Chapter II: Turning of the Tide in Asia Pacific: Trends and Drivers of China’s Maritime Transformation

Tobias Schäfer

“The traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests. It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests, safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic SLOCs [sea lines of communication] and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power—Chinese Ministry of Defense.” (MOD 2015: section IV)

Introduction

Given the speed of change that has taken hold of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) since its double-digit economic growth first began, the amount of attention that the country has garnered in media and analytical outlets is hardly surprising. A raft of reports and studies has been particularly interested in the idea of China as a rising power, an image that has undoubtedly gained traction and left a perceptible mark in the international reading of its behavior. According to the story of a state on a rising trajectory, it is especially relevant for actors in the immediate regional neighborhood to attentively observe China’s every step—for its actions may, after all, affect their own destiny too. Therefore, those neighbors are interested in knowing what comes next in Beijing’s development process and what the Chinese strategy of becoming a great power in the twenty-first century (Wu 2017) exactly means in the Asia Pacific regional context.

As it remains in part unclear, even within Chinese policy and academic circles themselves, what direction the country ought to take (Shambaugh 2011; Zeng/Breslin 2016), the reactions of the states in the region so far have varied according to their own individual status and perception of China’s rise (McDougall 2012). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that China’s rise has the potential to alter the security structure...
of Asia as a whole, particularly since the vast economic revenues pouring into Beijing’s coffers pave the way for its continued military renewal and development. An example of this is the apparent eagerness among Chinese leaders to obtain significant sea power capabilities and to modernize the country’s maritime military-industrial complex, as it showcases China’s new-found boldness to leave a default pathway and venture into reinventing itself. After all, this decision means the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is letting go of its erstwhile concentration on continental security, which had traditionally guided the strategic thinking of generations of military and civil servants in the “Middle Kingdom.” This profound change of mindset, also referred to as a “maritime transformation,” has played a role in particular cases of rising powers throughout modern history; therefore, when considered as a dimension of China’s rise, for many it is reminiscent of Europe’s violent great power rivalries.

While it is undeniable that certain issues and contentions are straining the relationship between China, its immediate neighbors, and the United States, it seems unlikely that Asia Pacific today is on the same trajectory as European powers were in the first part of the twentieth century. Regional security dynamics are definitely changing with China’s ongoing maritime transformation—consider, for instance, the expansion of region-spanning strategic partnerships, or the engagement of formerly distant powers in the regional seas—and fears of the country’s naval expansionism are discernible. Yet, the region is at the same time likely going to retain its most significant structural feature—namely a US presence as naval hegemon, together with its hub-and-spoke alliance system. And although the PRC as a rising great power wants to step up its national interests by gaining status as a maritime nation, its main overall objective still remains economic development. China’s leaders are thus pursuing a mixed strategy of trying to bring several delicately poised but vital goals into accordance with each other, and therefore they have to tread

“a fine line between asserting the right to become a great maritime nation (haiyang daguo) and acting upon the pragmatic imperative to engage cooperatively with its neighbours and the United States to maintain regional stability” (Morton 2016: 911).

China’s maritime transformation is, therefore, an important indicator of how Beijing tries to reconcile its national ambition for great power and the need for a stable regional security environment. Looking at how this transition has unfolded, what decisions have been taken throughout the process, and what challenges remain are therefore crucial tasks in the
assessment of China’s rise. This essay will address these points and afterward give a short outlook on the meaning of China’s maritime transformation for the larger security order in Asia Pacific. Before delving into this, however, a brief discussion on the role of sea power in international security will serve as an appropriate starting point.

Sea Power and Maritime Transformation as Milestones in the Quest for Major Power Status

Sea power has been an important topic in the Strategic Studies field for at least a century now. With the influential work written by classical naval strategist Alfred T. Mahan in the late nineteenth century, sea power was accorded a prominent role in the overall composition of a great power’s national strength (Mahan 2003 [1890]). For, according to Mahan, a nation that wished to be strategically strong, had to rely on large-scale economic success in order to acquire the wealth and industrial prowess needed to sustain a powerful international stance. This in turn necessitated advanced maritime navigation, since he discovered that

“the 19th century’s greatest power was its greatest sea power […]. It was their superiority at sea that enabled the British to excel in exploiting industrial technology, in expanding production (well beyond domestic demand), and in securing access to the world’s abundance of raw materials […]. This implied that sea power was the sine qua non for world power and strategic advantage.” (Gompert 2013: 27)

As Mahan’s analysis showed, the British Empire had brought this model to perfection during the nineteenth century; therefore, he also strongly advised the US to follow suit, in order to gain world power standing. Others have expanded on this and found states’ naval ambitions to be an indicator for the redistribution of power within the international system. According to George Modelski (1978: 225–227), for instance, command of the seas is closely related to dominance of the state system as a whole, as demonstrated by the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British, and finally—coupled with their aerial and space preponderance—the US Americans. Thus, the means to acquire great power status are based in particular on naval superiority, which is why the incumbent and the prospective world power are prone to clashing over dominance of the seas.
While this realist take on the role of the command of the seas may be regarded as outdated—not least due to recent technological innovations in aircraft, satellite, and cyber capabilities (Benbow 2016)—maritime security undoubtedly continues to have key relevance for the global system, and still has exceptional status and paramount importance in the maintenance of international order too (Bruns/Petretto/Petrovic 2013: 10). In fact, recent changes taking place in the international political arena at large resonate particularly with events occurring on the planet’s oceans. They have become engulfed in the redistribution of power, mostly through the efforts made by emerging powers to actively seek naval power projection—so that for the first time in history, maritime security is no longer the exclusive prerogative of Western states (Suárez de Vivero/Rodríguez/Flordi del Corral/Fernández Fadón 2015: 23–4). Some say this is actually going so far that “new geographical maritime spaces or scenarios are being shaped that reflect a new territorial order, the most outstanding feature of which is the displacement of the strategic centre of gravity from the continental mass to the ocean basins” (ibid.: 24). Hence, sea power is at the heart of international politics once more—a finding that applies to Asia Pacific in particular (Gompert 2013: 164).10

In consequence, states increasingly focus their activities on the seas. However, this means they need to switch to a mode of strategic behavior that takes this new order into account and to be prepared to bear the financial and material costs involved. The latter are especially heavy if the state in question does not have a rich naval tradition and a corresponding mindset. After all, the challenges involved in managing a transition toward sea-based security for a continental or coastal state are daunting given the geographical and historical circumstances that shape “the maturing of a strategic culture unquestionably maritime or continental in preference and style” (Gray 1994: xi). Continental powers are at an obvious disadvantage in such a scenario with their land-based mentality, as they tend to be characterized by a deep internalization of physical borders in their defensive thoughts and strategic moves (Grygieł 2009: 113).

In order to reap the benefits that come from using and ruling the sea, it is indispensable, though, to be savvy in shipbuilding, navigation, as well as naval combat. Thus prior to possessing capacities that allow for comprehensive management of the seas, a country will have to first

---

10 With regard to Southeast Asia, for instance, one might actually speak of a “seascape” instead of a landscape, due to the ever-present influence of the ocean—cutting across land spaces and forming vast coastlines and waterways via which actors interact across borders (Burgos-Cáceres 2014: 83).
undergo a maritime transformation.\textsuperscript{11} This requires the adaptation of one’s continental strategic identity, and the roles associated with this. Essentially, therefore, a state’s established identity, which has dominated their self-conception up to that point, needs to be overcome and redefined (Nohara 2017). The most important measure involved in such a development is the position of a navy in the overall composition of a country’s military (Wu 2015a: 15). Thus, a maritime transformation ideally includes two separate dimensions: One is the upgrading and relocation of capabilities and hardware from land-based security to the sea. Another is the discursive effort to establish oneself as a credible maritime power through the rebranding of strategic culture. As will be expanded on below, in China’s case both of these processes are currently unfolding.

The Neglect and Subsequent Rediscovery of China’s Interest in the Sea

When writing about the “geography of the peace” in East Asia on the verge of the twenty-first century, Robert Ross (1999) contended that China did not have enough incentives to expand its maritime interests and related foreign policies. After all, for the better part of its history the PRC had been and continued to be up to that point a continental state—with over 2,000 years of strict concentration on land security and defense of its inner land mass. Furthermore he refuted the notion that China might be worried about a foreign invasion coming from the sea, because neither Britain nor Japan—as the most recent occupiers of Chinese soil—had been perceived as naval threats per se.\textsuperscript{12} This led Ross to conclude that “there is no period in Chinese history when a maritime power—as opposed to a land power—posed the greatest threat to Chinese rule or threatened to establish a foreign dynasty” (ibid.: 104). Instead, the presence of major global (nuclear) rivals in its direct neighborhood requires a continental disposition for the stationing and concentration of Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops and the devising of the country’s corresponding defense budget (Ross 2009: 55–

\textsuperscript{11} A maritime transformation can be defined as “a strategic concept […] whereby a continental or coastal state shifts its general strategic orientation and systematically redirects resources from land to the seas with the aim of transforming itself from a purely land power to a land/sea hybrid” (Wu 2015a: 14–15).

\textsuperscript{12} Upon their arrival on Chinese shores in the nineteenth century, the British Royal Navy merely used port facilities; Japanese troops, meanwhile, first established a continental base in Northeast Asia before conquering Chinese territory.
All of this leads to the widely held view that “the rise of China means, or ought to mean, the ‘great revival’ of China as a major and influential Eurasian land power” (Crisp 2010: 208).

It would be erroneous, however, to disregard altogether the Chinese appreciation for the sea prior to the new millennium. In fact there are signs of a reevaluation of the firm continental stance having occurred as early as the mid-1970s, herked by the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong. These events “brought major changes in the way China conceived of sea power as a strategic paradigm” (Nohara 2017: 219). This had to do with China’s shifting priorities in its regional neighborhood: resisting Moscow in the Pacific and claiming maritime territory—most notably Taiwan, but also the South China Sea islands—had suddenly appeared on its radar (Cole 2009: 330). But it was only after circumstances dramatically altered in the 1990s that the communist leadership would finally initiate concerted efforts to tap into the benefits of reconnecting the country to the sea, and begin warming to the idea of expanding the role of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in order to achieve this (ibid.: 333).

The most visible turn in the Chinese government’s attitude toward the sea came in July 2005. This marked the first time China celebrated its “National Maritime Day” in memory of Eunuch Admiral Zheng He and his exploration voyages under the Ming dynasty 600 years previously (Xinhua 2005). This commemoration would change the historical consciousness in China going forward, as the authorities thereby initiated “a new maritime narrative around the peaceful aspects of Zheng’s voyages, which gradually become a paradigm of Beijing’s maritime posture” (Uras 2017: 1025). Through the rediscovery of Zheng He as a national hero and the active promotion of his extensive but largely peaceful nautical explorations as a cultural tradition China has, finally, started to embrace the advantages of a maritime transformation (Uras 2017). Furthermore, this yearly recurring festive date has, without question, a lot to do with the realization that in the past the political leadership had accorded too little attention to the sea, and paid the price of foreign invasion and national humiliation for this disregard (Xie 2014: 115–19).

Yet, while being the most iconic reaction to this perceived strategic weakness, the China National Maritime Day is only part of a larger strategic paradigm shift that has unfolded over the course of the last twenty years. Indeed, starting in 2001 the demand for comprehensive maritime competence has been translated into political roadmaps and CCP outlets—such as Five-Year Plans and Defense White Papers (Erickson/Goldstein 2009a: xxvii–xxix). This whole series of official
statements thus promotes the need to speed up naval activities and at the same time implies a turnaround in the country’s self-image. The unprecedented claim that “China is a maritime power” (quoted in Lim 2014: 2) in 2006 by then-president Hu Jintao, for example, can be read along those lines as it clarified that in the eyes of the Party elite maritime power was no longer only an aspiration but already a formative strategic identity (Nohara 2017: 222).

In fact, efforts bolstering this stipulation have been widespread among both the previous and the current administrations. Most importantly, there is the official adoption of the goal of building China into a strong maritime power, introduced at the 18th Party Congress in 2012 (Yang 2012). Thereby, for the first time since the founding of the PRC, the government clearly signaled a departure from the self-conception of being only a continental great power (Bickford 2016b: 2). The legacy thus established by Hu in his final act as president was seamlessly embraced by his successor Xi Jinping. As such, there was no break in policy between these two leadership figures. “On the contrary, the new leadership continued to emphasize the importance of the sea and the development of the navy” (Nohara 2017: 226). Some even say that whereas the topic was brought up by Hu as a sort of “matter-of-fact description,” it was by Xi’s doing that maritime policy was addressed with a lot more urgency—thus conveying a “more threat-oriented message that paints the maritime challenges China is facing in stark and uniquely strategic terms” (Johnson/Bower/Cha/Green/Goodman 2014: 46). This is, for instance, signaled by the government’s new appreciation of resolutely defending its perceived legitimate maritime rights and interests (Chellaney 2016: 334).

Especially, then, through the tone introduced by the current CCP administration, the maritime power concept calls on the PLA to be capable of firmly implementing policies that help secure those maritime rights and interests. Moreover Xi has made maritime power status part of his articulated vision within the “Chinese Dream”, meaning it will be vital to the maintenance of economic growth, achievement of national security objectives, and ultimately to the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Bickford 2016b: 12). Obviously,

---

13 It should be noted, though, that while in recurrent use ever since there has never actually been an official document explaining how China defines “maritime power” or, indeed, in what way having this characteristic might help with the accomplishment of national objectives (Bickford 2016b: 3).

14 The rejuvenation narrative—a term originating from Xi’s administration—seeks legitimacy via the telling of the following story: “After overcoming a hundred years of victimization at the hands of foreigners, China has finally stood up. Through
therefore, the Chinese leadership harbors a keen interest—as most visibly epitomized by Xi Jinping’s proclamations—in transforming China into a modern great maritime power and thereby altering the longstanding strategic identity of the country as a continental power.

Hence, whereas China as a state was for most of the twentieth century preoccupied with its internal borders and the vast territories that connect it to neighboring countries, recently the CCP has taken steps to upgrade the role of the sea in Chinese cultural memory. As a consequence, a shift from a land- to a more ocean-based security strategy is now underway and provides the basis for the pursuit of China’s maritime transformation (Wu 2013, 2015a)—which, at the same time, is seen as a major prerequisite for the realization of the Chinese Dream (Wu 2014). This shift has, by now, culminated in the situation that “at the highest level of the Party, there is a recognition that China’s interests in the maritime domain have increased to the point where maritime issues are essential to the Party’s approach to national objectives” (Bickford 2016b: 13; italics in the original). Thus “China’s maritime renaissance has been a long time in the making—shaped by centuries-long internal struggles over its national identity as a continental power” (Morton 2016: 931).

Assessing Challenges and Achievements regarding China’s Maritime Transformation Efforts

While the early twenty-first century thus marked a fundamental turning point in the PRC’s position vis-à-vis sea power, even to this day there are voices within the country that wish to keep China’s maritime outlook modest. For them, the Middle Kingdom is still firmly married to a continental pathway to great power (Erickson/Goldstein 2009a; Crisp 2010). Due to China’s long history of acting as a land power, they are under the impression that a continental strategic focus will prevail despite the newfound appreciation of the sea. Judging by a number of observations, China is indeed still struggling to find a sound naval approach: “When it comes to the sea, it still thinks territorially, like an insecure land power, trying to expand in concentric circles” (Kaplan 2012: 215). At best, China’s attitude toward the ocean evidences a coastal mindset—a position underscored by the restrictive legal regime it applies in its near waters. By disregarding the right of innocent passage in its territorial waters and the freedom of navigation in its exclusive
economic zones (EEZs), as enshrined into the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), China is creating its own maritime dilemma. Because given its attempt to restrict foreign use of Chinese coastal waters, the PRC cannot make a very convincing case concerning its far seas objectives in other states’ territorial waters and EEZs (Odom 2015). Moreover, considering that Beijing declares its “nearby waters as ‘blue national soil’ also reflects an enduring continental mindset in the midst of its quest toward a sea power identity” (Nohara 2017: 277). As such, while making genuine efforts to evolve into and be perceived as a maritime power, China does not currently behave like one in practice.

Consequently, the indecisiveness over the question of its strategic orientation still appears to be a core feature of China’s internal security debates and partly shapes its behavior with regard to the maritime domain. Given the historically overwhelming influence of the ground forces in the PLA, this is by no means surprising. The army’s overly strong impact on the course of policy has not been resolved to date, despite this having been an explicit aim of the latest military reform (Wuthnow/Saunders 2017: 30). For example, of the PLA’s five theater commands that have oversight of the military in China’s strategic regions only the recently promoted commander of the Southern one has a naval background (ibid.: 17–18). It must be acknowledged, therefore, that this bias in favor of ground forces still heavily guides “Chinese strategic decision-making, particularly at a time when China’s leaders are vividly reminded of the fragility of their hold on large parts of the country’s periphery” (Lord 2009: 448). While China is by far the world’s leading manufacturer of commercial ships (UNCTADstat 2018), it faces some issues in this regard as well. Its goal of mainly building indigenous vessels in both the commercial and naval sectors, for instance, is still very much out of reach as of now given Chinese dependence on foreign propulsion systems and subcomponents industries (Kirchberger 2015: 143–45). With regard to naval manufacturing this may become an acute issue sooner or later, considering that the Western arms embargo still curtails a lot of China’s attempts to modernize its military (ibid.: 148).

Notwithstanding these caveats, the country has undeniably achieved a form of sea power that does not require possession of an extensive fleet; with its strategic options from other sources that can be used to exert power upon the sea—such as anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities (Scholik 2016)—even without a blue-water navy “China is already creating sea power and challenging American sea power, whether or not it tries to replicate U.S. naval forces” (Gompert 2013: 6). Owing to its impressive economic gains, moreover, the PRC
has been able to appropriate mostly former Soviet and Russian technology, which—due to (legally problematic) reverse engineering—now forms the basis of its indigenous naval development program (Bussert 2008). This is also how China got its hands on Liaoning, the PLAN’s only aircraft carrier in service so far (Scobell/McMahon/Cooper III 2015).\footnote{A second one was launched in 2017, yet is still undergoing sea trials while a third is under construction at present (Oki 2018).} On top of all that, there are clear indications that Beijing is taking steps domestically to prepare for the necessary transition too. Observers take note, for instance, of how China is now restructuring its naval command and force structure (Allen/Clemens 2014; Becker 2016), adapting its legal codes and legal interpretations (Kardon 2015), and launching an official Party parlance (Martinson 2015) so as to better align its national hard- and software with its maritime ambitions. In addition, the Chinese government seems determined to avoid running into the same problems other countries encountered during their own (attempts at) maritime transformations, and is thus eagerly analyzing those cases to prepare China for its own rise as a sea power (Erickson/Goldstein 2009b). Yet, it remains to be seen whether China will indeed be able to manage a maritime transformation with distinctive “Chinese characteristics” […]. In any event, it is certain we have not yet seen the end of a process that could fundamentally transform not only China as a whole but also the shape of global politics in the decades to come.” (Lord 2009: 451)

**Drivers of China’s Interest in Becoming a Sea Power**

As outlined above, the intention is indisputably present among high-ranking Chinese policymakers to turn the country into a credible sea power. What is less obviously apparent, though, is their underlying rationale for this aspiration. Although it is never easy to assess people’s motivations when judging them only from the outside, it is nonetheless possible to infer from observing their actions the reasoning at least likely to play a role in their decision-making processes. As I see it, there are consequently a number of key drivers responsible for making Beijing pursue such a maritime transformation. While they are, of course, interlinked and partly overlapping in practice, the five principal drivers hereof can be described as follows.
Seek security from sea-based threats

The first driver of China’s maritime transformation is the concern of the CCP with traditional security, and thus the maintenance of sovereignty and territorial integrity in a strictly statist, Westphalian sense. This includes predominantly the protection of the political system, overall social stability, and the preconditions for economic and social development. Thus, this goal refers to the defense against threats from the sea to ensure continued well-being for the state and its inhabitants. Given the settlement of the border dispute with Russia in the aftermath of the Cold War, the Chinese focus has shifted from the consolidation of its power and sovereignty on land to sea-based security threats instead. While the border dispute with India is still unsettled as of now, “all other remaining territorial and boundary disputes are with its neighbors along its maritime periphery” (Bickford 2016b: 19).

This causes China’s authorities to pay much more attention to the coastal frontiers, and hence to the relationship with the US in particular. Beijing questions not only the legitimacy of a forward-deployed US presence in the regional seas and condemns the US Navy’s surveillance operations there as “a relic of an adversarial Cold War mentality” (Redden/Saunders 2015: 99), but is also preoccupied with Washington’s role in cross-strait relations too. The “One China” policy is the most important sovereignty issue for the PRC. This was, for instance, evidenced by Xi’s remarks in early 2019 when he told the world that China would not make promises “to renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary means” (China Daily 2019) in the Taiwan dispute. However, without substantial investments in naval capabilities such a claim would be difficult to uphold.

After all, “Taiwan, as an island, is an inherently ‘maritime’ military problem” (Bickford 2016a: 11) and dealing with it requires appropriate response mechanisms from the PRC’s point of view. In fact, as a lesson from the PLA’s unpreparedness to undertake a major reunification campaign during the 1990s, its military modernization has been a direct result of this gap—one that seems to have been largely closed by now (ONI 2015: 7). Any move toward Taiwanese independence would probably nowadays be met by countermeasures that heavily rely on operations by the PLAN; therefore “developing the capabilities to compel reunification will remain a central priority in the years ahead” (ibid.: 7). Developing sea power on its own appears, then, to China a suitable way to deter the threat posed by the US in the region and also to achieve its long-held goal of reuniting with Taiwan.
Safeguard island sovereignty and maritime rights

Seen from a more offense-oriented perspective, China’s ambition for significant maritime power also originates from a deep sense of entitlement to sovereignty over a wide range of waters, reefs, and island features in the South and East China Seas. Compared to the relatively stable situation in Taiwan, activities in these regional waters have advanced quite rapidly—with news of reclamation operations, sovereignty patrols, and episodes of harassment appearing on a daily basis. This has to do with the large number of rival parties involved in the conflicts here over sovereignty, and thus the diversity of approaches taken. China, for its part, has been especially busy supporting the case for its infamous nine-dash line, which lays claim to virtually all of the available features in the South China Sea and has emboldened the country to even start building artificial islands in the region (Beech 2016).

According to the Chinese telling of it, these claims are based on legitimate sovereign rights deriving from ancient historic titles. Here it becomes apparent that, even though it has claimed the seas and archipelagic features in question for a long time now, “as China’s military capabilities grow, Beijing is increasingly capable of asserting these claims in a manner that it was unable to only a few years ago” (Liff/Ikenberry 2014: 56). The reasons for such coercive behavior in this case are manifold, concerning not only China’s perceived maritime rights over the involved seas and the land features scattered throughout their waters. They must also be seen as a way to further contribute to economic development, as this geographic area seemingly promises vast quantities of highly valued resources—which are obviously a key asset to have at one’s disposal (Jakobson/Medcalf 2015: 8). In order to bolster its interests against rival claimants, China not only puts hope in the PLAN but more frequently sends out its coastguard too—and, reportedly, also entertains a maritime militia, a grassroots, paramilitary organization made up mostly of fishing boats operating in conjunction with the other two agencies active in its home waters (Erickson/Kennedy 2016; Martinson 2016). Hence, the ambition to increase its maritime weight is directly linked to China’s wish to control the regional seas and build up its role as the region’s major security actor.

Protect sea lines of communication and overseas interests

As for the third driver, one has to turn to the significance of the maritime economy and the relevance that shipping and sea-based trade have for supporting Chinese national growth objectives. China’s dependence
on the sea has increased immensely in recent years, with its development model hinging on overseas trade and markets from which to import fossil fuels and to which to export assembled commodities (Wu 2013: 145; Klein, in this volume). Figures commonly cited here reveal that 90 percent of China’s foreign trade travels by sea and 82 percent of its crude oil imports had to pass through the South China Sea in 2013 (Stratfor 2015). This “dependence on international shipping places it at the mercy of its geographic location. China does not enjoy the geographic endowments of the United States—that is, two borders composed of thousands of miles of coastline and adjacent maritime zones” (Odom 2015: 81). Instead the SLOCs, via which goods and resources are carried to and from China, are contained within a very enclosed area (the so-called first island chain). One official document even claims that China has no less than 30 key SLOCs that connect China to 1,200 ports in over 150 countries, and therefore form “vital lifelines” for the national economy (cited in Bickford 2016b: 22). Protecting these sea lines, which connect the world to China’s vibrant Southern and Eastern coastal provinces and vice versa, is thus an essential task.

A major security concern that ties directly into this and thus haunts Beijing is its “Malacca Dilemma.” The phrase first came up in the discourse on China’s worries about energy security and oil supplies back in the early years of the new century, when the CCP leadership came to perceive the geographic situation of its economically crucial coastal area, which has access to the open sea only via narrow straits, as a strategic vulnerability (Storey 2006). These straits could be subjected to frequent freight raiding by pirates, terrorists, or—even worse—to blockades by hostile sea powers. The situation is further complicated for China in particular by the fact that the Strait of Malacca is not an international waterway but enjoys shared sovereignty among its littoral states Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Murphy 2014: 138).  

As China’s resource efficiency is still quite low in comparison to industrialized countries, its consumption of energy for the creation of similar value in terms of gross national product is substantially higher (Xie 2014: 117). As a result, it is particularly vulnerable to interdictions of these waterways and “tries to expand its influence in the sea by developing its navy forces and strengthening its control over the sea chains” (ibid.: 117). Beijing’s offer to patrol the Strait of Malacca was,

---

16 This is, however, an issue not only for China but for the regional states (notably Japan) more generally, since their trade would also be adversely affected if these straits became unnavigable—afterall, roughly one-third of the global seaborne oil trade and half of the world’s traded liquefied natural gas (LNG) pass through here on a daily basis (Xu 2015: 25).
however, unsuccessful in the same way that similar bids by Japan and the US were too: on account of foreign naval activity in its territorial waters being an infringement of its sovereignty, Jakarta declined all of these requests (Murphy 2014: 138). Nevertheless, in order to ensure that its economic development is not slowed down by a restriction of trade routes it still makes sense for China to invest in offshore military capabilities.

**Earn legitimacy as a strong nation by gaining status as a major maritime power**

More recently, the PRC has started to attach its goal of becoming a maritime power to its overall continued rise as a great power more openly—a process, as mentioned above, that was first initiated under Xi Jinping’s leadership. These efforts are in part unmistakably nationalist in nature, as can be witnessed in all the talk of the importance of maritime power for the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Bickford 2016a). As one commentator put it, “Xi Jinping may be inclined to use the concept of maritime power to boost popular support for the regime” (Yoon 2015: 46). Much of what is being reported and shown off as alleged naval development achievements needs, therefore, to be reframed as propaganda—“geared toward creating a feeling of pride and unity among the populace and therefore aimed at a domestic audience just as much as at foreign powers” (Kirchberger 2015: 9–10). This underlines the nationalist tendencies inherent in the goal of achieving naval power.

For instance, the obvious attempt by the CCP to use promises of maritime power in the East China Sea islands dispute is said to be aimed at boosting the Party’s popularity by exploiting the nationalistic mood surrounding these events (ibid.). Much like the islands dispute, naval prestige projects such as the building of an aircraft carrier or the formation of a blue-water navy are also based on feelings of national pride within the PRC. Similar to the nationalist rhetoric surrounding high-profile projects like the Three Gorges Dam, the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, or the domestic space program, the Chinese leadership is said to favor building an aircraft carrier and forming a blue-water navy in the same spirit—to be seen as taking another step toward achieving great power status (Ross, 2009: 60–65). In the eyes of many, the acquisition of a carrier fleet promises a better position vis-à-vis Taiwan and regarding SLOC protection. It would furthermore bring an end to the “embarrassment” of being the only rising power and Security Council
member without an aircraft carrier, enable the country to confront and deter the US Navy and its allies in the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca, and help overcome the historic events that caused China’s long century of humiliation—which was, supposedly, inflicted on the country via the ocean (ibid.: 65–75).

Asserting its maritime supremacy would thus be a crucial step for China in finally rising to the rank of major global power, as it operates under the impression that all historic major powers were sea powers as well (Bickford 2016b: 21). Given this close association of maritime power with the quest for Chinese national identity, “naval modernization is no longer simply a question of keeping pace with economic growth, but lies at the heart of debates over China’s rightful status in the world” (Morton 2016: 933). This is partly being reinforced by China’s growing community of (military) nationalists. Considering that their views have seeped into the public discourse, China’s regional and foreign policies are now under close observation. “If China’s leadership is seen as ‘settling’ over contentious regional issues, rather than perpetuating a hard-line stance, it risks inflaming public opinion and undermining its domestic legitimacy” (Lin/Gertner 2015: 16). As such, the country is in need of a stand being taken and its determination being signaled to national audiences. Given that, moreover, Xi has done away with some of the rhetorical inhibition that had previously guided maritime relations with China’s neighbors, he may be hard pressed to live up to the standard thus set. On multiple occasions Xi has indicated that the CCP elite may be unwilling to put its restraint on hold any longer, and also wants to see China become a great maritime power (Jakobson/Medcalf 2015: 9).

Maintain a sound overseas and maritime security environment

The fifth and final driver of China’s maritime transformation is one based more on a global security perspective that aims at the maintenance of good relations with the region as a whole as the country proceeds to expand its naval presence. Most of this can, therefore, be termed as “military operations other than war” (MOOTW). This is linked to the increased presence of its nationals around the world, a trend that is of course closely tied to the opening up of the Chinese economy and especially the “Go Out” policy initiated in 1999. The security of these citizens is of significant importance, because threats to them receive extensive media coverage. The need to ensure their safety is thus quite crucial for the Party leadership, because failure to do so
would draw attention to a potential inability to care for the population and thus discredit Beijing’s overall legitimacy. The measures that needed to be taken in response to dangerous situations involving Chinese nationals in countries and regions like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Sudan, and the Mekong Delta go to show that this risk is heightened when commercial activity is extended to weak states (Parello-Plesner/Duchâtelet 2015).

This interest falls into a similar category to the international commitments China has that equally call for an ability to quickly respond to situations arising overseas. Such responsibilities include peacekeeping operations, reacting to nontraditional security threats at sea, as well as other “multilateral efforts to support the international order” (Bickford 2016b: 22). Evidently, combating piracy and terrorism are the most pressing issues as they create fear of attacks that could possibly harm sensitive shipping lanes—for instance, through suicide attacks on oil tankers or LNG carriers (Xu 2015: 26). However, MOOTW may also involve actions of a humanitarian nature, thus substantially promoting China’s soft power image by giving the PLAN a much more civilian outlook and responding to the negative perceptions surrounding its modernization—as it has done, for example, with the dispatching of its hospital ship, the Peace Ark, to foreign countries (Dooley 2012: 71).

In addition, the PLAN has also expanded its horizons by joining in with the antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden. Despite some differences and the Chinese insistence on acting individually outside of the Western-led multilateral coalition, its contribution on the Horn of Africa goes to show that successful cooperation with the PLAN is indeed possible (Erickson/Strange 2015). Moreover, given the high number of shipping and naval activities occurring in the partly enclosed seas around China’s coast it is noteworthy that Beijing has signed a number of international protocols. Examples are the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea or the Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea; this signals the country’s readiness to defuse potential conflicts over minor accidents happening at sea (Redden/Saunders 2015: 97–98). Hence the PRC has reason to become an active participant in maritime security affairs not only for its own sake but also for the maintenance of order at sea more generally. Besides developing predominantly offensive capacities for an intervention in Taiwan or for the goal of A2/AD, China also recognizes the need to fight nontraditional naval threats and to support international disaster relief as well as peacekeeping operations.

Given these wide-ranging interests, it appears logical that China is now very conscious of the need to develop its own maritime strategy.
While some of the daunting challenges inherent in its current national development model can be met by putting greater emphasis on such a strategy though, it is also clear that those interests differ with regard to their geographic scope; some affairs can be dealt with under a coastal and near seas framework, others have a much broader dimension to them—thus requiring the deliberate development of far seas capabilities, provided only by a reliable blue-water navy. It is, therefore, unsurprising that Chinese attempts at maritime transformation have a dual purpose in line with what has been termed in the 2015 DWP as a shift in “[the PLAN’s] focus from ‘offshore waters defense’ to the combination of ‘offshore waters defense’ with ‘open seas protection’” (MOD 2015: section IV). Against this backdrop, it is quite important to bear witness to how these interests have led to policy choices that impact on the whole region and that have consequently been met with counteractions from states throughout Asia Pacific.

The Regional Security Order in Times of China’s Maritime Transformation: The Turning of the Tide in Asia Pacific Relations

Apart from being a palpable rupture with a country’s own past, a maritime transformation also constitutes a very visible modification of the established security order. In the case of Asia Pacific this security order used to be based on US maritime preponderance. While the US retains a strong role as external balancer and security guarantor for many states in the Asian naval theater, it will not be able to thwart China’s bid to become a true maritime power. It is under these conditions that China’s maritime transformation is presumed to be a serious challenge to the US-based liberal order in the region, because the expansion of the former’s power projection capabilities may hint at a key novelty arising in Asia Pacific. It demonstrates China’s willingness to seek the same kind of security on its maritime frontiers that it has enjoyed along its inner territorial borders ever since quasi-peace was reached with its northern and western neighbors. For a region that is widely affected by a distinctly maritime geography, this creates the risk of surrendering the freedom of navigation to unilateral Chinese control. Furthermore, the current international system is so deeply immersed in the globalized economic model, of which seaborne trade and sea lane security are essential aspects, that no state with a stake in it can ignore what is going on around one of the world’s most important waterways.
It is therefore undeniable that China’s increasing ability to effectively control the near seas with its A2/AD capabilities and emerging blue-water navy are now altering security dynamics in Asia Pacific. However, the US is still in a very strong position in the region, even if China does eventually manage to push it further back toward the rim of the first island chain. The US potential to effectively seal the choke points in the Indian and Pacific Oceans to Chinese shipping is a very real option that has haunted China for a long time now. Given that the US has moved toward becoming less dependent on foreign fossil fuels since it began to allow fracking, in its search for domestic energy resources, this imbalance vis-à-vis China has only further increased. Although China is trying to adapt to this development by upgrading its means for projecting sea power, “neither its rapidly expanding submarine fleet nor its ambition to acquire aircraft carriers can protect the vital shipping upon which its economy is dependent” (Pfeifer 2011a: 129). Thus, the A2/AD is not a factor that has flipped the balance of power in the region to date. The US continues to have a very real ability to counter these capacities, even as an offshore balancer. Of course, for its current role the US is heavily reliant on the access to the region granted to it by alliance partners—and especially South Korea and Japan, “playing the role of facilitator for greater presence” (Garcia 2016: 553). Yet, as the American decision regarding a pivot to Asia shows, the regional states have more than gladly welcomed an increased show of US force in the region (Morton 2016: 930–931).

The PRC, on the other hand, is confronted with a group of wary nations that are pitting themselves against a perceived Chinese effort to establish a bigger sphere of maritime influence. Since China’s maritime transformation is likely to become a reality at some point, the region is tasked with weighing up a very complicated set of strategic choices. Even though China may not be able to replace the US as supreme naval power in the region for some decades yet, it still might extend its range of capabilities to a degree perceived as dangerous. Hence, many neighboring states are prone to bolstering their defenses against this potential Chinese threat. Meanwhile they do not want to appear to be obviously balancing China, because they all depend so greatly on the economic power that it has amassed over the last thirty years.

This produces an interesting array of approaches and strategies by the states of Asia Pacific: they pursue not only bilateral security assurances with the US, but in a number of cases have even established security ties with each other without the latter being in the picture (Garcia 2016). Along with the calling upon supranational institutions, there is thus an unmistakable tendency of making the issue a multilateral one—
or at least internationalizing it. It remains to be seen whether this trend continues to allow smaller neighboring states to face China as a coalition of like-minded actors, or if the rising power finds a way to undermine and dissolve the interlinkages between them. In any case the maritime transformation of China is a clear manifestation of its rise to great power status, and is making the entire situation more complex by creating new security interdependencies throughout Asia Pacific. The tenets of the regional security order are thus in flux, while the balance of power simultaneously remains more or less intact.
Bibliography


