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CHINA'S MARITIME QUEST

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The Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) turned 60 on April 23, 2009. China held an unprecedented celebration on this occasion. For the first time in its history, China invited foreign navies to the PLAN's birthday event. Chinese President Hu Jintao and all the People's Liberation Army (PLA) senior leaders reviewed a parade of China's major warships from a Chinese destroyer. The column of PLAN vessels were headed by two nuclear-powered and armed submarines (the first-ever public appearance of China's strategic submarine fleet) and 21 warships from 14 nations, including major naval powers such as the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, and France. The parade took place off the coast of Qingdao, the PLAN Beihai (northern seas) Fleet Headquarters. In addition, China invited many foreign navy chiefs, most notably the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations and the Russian Navy Commander, as well as over 200 foreign military and navy attachés to the party.

The PLAN birthday celebration was like an Olympic meeting for the international navies. Yet behind the smiling faces, the world saw an ambitious Chinese navy eager to edge its way to the center stage of world maritime affairs. Indeed, as PLAN Rear Admiral Yang Yi, a senior strategic analyst at the PLA National Defense University, noted, "the parade is not just about showing China's accomplishments, it is more of a new start signaling where China needs to go in the future."¹ Yang did not have time to elaborate on his thoughts at the PLAN birthday party, but he and many other noted Chinese analysts have in recent years put forward an urgent agenda for China's maritime power.

At the strategic level, China has raised the stakes of its need for great maritime power as a precondition for its becoming a full-fledged global power. The Chinese argue that all global powers are also strong maritime powers. Therefore China must follow suit. Moreover, China's quest for maritime power will be broad and comprehensive, going beyond the scope defined by Alfred Thayer Mahan more than a century ago. A powerful navy is still the first and foremost component. China must have a navy commensurate with its growing national power. This means upgrading the PLAN to a top-ranked world-class naval power, the threshold of which, as the Chinese see it, is the possession of aircraft carrier battle groups and long-range power projection capabilities. There has been a national debate on the pros and cons of aircraft carriers since the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-96 (when the Chinese were furious with the arrival of two U.S. aircraft carrier battle

groups to check China’s dealing with Taiwan). The debate is clearly settled. In recent months, Chinese officials have gone on record to state that China has good reasons to acquire aircraft carriers and the world should not be surprised at their decision. China understands that aircraft carrier capability is an expensive undertaking in construction as well as in operation, but having had 30 years of phenomenal economic development and further development carefully planned well into the mid-21st century, China is confident that it can afford to run this business. There are already calls for China to openly launch its aircraft carrier construction project. China may be happy to comply.

The second component of China’s maritime power will be a world-class seaborne merchant fleet to meet the nation’s growing demand for trade and resources supply. Since becoming the “world manufacture center,” China has greatly expanded its seaborne transportation; after all, over 90 percent of China’s trade and resources supply go by sea. Already China is among the world’s top seaborne transport holders—it has the world’s fourth largest merchant fleet and third largest shipbuilding industry; runs the heaviest container port traffic; and has five of the world’s ten busiest seaports. China wants to continue this advance and develop a blue-water navy to protect these “life supply facilities.”

The third part of China’s maritime power will cover all of its ocean interests, long-claimed (the disputed islands and the entire South China Sea) as well as those expanded by the UN Law of the Sea Treaty (LOST). These include the 200 nautical miles of Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and Extended Continental Shelves (ECS). The claimed area is about 3 million square kilometers, as indicated by the blue line circling area in Figure 1.

However, this claim complicates China’s old disputes with Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei and brings China new enemies, the two Koreas and Indonesia. All of them are also members of the LOST and entitled to claim their share of the pie (see the overlapping claims in the South China Sea shown in Figure 2. Additionally, China has to settle the Taiwan issue with the United States.



Figure 1. China’s Claimed Ocean Territory



Figure 2. Overlapping Claims in the South China Sea

In recent years, there have been many confrontations between China and its ocean neighbors. Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines and Malaysia have all stepped up their measures to reinforce their claims on the disputed islands. The Chinese were very upset that their ocean neighbors were taking advantage of China's restraint to encroach upon its claimed ocean territories. (China's central focus has been on Taiwan and its conflict avoidance approach was taken to maintain a peaceful environment for its economic development). In the last several months, China and the United States have clashed over U.S. surveillance vessels in China's

claimed EEZs in the South China Sea and Yellow Sea. The United States insisted that its vessels were making "innocent passages" in international waters. China argued that innocent passages should not include "unauthorized" surveillance activities. All of these contested acts put much urgency in China's determination to secure its maritime interests, and more pointedly, on the need to have a powerful navy to protect its interests.

Chinese President Hu Jintao called for the building of "harmonious ocean" at the PLAN birthday party. Ironically, the parade of force brought to mind the old saying that if you want peace, prepare for war. Indeed, China's ocean neighbors are watching China's moves closely. They are also spending more to strengthen their own naval forces. China's quest for maritime power will eventually alter the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region. Until China and its ocean neighbors settle their disputes, there will not be harmony and peace in the Asia Pacific Ocean.

ENDNOTE

1. *China Daily*, April 27, 2009.

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