiming*) and increasing emphasis on "nonwar military operations" (*feizhanzheng junshi xingdong*) directed the PLA to undertake a range of nontraditional security operations. These new missions and tasks require new capabilities, including some power-projection capabilities.<sup>27</sup>

Ross explicitly dismisses two missions prominent in Chinese arguments in support

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26. Erica Strecker Downs and Phillip C. Saunders, "Legitimacy and the Limits of Nationalism: China and the Diaoyu Islands," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 1998/99), pp. 114–146.

27. Daniel M. Hartnett, "The PLA's Domestic and Foreign Activities and Orientation," testimony

of a limited power-projection capability that could protect sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and defend maritime sovereignty. We agree that a limited PLAN power-projection force could not defend Chinese SLOCs against the U.S. Navy, but a carrier might help to deter potential threats from Japan, India, and pirates. Ross is also unconvinced by Chinese arguments about defending China's maritime sovereignty because he expects U.S. intervention in any conflict. The United States is not a direct claimant in these disputes, however, and it has defined its interests in terms of freedom of navigation rather than taking a position on underlying sovereignty disputes. China could hope to develop sufficient naval power-projection capabilities to prevent others from challenging Chinese sovereignty and seizing resources.<sup>28</sup>

Although Ross focuses exclusively on war-fighting and traditional security missions, PLA officers offer a broader list of potential roles for naval power-projection capabilities. These include humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, counterpiracy, noncombatant evacuation, peacekeeping operations, antiterrorism, military diplomacy, peacetime presence, and crisis response.<sup>29</sup> PLA officers and experts repeatedly cite the flexibility (*jidongxing*) of an aircraft carrier as an important advantage.<sup>30</sup>

A limited power-projection capability could also help to demonstrate that China is a responsible major power willing to take on more international burdens as it becomes more powerful. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami appears to have been a turning point in the Chinese leadership's support for an aircraft carrier. The U.S. Navy's rapid assistance not only highlighted the political value of naval forces, but also showed that China had a long way to go before it could participate effectively in such missions.<sup>31</sup> Some power-projection capabilities are a prerequisite for China to assume greater international responsibility, share international burdens, and provide global public goods.<sup>32</sup> China's 2008 deployment of four ships to participate in counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden showed how even a limited power-projection capability could pay international dividends.

PLA officers acknowledge that if China tried to use its aircraft carriers against the U.S. Navy, they would be "sitting ducks" or "easy targets," and that it would be "suicidal." As a result, they emphasize limited power-projection capabilities that could pro-

before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, at the hearing "China's Military and Security Activities Abroad," Washington, D.C., March 4, 2009.

28. Senior Col. Li Jie, *Hangmuzhilu: Haishang "juwuba" de Fazhan, Zhenglun ji Sikao* [The road to an aircraft carrier: Developments, debates, and reflections on maritime "invincible giant"] (Beijing: Sea Tide, 2009), p. 186; and Wang Shengrong, *Haiquan dui Daguo Xingshuai de Lishi Yingxiang* [The historical influence of sea power on the rise and fall of the great powers] (Beijing: Sea Tide Press, 2009), p. 398.

29. In the preface to a new book on aircraft carriers, Rear Adm. Yin Zhuo writes, "Entering the 21st century, aircraft carriers not only continue to serve a huge function in areas of traditional battle, but also make a prominent contribution in nontraditional military uses." See Li, *Hangmuzhilu*, p. 1. For other examples, see *ibid.*, pp. 214–218; Hao and Yang, *Haishang Liliang yu Zhonghua Minzu de Weida Fuxing*; and Senior Col. Dai Xu, "Baowei Haiwai Liyi, Yao Jian Yiliu Haijun" [To safeguard overseas interests, need to build a first-rate navy], *Huanqiu Shibao* [Global times], December 8, 2008. PLA officers repeat this wide range of potential missions in interviews as well. See interviews by Michael A. Glosny, Beijing, summer 2004, spring–summer 2006; and interviews by Glosny and Phillip C. Saunders, Washington, D.C., fall 2007, fall 2008, and fall 2009.

30. Interviews by Glosny, Beijing, summer 2006; Washington, D.C., fall 2008.

31. Li, *Hangmuzhilu*, p. 217; and interviews by Glosny, summer 2005.

32. Dai, "Baowei Haiwai Liyi, Yao Jian Yiliu Haijun."



tect a range of Chinese interests in a permissive environment and that would be less likely to undermine China's diplomatic relations.<sup>33</sup> Even many of the experts that Ross characterizes as naval nationalists argue that China's sea power should not be aimed at challenging the United States or establishing hegemony, but instead should be "limited" (*youxian*).<sup>34</sup> Liu Zhongmin, an advocate of naval modernization from China's Ocean University, argues that China should "promote the development of sea power in a cautious and orderly manner."<sup>35</sup>

Ross criticizes China's naval nationalists for paying insufficient attention to geopolitical constraints, but many of them explicitly recognize these constraints. Chinese experts recognize the potential dangers of facing threats from the land and sea simultaneously, and they see more benefits and fewer risks from building a limited power-projection naval force than one aimed at challenging the maritime hegemon.<sup>36</sup> Even Ye Zicheng suggests that China's continental orientation "does not exclude making naval construction more prominent in the current stage," arguing that China should "develop from a land power with weak sea power into a land power with strong sea power."<sup>37</sup>

To secure funds in an environment of interservice and intraservice resource competition, PLAN leaders and others in China's "naval lobby" have tied PLAN modernization to these new taskings and broader leadership priorities. PLAN Cmdr. Wu Shengli has emphasized the navy's unique role in military diplomacy and the protection of overseas interests.<sup>38</sup> Others have linked PLAN modernization to China's economic development, rise to world power status, and "the great revival of the Chinese nation" (*zhonghua minzu de weida fuxing*).<sup>39</sup> Chinese nationalists are one part of a domestic coalition pushing for PLAN development, but by conflating the naval lobby with nationalism, Ross oversimplifies this coalition and gives the nationalists too much credit.<sup>40</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

We agree with Ross that geography is a potential constraint on China's ability to develop naval power, but its constraining effect has declined as continental threats have eased and as threats to China's expanding maritime interests have become more salient. We also agree that nationalist support would play some role in a likely Chinese decision to build a few aircraft carriers. We do not view nationalism as the principal

33. Interviews by Glosny, Beijing, summer 2006; and interviews by Glosny and Saunders, Washington, D.C., fall 2007, fall 2008, and fall 2009.

34. Zhang Wenmu, "Jingji Quanqiuhua yu Zhongguo Haiquan" [Economic globalization and China's sea power], in Guo Shuyong, ed., *Zhanlüe Yanjianglu* [Lectures on strategy] (Beijing: Daxue Chubanshe, 2006), p. 93; and Ni Lexiong, "Haiquan yu Zhongguo de Fazhan" [Sea power and China's development], in *ibid.*, pp. 115–116.

35. Liu and Zhao, "Guanyu Zhongguo Haiquan Fazhan Zhanlüe Wenti de Ruogan Sikao," p. 94.

36. Shao and Shi, "Jindai Ouzhou Luhai Fuhe Guojia de Mingyun yu Dangdai Zhongguo de Xuanze"; and Liu Zhongmin, "ZhongMei Haizhan zhishuo shi Wudao" [Talking about a U.S.-China naval war is misleading], *Huanqiu Shibao* [Global times], March 12, 2008.

37. Ye and Mu, "Dui Zhongguo Haiquan Fazhan Zhanlüe de jidian Sikao," pp. 16, 17.

38. Wu Shengli and Liu Xiaojiang, "Jianshe yizhi yu Lüxing Xinshiji Xinjieduan Wojun Lishi Shiming Yaoqiu Xiangshiying de Qiangda de Renmin Haijun" [Build a powerful people's navy suited to the requirements of performing military missions in a new century and a new stage], *Qiushi* [Seeking truth], May 1, 2009.

39. Hao and Yang, *Haishang Liliang yu Zhonghua Minzu de Weida Fuxing*.

40. For a similar conception of a coalition, see John W. Garver, "China's Push through the South China Sea: The Interaction of Bureaucratic and National Interests," *China Quarterly*, No. 132 (December 1992), pp. 999–1028.

cause of this decision, however, and Ross presents no direct or persuasive evidence that this is the case. Ross rightly highlights unrealistic claims about some purported benefits of naval modernization in the Chinese debate, but other arguments about the potential value of a limited naval power-projection capability appear more reasonable, given a proper understanding of Chinese interests.

Chinese statements and writings on the development of an aircraft carrier and other maritime issues are part of an ongoing strategic debate about China's security environment, Chinese interests, and appropriate military choices. Explaining China's defense modernization choices requires a sophisticated and nuanced examination of the leadership's decisionmaking process. Such an approach should not only include analysis of how the Chinese government assesses its threat environment and defines its interests, but should also include serious consideration of guns versus butter trade-offs, civil-military relations, and service politics. China's limited transparency makes this type of analysis difficult, but these are the issues that experts must address to understand and explain China's military modernization.

Although the limited naval power-projection capability we see as likely would prove less destabilizing than the "carrier-centered navy" Ross describes, even a limited capability could produce heightened regional concern and spirals of instability. To minimize damage to bilateral and regional relations, Chinese civilian and military leaders will need to explain to a skeptical region why such capabilities are needed and take concrete measures to show that such a power-projection force not only will be limited and employed in a constructive manner, but will not challenge regional stability.

—Michael A. Glosny  
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### *Robert S. Ross Replies:*

Michael Glosny and Phillip Saunders have written a thoughtful response to my article "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response."<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for their contribution to the literature on the sources of China's naval policies and for the opportunity to further develop my thinking on this subject. Glosny and Saunders critique three broad aspects of my article, which I address below.

#### THE PLA AND CHINA'S DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

Glosny and Saunders begin by arguing that after thirty years of economic development China has developed global interests that require expanded naval capabilities. This is not a controversial subject. The significant issue is what kind of navy China should develop and whether its emerging global interests require reallocation of scarce financial resources from current defense priorities to the development of a power-projection capability dependent on carrier-based airpower.

Glosny and Saunders suggest that because China has recently experienced a benign

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1. Robert S. Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall 2009), pp. 46–81.

threat environment, it can reallocate its resources to distant-ocean maritime defense. They argue that the improvement in Chinese border security reflects successful diplomacy and cooperation between China and its neighbors. Further, they claim that the resolution of border disputes allows China to look forward to continued territorial security. This argument, however, misconstrues the sources of national security. Capabilities, not diplomacy, create security. In this respect, border disputes do not cause security conflicts. Rather, security conflicts cause border disputes. Many border disputes remain latent because of the imperative of strategic cooperation. Once relative capabilities change and security conflict develops, border disputes become salient. Escalated border conflict is a symptom of conflict, not its cause. This is the history of the Sino-Soviet border dispute. On the other hand, escalated great power conflict and war frequently occur despite the absence of border disputes.

The source of China's overall border security is not successful diplomacy or even the intrinsic weakness of its neighbors, but rather China's successful development of its ground force capability and the corresponding imperative for China's neighbors of cooperation with China. For example, the Sino-Vietnamese balance of forces is very different today than it was in 1979, when the People's Liberation Army (PLA) encountered significant difficulties in its effort to "teach Vietnam a lesson." This change has compelled Hanoi to cooperate with China's strategic interests in Indochina. China's current allocation of resources and its ground force modernization, not cooperative diplomacy, contributes to Chinese security. Given that China has thirteen territorial neighbors, including some with large standing armies, nuclear weapons, or both, as well as increasingly disaffected minorities along its porous inner-Asian frontiers, a significant reallocation of resources away from its ground force capability could jeopardize China's current advantageous strategic environment.

A similar misunderstanding of the sources of security colors Glosny and Saunders's analysis of China's ability to discount the role of the PLA in maintaining domestic security. China is experiencing many of the societal problems associated with rapid and uneven economic development. This situation has contributed to a decline in the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and, in combination with the spread of personal communication technologies, has contributed to widespread social instability. Although the domestic challenges to the CCP remain manageable, the future of China's authoritarian leadership is uncertain. Indeed, the CCP is acutely aware of the fate of the communist parties of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, as well as the violent anti-government demonstrations in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 that led to the exile of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev and the establishment of a constitutional democracy. At the same time, the CCP has begun to exercise increasing control over Chinese society. Glosny and Saunders argue that the PLA is the "last line of defense" against societal and political instability, but given China's severely understaffed police and paramilitary force, should domestic conditions continue to deteriorate, the army could be the only line of defense. The CCP understands that domestic stability and its long-term survival may ultimately depend on continued generous funding for the PLA.

#### GETTING CHINESE DEPENDENCY RIGHT

If China possessed vital global security interests, as Glosny and Saunders suggest, then reallocation of resources to the PLA Navy might be justifiable. Glosny and Saunders's analysis of China's emerging global interests, however, is flawed and thus overstates

the strategic value of a power-projection navy. They argue that the United States presents the greatest challenge to Chinese security, suggesting that China requires expanded naval capabilities to contend with U.S. naval power. The underlying issue, however, is whether or not Chinese overseas interests require opposing U.S. maritime power and, if so, whether or not reallocation of resources away from territorial and domestic security to the development of naval power could make China more secure.

Glosny and Saunders misunderstand the importance of seaborne oil imports to Chinese security. In my article, I wrote that "an increasing share" of oil imports comes from overland sources. In response, Glosny and Saunders state that 86 percent of China's current oil imports arrive by sea; they do not consider the emerging trend in Chinese dependency on oil imports. Moreover, given China's extensive use of coal, hydropower, and other domestic sources of energy, as well as its import of oil and gas from Central Asia and Russia (which I discuss in my article), Glosny and Saunders's 86 percent figure suggests that China imports less than 8 percent of all of its energy resources by ship. This hardly amounts to Chinese dependence on maritime oil imports. Glosny and Saunders similarly use misleading figures to address China's future oil dependency. They write that in 2030 China will import 75 percent of its oil, but the strategic issue for the development of naval power is the percentage of overall energy resources, not the amount of oil shipped by sea. Glosny and Saunders do not use the proper statistics to address this issue. An analysis of China's ongoing emphasis on coal, of its commitment to the development of hydropower, nuclear power, and other sources of domestic energy, and of its increasing access to oil imports from Central Asian countries and Russia indicates that China's dependence on ship-borne oil imports for its overall energy resources consumption will remain low.<sup>2</sup> Energy security is not nor will it be a rational strategic driver of a Chinese power-projection navy.

Glosny and Saunders also argue that China's gross domestic product (GDP) is dependent on international trade; yet their measure of dependency does not reflect a strategic assessment. They cite a World Trade Organization report stating that the value of total Chinese trade is 73 percent of GDP, but this figure is misleading because it includes imports. Nations depend on exports for economic growth. They also depend on imports of selected strategic resources for security. Oil is the most important strategic resource, but as noted above, Chinese dependency on ship-borne oil imports will remain low well into the future. Other critical imports, such as strategic metals, can be stockpiled.

If trade matters to China, it is because of China's dependency on exports. Glosny and Saunders, however, do not focus on the value of exports; nor do they analyze the actual value added that Chinese trade contributes to China's GDP. At most, China's value added to its exports is approximately 45 percent of the absolute value of its exports, so that the value of exports in China's GDP is approximately 20 percent.<sup>3</sup> This significantly

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2. China's emerging energy legislation emphasizes energy security and the development of domestic energy resources. See Keith Bradsher, "Security Tops the Environment in China's Energy Plan," *New York Times*, June 10, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/18/business/global/18yuan.html>.

3. Robert Koopman, Zhi Wang, and Shang-Jin Wei, "How Much of Chinese Exports Is Really Made in China? Assessing Domestic Value Added When Processing Trade Is Pervasive," Working Paper, No. 14109 (Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, June 2008), <http://www.nber.org/papers/w14109>. See also Yılmaz Akyüz, "Export Dependence and the Future of

lower figure is a more accurate measure of Chinese trade dependency than the 73 percent figure that Glosny and Saunders use. Thus, despite the worst global economic recession since the 1930s and a significant decline in Chinese exports to both the U.S. and European markets, China has enjoyed robust economic growth since 2008. With a domestic market of 1.3 billion people and a rising middle class, China's economic growth remains primarily domestic driven. Glosny and Saunders exaggerate China's trade dependence and the economic imperative of expanded naval capabilities.

Glosny and Saunders also cite China's naval nationalists' argument that because China has both long interior borders and a long coast, it is uniquely advantaged to simultaneously develop the ground force and naval capabilities of a great power. This argument turns sound strategic analysis upside down. The development of capabilities for a second military front necessarily requires the division of resources and a greater defense burden. This is especially true when one of the two military fronts is a maritime theater, which requires a significant and potentially debilitating expenditure of resources to develop costly naval capabilities. Glosny and Saunders's analysis of China's strategic constraints is mistaken because the authors uncritically accept the self-serving arguments of Chinese advocates for expansive naval capabilities.

#### NATIONALISM AND CHINA'S DEFENSE POLICYMAKING PROCESS

Next, Glosny and Saunders critique my analysis of the role of nationalism in China's naval policy. First, they argue that the literature on nationalism and foreign policy indicates that prestige strategies are predominantly associated with political transitions. They are incorrect. It is true that there is significant scholarship that associates great power use of force with domestic political transitions. Prestige strategies, however, encompass more than simply the use of force. My article does not address China's use of force. Rather, it addresses the role of nationalism in Chinese defense acquisitions. There is an extensive literature that explains the expansive naval ambitions of numerous great powers with the quest for international prestige. In my article, I offer many examples of this dynamic and many citations. China is simply the latest case.

Second, Glosny and Saunders are critical of my analysis of the role that nationalism plays in China's naval policy because I do not explain the elite decisionmaking process by which nationalism is incorporated into Chinese policymaking. I fully concur, but such criticism could be leveled at a large proportion of security studies scholars. Decisionmaking in all authoritarian countries and in many democratic countries is not sufficiently transparent to allow detailed research into policymaking regarding the use of force, deterrence, and weapons acquisition decisions. I sincerely wish I had the materials to enable a detailed understanding of CCP Politburo decisions regarding defense policy, but I share with both Western scholars and Chinese academics a lack of access to such materials.

#### NATIONALIST JUSTIFICATIONS FOR A CHINESE AIRCRAFT CARRIER

Finally, Glosny and Saunders argue that China can effectively deploy a power-projection navy for multiple missions, thus justifying its diversion of financial resources

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Growth in China and East Asia," *South Bulletin*, No. 48 (June 30, 2009), [http://www.southcentre.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1339%3Asb48&catid=144%3Asouth-bulletin-individual-articles&Itemid=287&lang=en](http://www.southcentre.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1339%3Asb48&catid=144%3Asouth-bulletin-individual-articles&Itemid=287&lang=en).

from existing priorities to the development of carrier-based naval capability. Glosny and Saunders concede that China will not be able to use greater naval power to defend sea-lanes and choke points in the face of superior U.S. capabilities. Its naval capability is too far behind that of the United States, and it lacks advanced power-projection technologies. This acknowledgment, however, undermines Glosny and Saunders's earlier analysis. The capability to contend with U.S. naval forces would be necessary to defend the very interests that Glosny and Saunders argue in the first section of their letter create the imperative for China naval expansion—alleged Chinese dependency on sea-borne oil imports and foreign trade. If an expanded Chinese naval capability will be unable to contend with U.S. naval forces, then it will be unable to guarantee China's access to foreign markets and oil. And if China's naval development cannot defend such international economic interests, then its future navy would be reduced to defending secondary interests, interests that do not require significant maritime air capability and thus do not explain the diversion of significant resources to the development of a power-projection navy.

Glosny and Saunders cite Chinese authors to argue that China could use a carrier force to fulfill secondary missions such as counterpiracy, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and peacekeeping. True, an aircraft carrier can be used for many "non-traditional" missions, including UN peacekeeping. Far more efficient and cost-effective means to conduct such operations are available, however, so that such interests do not justify the expense of building a carrier and the associated reallocation of resources from the defense of more vital interests, including the security of the CCP and China's territorial security. The United States uses its aircraft carriers for these missions because it possesses carriers. It did not build them for these missions. Rather, it built and maintains its carrier force to deter challenges to its strategic maritime interests and, if necessary, to fight and win a maritime war. Should China build an aircraft carrier for secondary, nonstrategic missions, it would be for the associated great power prestige that would accrue given its mere possession of an aircraft carrier. That China's naval nationalists use these humanitarian missions to justify the development of an aircraft carrier does not make these missions sufficiently important to require China's reallocation of resources from the defense of pressing security interests. Once again, Glosny and Saunders are mistaken in their analysis because they too readily accept the self-serving arguments of Chinese advocates for an expansive naval capability.

If China seeks to fulfill its great power responsibilities and pursue nontraditional security interests, then Japan presents a model of rational weapons acquisition. Rather than develop a carrier force, it has constructed an effective and relatively inexpensive maritime helicopter platform (DDH-161 Hyuga class) that is well suited to such missions as humanitarian relief and antipiracy. Faced with pressure from both the rise of mass nationalism and the PLA Navy, however, Chinese leaders have opted to build an aircraft carrier. They are seeking international prestige, rather than simply the ability to fulfill China's reputed humanitarian responsibilities.

Glosny and Saunders also argue that China could use an expanded naval capability to deal with challenges from regional states, including potential challenges from the Japanese navy and from declarations of sovereignty by Malaysia and the Philippines to the Chinese-claimed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. This analysis also fails to grasp the role of the U.S. Navy in these countries' China policies. These local powers can challenge China because they enjoy the protection of U.S. extended deterrence com-



mitments, which are based on U.S. maritime supremacy in the western Pacific and in the South China Sea. To coerce these countries to acknowledge Chinese territorial claims, China will have to develop sufficient naval capabilities to challenge U.S. maritime supremacy. Glosny and Saunders acknowledge that this is not a realistic Chinese objective; yet their suggestion that China could use force against Malaysia and the Philippines over the disputed islands without risking U.S. engagement fails to grasp the strategic context of U.S. extended deterrence credibility in East Asia and the likelihood of U.S. intervention to defend these countries from the use of force by China, regardless of the *casus belli*. My conversations with Chinese security specialists indicate that Chinese leaders are well aware of the risk of conflict with the United States should China use force against other claimants to the Spratly Islands.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Spratly Islands are strategically and economically worthless, and China has tolerated the challenges to its sovereignty claim for nearly forty years. Chinese assertions that the PLA Navy should develop a carrier force to deal with sovereignty challenges from local powers are the hollow justification of naval nationalists arguing for an a priori policy preference for aircraft carriers.

#### NAVAL NATIONALISM AND CHINA'S MARITIME AMBITIONS

Since the end of the Cold War and China's emergence as a rising economic power, Chinese leaders have allocated increasing financial resources to the development of a naval capability. During this same period, they have turned away repeated requests from the navy to allocate funding to construct an aircraft carrier. Their focus has been on developing an effective access-denial capability to enhance China's coastal security, an effort that has been very successful. China's acquisition of both Russian and domestically produced diesel submarines and of Russian aircraft and surface-to-air missiles has made a cost-effective and significant contribution to Chinese security. Its development of an antiship ballistic missile capability may further contribute to its coastal water defense capability. The success of China's access-denial strategy is reflected in the increasing concern of the U.S. Navy regarding the growing difficulty of operating in the western Pacific. Thus far, China's maritime defense policy has been driven by a prudent assessment of Chinese capabilities and interests.

On the other hand, the allocation of significant resources to the development of a power-projection navy of dubious value will divert Chinese resources from funding for China's territorial security and domestic stability missions, as well as from its funding and deployment of submarines and other weaponry for its access-denial capability. U.S. naval personnel frequently welcome the development of a Chinese aircraft carrier, insofar as construction and deployment of Chinese carriers would divert resources from China's effective access-denial capability in favor of a second-rate carrier capability that would offer an easy wartime target for U.S. forces.

The Chinese people's nationalist ambition for an aircraft carrier is understandable. Combined with the persistent PLA Navy's demands to possess an aircraft carrier, such naval nationalism is a powerful force driving China's naval buildup. Similar nationalist ambitions have driven the capital ship acquisitions of many previous great powers. After thirty years of impressive economic growth and the corresponding development of

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4. Conversations with the author, Beijing and Cambridge, Massachusetts, June 2008 and May, June, and November 2009.

national pride, the Chinese people desire the international prestige and status commensurate with China's domestic and international successes. An aircraft carrier would be one reflection of Chinese success. That such naval ambitions are understandable, however, does not necessarily make naval expansionism an effective defense policy. That China's leadership is intent on developing an aircraft carrier and a maritime power-projection capability, despite their great expense and limited strategic utility and despite the resource demands of more vital security interests, is a reflection of the leadership's growing reliance on appeasing widespread nationalist sentiment to maintain its popular legitimacy and the security of the Chinese Communist Party.

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