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China's Naval Modernization: Reflections on a Symposium

The “rise of China” is on everyone’s lips these days, with the conversation being driven both by China’s rapid economic development and its military modernization. On November 9, 2010, the Boston University Center for the Study of Asia hosted a symposium that focused on one aspect of China’s rise: its naval modernization. Professor Andrew Bacevich of Boston University kicked off the afternoon with an opening address that posed the central question: Are China and the United States on a collision course? This question was then explored by Lyle Goldstein, Nan Li, Peter Dutton, and Toshi Yoshihara of the United States Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, and Professor Robert Ross of Boston College. Comments and questions were raised by Professors Joseph Fewsmith and Michael Corgan of the Department of International Relations at Boston University. The broad answer the group came up with was “not necessarily.” Whether there is conflict or not depends on the capabilities and intentions of the United States and China, their ability to communicate reassurance to each other, as well as the impact of China’s naval modernization on other regional powers, particularly Japan.

A few years ago, Chinese diplomatic behavior was often characterized with the term “peaceful rise,” which suggested China is rising, but by reassuring other nations it would not behave aggressively. Deng Xiaoping’s famous statement that China would “never act as a hegemon” was often quoted. In short, China was a status quo power, accepting of the interests of its neighbors – with the possible exception of Taiwan, which China has always considered to be part of its sovereign territory. However, in the past eighteen months or so, actual Chinese behavior especially in the near seas has seemed assertive or provocative, causing outsiders to begin to reconsider their views of China. This was the rationale for convening this symposium. Rather than simply digesting the views of the various speakers, this report reflects on some of the critical issues that were raised at the symposium, specifically: (1) historical diplomatic posture; (2) capability; (3) intentions; and (4) views and perceptions.

Diplomatic History

When we try to understand and even predict state behavior, diplomatic history is one factor to consider. If we could identify continuous and repeated tendencies in a state's diplomatic posture, it would help us to understand the current and future course of the state. One school of thought on Chinese diplomatic behavior emphasizes pragmatism, seen especially after Deng Xiaoping, China's paramount leader, launched the country on a course of economic reform in 1978. From this school's view, the primary aspiration of the Chinese state is to become economically powerful, both to raise the living standards of its people and to command foreign respect, thus leaving the "century of humiliation" permanently behind. China has maintained its one-party system in part because it believes this can preserve internal order, which is regarded as the foundation of economic development. To achieve economic development under the one-party rule, China has followed such policies as seeking export-driven economic growth, undertaking massive domestic infrastructure development, developing broader access to natural resources, and maintaining territorial integrity.

Another tenet of this school of thought is that regional stability is essential for rapid economic development. While China is worried about the U.S. global hegemony, China also gains great economic benefit from the current stable regional order, which is underpinned by the power of the U.S. Therefore, the Chinese military posture can be understood as defensive, rather than offensive. China has, however, been increasing its power projection capability, albeit to a limited degree. The purpose of military modernization is not to replace the U.S. hegemony in the region as that would be counterproductive to the goals that China wants to achieve. In a sense, Chinese ambition is likely to be limited in comparison to some rising powers of the past.

Therefore, from the perspective of this school of thought, the key question that needs to be answered on the future of Sino-U.S. relations lies in the U.S. policy direction toward China, rather than the Chinese policy toward the U.S. The question that we should tackle is whether the U.S. can adjust itself to a multi-polar world caused by a rising China. American global leadership based on the diplomatic tradition of Wilsonianism advocates the spread of democracy, liberal market oriented capitalism, and intervention to help create peace and spread freedom. This diplomatic tradition often leads to an eagerness for a robust military capability in order to achieve these goals. It also tends to associate the United States with broad overseas commitment. Given a seemingly inevitable decline in relative power, reflecting both the rise of other powers and the global financial crisis, the maintenance of global primacy has become very costly and may no longer be realistic. If the U.S. can adjust itself to this coming reality, Sino-U.S. relations are likely to be friendlier. If not, relations could be on a collision course.

The first school of thought sees pragmatism as a default mode of Chinese diplomatic posture. It assumes that the Chinese ambition is and remains limited, and that the country is not inherently hostile toward the United States. Historically China does not mirror past great powers that exercised military instruments to achieve ambitious



Chinese President Hu Jintao visits the Pentagon - May 2002

Photo Source: U.S. Dept. of Defense

goals. In contrast, a second school of thought questions this assumption and sees the recent Chinese naval modernization as exactly the sort of behavior other great powers have pursued in the past. A state continues to seek more power for its own survival, and it will do what it can. For example, as its power grew, the U.S. began to establish a sphere of influence over the Caribbean and then the Western hemisphere in the 19th century. In the same manner, Japan also established a sphere of influence in East Asia in the early 20th century. To achieve their goals, both the United States and Japan modernized their naval capabilities to defend access to resources and markets necessary for economic development. Now in the early twenty-first century, China is following this route. As its power is rising, China has begun to strongly assert its maritime rights in both the South and East China Seas, which it regards as its backyard. These rights are described in the sort of nationalistic logic that claims legitimacy as a great power. The Chinese naval modernization should be understood in this context.

The answer to the overarching question of conflict or cooperation depends upon which default mode of diplomatic posture you are willing to consider in each state. What period of a long diplomatic history do you consider to identify the default mode of diplomatic posture? How do you interpret state diplomatic behavior in a certain period? Is there a non-default mode of diplomatic posture in each state (such as the realpolitik of Theodore Roosevelt and Richard Nixon in the United States and the Sino-centric nationalism that can prevail in China)? To sum up, the following table may be useful for analytical purposes. The first school of thought predicts either Case 1 (more peaceful) or Case 2 (mixed of peaceful and conflictual but basically Chinese acceptance of U.S. primacy in the region). On the other hand, the second school of thought predicts either Case 2 or Case 4 (more conflictual).

Table 1: The Potential Cases in the Future Sino-U.S. Relations

		U.S. Diplomatic Postures	
		<i>Realpolitik</i>	<i>Wilsonianism</i>
Chinese Diplomatic Postures	<i>Pragmatism</i>	Case 1: More Peaceful (Security Regime in kind)	Case 2: Mixed (but basically Chinese acceptance of U.S. primacy in the region)
	<i>Sino-Centric Nationalism</i>	Case 3: Mixed (but basically U.S. acceptance of Chinese primacy in the region)	Case 4: More Conflictual (Cold War in kind)

Capabilities

The second factor is capability. The analysis of capability is important because if one knows that one's competitor is weaker, one does not have to be too concerned and can avoid overreacting. Even though the weaker power tries to strike out, there is no major conflict because the competitor is weak. So, what kinds of capabilities is

China building up? What can China do with them? Is the increasing Chinese naval capability changing a military balance globally or regionally? If not, is China still posing problems for the United States even if it is not catching up?

The range of the Chinese naval buildup is very broad, and includes submarines (both strategic and tactical), mine warfare capability, missile forces including the development of the anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), air defense capability, an amphibious force, the acquisition of aircraft carriers, and surface ships such as destroyers and frigates.

One of the major Chinese efforts is the modernization of submarines. As the table below shows, the total number is relatively stable but the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been replacing the old types (Romeo and Han classes) with the newer types (Kilo, Song, and Yuan classes). This replacement indicates development of quieter, more modern submarines that are less detectable and therefore have a greater capability of firing an anti-ship cruise missile. According to an estimate of the U.S. Department of Defense, the modern percent of PLAN submarine forces have increased from less than 10% in 2004 to 50% in 2009.

Table 2: The Development of the Chinese Submarine Capabilities

	1997	2004	2006	2008	2010
Strategic (SSBN)					
Xia class	1	1	1	1	1
Jin class	0	0	0	2	2
Tactical (SSN)					
Han class	5	5	4	4	4
Shang class	0	0	0	2	2
Tactical (SSG)					
Romeo class	1	1	1	1	1
Tactical (SSK)					
Kilo class	3	4	3	12	12
Ming class	13	19	19	19	19
Romeo class	36	35	20	8	8
Song class	1	3	9	10	13
Yuan class	0	0	0	2	2
Tactical (SS)					
Golf class	1	1	1	1	1
Strategic submarines	1	1	1	3	3
Tactical submarines	60	68	57	59	62
TOTAL	61	69	58	62	65

Source: International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance: 1997; 2004; 2006; 2008; and 2010* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press)

So, what can China do with modernized submarines? In October 1994, a U.S. anti-submarine aircraft could spot the Chinese Han class SSN about 450 nautical miles off the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Kitty Hawk. However, in October 2006, the Chinese Song class SSK stalked the Kitty Hawk again and surfaced within firing range (five miles) of its torpedoes and missiles before being detected. The PLAN also possesses an effective mine warfare capability. According to the recent remarks of U.S. Pacific Commander Admiral Willard and others, the Chinese ASBMs (DF-21D) might reach the initial operational capability (IOC). In addition, the PLAN has recently increased its activities beyond the near seas and moved toward the Western Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the Gulf of Aden.



Chinese Sailors aboard the Chinese Navy destroyer Qingdao, Pearl Harbor, HI, 2002.
Photo source: United States Navy

So, can we say the Chinese naval modernization is changing the military balance between itself and the United States? The answer is "no" as of now, and seems likely to remain "no" for the foreseeable future. The United States still firmly maintains escalation dominance from the conventional to the nuclear level. In terms of the capabilities, this means that if the United States and China should go to war, the United States military can defeat the Chinese military in all levels of warfare.

Then can we say the Chinese naval modernization is changing the military balance with Japan? The answer is "yes" in the near future, even though Japan still maintains naval superiority over China. If Japan fails to keep pace with Chinese naval modernization, Japan could lose its naval superiority and will have to make a difficult choice (what kinds of naval capabilities should and can Japan procure in face of a coming naval parity?) in the near future while facing serious fiscal constraints. The Sino-Japanese military balance is shifting in favor of China, but U.S. capability to defend Japan is still a key factor. In this sense, as long as the United States maintains its capabilities, the effect of the shifting balance between China and Japan can be marginalized in terms of capabilities.

The issue posed by the Chinese naval modernization is not whether the military balance with the United States is being tipped, but whether U.S. military access to the seas near mainland China is being restricted. Chinese naval modernization focuses on the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, so it is now much more difficult for U.S. forces to approach the Chinese coast than it was 1996 when the U.S. could dispatch two carrier groups to the area near Taiwan. The cost and risk associated with such an operation has gone up.

To deal with this challenge of anti-access, the United States emphasizes the Joint Air-Sea Battle (JASB) concept



The above map illustrates many of the straits through which vessels must pass in order to supply China with oil. The most important of these is the Malacca Strait, a narrow passage between the Malaysian Peninsula and the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

Image Source: United States Department of Defense

in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). The basic idea is to deter and defeat aggression under the anti-access environments by building and exercising highly integrated air and naval capabilities. The JASB concept urges the build-up of the long-range strike (LRS) capability (e.g., a new long-range bomber) from outside the anti-access environments and the resiliency of overseas bases inside the anti-access environments. This move of securing access under the anti-access environments seems to suggest the United States has the resolve to maintain escalation dominance in foreseeable future.

Intentions

The third factor to consider is China's intentions – What is driving China's modernizing efforts? What are the strategic goals that these new naval capabilities serve? Even while China builds a large navy, if the intention is limited and defensive, its behavior will be peaceful. On the other hand, even though the Chinese navy is relatively

small, if the intention is expansionistic and offensive, its behavior will be more aggressive. Therefore, it is important to understand not only the capability (i.e., what can China do?) but also the intention through the naval strategy (i.e., why is China doing what it is doing?).

Until the mid 2000s, the Chinese naval strategy focused on near-coast defense and near-seas active defense. The purposes were to defend the territorial waters and to be capable of naval operations within the "three seas," namely the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea. After the mid 2000s, Chinese naval strategy was extended to include far-seas operations. The purpose is to establish a capability for effective naval operations beyond the three seas and within the second island chain, a line that extends from the mainland China's coast to as far east as Guam.

So what has been driving the Chinese naval modernization? First, land-based threats have declined particularly since the final settlement of disputed borders with Russia in 2008, although India still remains a concern for China. Second, the areas with the greatest economic prosperity are located along China's coasts. They are vulnerable to sea-based threats. To protect the most economically prosperous areas, China needs to create a sea buffer through the development of the anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities. Third, secure access to maritime resources and overseas trade investment are emerging as Chinese national interests for maintaining economic development. According to some Chinese experts, China now faces the "Malacca dilemma," so named because of the large percentage of Chinese imports that pass through the Malacca Strait. The Chinese are concerned

that if China does not have sufficient naval strength to control or influence the Malacca Strait, the U.S. can squeeze the Strait anytime it wants, and hence the Strait poses a critical problem for China economically. Fourth, it is operationally better to have more room to deploy naval forces and to gain an initiative for the naval operations.

The Chinese leadership, including President Hu Jintao, has endorsed these goals and the strategies to achieve them. Technologically and financially, the resources for the far-seas operations strategy are now available to China. So can we say this Chinese naval strategy of far-seas operations is offensive or defensive? For now, the answer seems to be that the Chinese naval strategy is defensive based on current observations. The intentions underlying China's naval strategy are primarily driven by economic concerns, which is different from the Soviet Navy during the Cold War era. The intention is not to build a global offensive navy, but to build a local war-oriented regional navy. In addition, the PLAN SSBN has never made a significant deterrent patrol yet. Although the PLAN shows the development of power projection capability through its participation in anti-piracy operations off Somalia, only two ships were dispatched for this mission. The purpose of these anti-piracy operations is limited and more symbolic than strategic. Moreover, the Chinese naval strategy lacks the significant effort of building the



An older, Chinese Kilo class submarine in autumn 1989.

Photo Source: United States Navy

anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capability. These pieces of evidence suggest the current Chinese naval strategy is defensive. For the near future, if the PLAN were dictating more far-oceans operations, seeking overseas bases, and building an ASW capability, it would indicate that the Chinese naval strategy is becoming more offensive. So far this has not occurred.

Chinese Perceptions

The fourth and final factor is China's views and perceptions on three areas: geography, international law (especially on maritime rights), and itself (i.e., nationalism). Analysis of views and perceptions is important because it helps us to understand what actions the Chinese consider to be legitimate and appropriate in terms of state behavior. The views and perceptions may be pushing Chinese behavior beyond what one would expect from a rational calculation of costs and benefits. First, from a geostrategic point of view, the Chinese have perceived that the first island chain -- a line through the Kurile Islands, Japan, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia -- is blocking further Chinese naval development. To reach beyond the first island chain, China must pass through one of the 16 straits and channels. At present, 11 of these 16 straits and channels are under Japanese control, and 10 of these 11 straits and channels are located around the Ryukyu Islands. It seems central to Chinese naval strategy to build the capability to pass through these straits and channels (especially the Miyako Strait, the widest and deepest strait among them) for its commercial access and security interests.

The second area concerns Chinese views on international maritime rights. There are three basic disputes between China and the U.S. (and the neighbors in the region) over maritime rights: (1) who owns and controls the disputed islands (i.e., the issue of sovereignty)?; (2) who gets jurisdiction over the maritime resources and waters in the



disputed areas (i.e., the issue of access to resources)?; and (3) what is the proper balance of maritime rights between the international community and the coastal states? These disputes are closely related to the normative dimension. How do we interpret the international law? What is the legitimate and appropriate interpretation of international law in international maritime activities? Who follows or violates international laws? These disputes reflect China's efforts to secure resources such as fisheries, oil, and gas; as well as security interests such as a sea buffer zone and a sanctuary for the naval maneuvering operations. While the United States considers freedom of navigation as a national interest (i.e., seeking more access to the seas), China emphasizes sovereignty, security interests, historical legitimacy, and the extension of Chinese domestic laws (i.e., seeking an anti-access environment).

Admiral Mike Mullen speaks with Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy Commander-in-Chief Adm. Wu Shengli at a joint event in April 2007.

Photo source: United States Navy

The third area is Chinese nationalism. It appears that nationalism in the military and beyond has had a growing effect on the decision-making process in civilian party leadership. As national power increases, the public tends to seek more national prestige and respectable status as a great power. The party leadership is facing issues of domestic legitimacy under conditions of fragile social stability. Nationalism appears to be an important factor in China's decision to build an aircraft carrier and move toward a blue water navy. Party leaders are vulnerable to popular demands and widespread nationalism, and these forces have helped push the recent Chinese naval modernization.



Conclusion

Analysis of these four factors does not give a decisive answer to the overarching question of whether or not Sino-U.S. relations are on a collision course. On the basis of the analysis of capability and intentions, U.S. maintenance of escalation dominance will continue to discourage China from challenging the United

States militarily if China remains rational and the Chinese naval strategy remains defensive. Therefore, the answer to the overarching question is "no" as of this moment and is unlikely to change in the near future. However, with further analysis of Chinese views and perceptions, the answer may be "yes." China's naval modernization has been motivated by its geostrategic perception, its normative aspiration, and the spread of nationalism propelled by China's increasing economic power. The sense of national mission and legitimacy associated with naval modernization is hard for the pragmatists in the Chinese government to control. Finally, from an analysis of the diplomatic postures of China and the United States, the answer is "yes" and "no," because it depends upon which diplomatic posture each state takes in future – history gives both the United States and China a variety of traditions to draw upon.

The Ryukyu Islands, stretching between Japan and Taiwan, form "the first island chain." These islands are Japanese territory and block China's unfettered access to the Pacific.

Image Source: Wikimedia Commons

If any broad consensus came out of this symposium, it is that a collision between the United States and China is not inevitable. The two states share very broad interests in both global and regional arenas (e.g., nuclear proliferation, environment, and energy). Conflictual relations in the naval dimension do not necessarily characterize or overwhelm the entire Sino-U.S. diplomatic relationship. There are also many opportunities to promote cooperation and better mutual understanding even in the naval field, such as crisis management, confidence building, search & rescue, maritime counter-terrorism, disaster relief, environmental stewardship, regional maritime security, and sea lane security. More cooperative and productive bilateral relations will create benefits for both powers, the region and the world.

A state leader has multiple choices. The interactions between the choices made by the leaders of both countries will ultimately reveal the answer to the question addressed by the symposium. Until then, it is necessary to keep an eye on the four factors discussed in the symposium as well as other factors in China such as internal party politics, civil-military relations, military-military relations, emerging influences of state-owned enterprises, and socio-economic stability.

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