

## CHINA'S RE-EMERGENT SEA POWER

The traditional Western view of Chinese history has treated China as a continental power with only a sporadic concern with maritime affairs. In part, this view originated due to the European-imposed maritime dominance of China starting in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. China's seaborne achievements – perhaps most well known are the 'treasure fleets' of Zheng He – are all too often overlooked in the face of her capitulation at the hands of mercantilist Western powers.<sup>1</sup> In fact, international sea trade has contributed significantly to China's prosperity for over two thousand years, so when discussing the modern People's Liberation Army – Navy (PLA-N), it is important to recognise China as a re-emerging sea power.

Soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the need for a maritime defence was well understood as the nascent nation faced a hostile regional outlook. The threat of invasion by the Chinese nationalists from the island of Taiwan was foremost in the minds of the PRC leadership, as was the strong United States (US) military presence, especially after witnessing the effective use of joint and combined sea power during the Korean War. The few littoral craft the PRC operated were no match for either of these more powerful navies. Planning to counter these threats, the infant PLA-N was modelled to become a force essentially dedicated to sea denial and coastal defence.

During the 1980s the PLA-N received increased attention from military policy makers in Beijing, as the utility of modern, efficient navies became much more visible. This turn to the sea also owed much to the ability of Chinese Navy leader Liu Huaqing to cast off land-centric strategic philosophies and bring credibility to the concept of offshore defence and protecting the 'first island chain'.<sup>2</sup> This new generation of Chinese visionaries promoted the growth of the PLA-N, but their task was helped by the strengthening Chinese economy and increased liberalism within the PRC.

The last decade has seen a concerted push by China to modernise and consolidate her naval capability. A strong focus has been the promotion and development of indigenous capabilities, while bridging any capability gaps with acquisitions of foreign platforms and technology. In many instances, reverse-engineering has been used to develop in-country expertise which in turn generates an even greater self-reliance in naval capabilities. Significant updates to naval combat and weapon systems have resulted. The Chinese fleet of ten years ago might not have been significantly different in size, but it did not have many of the important technologies that the PLA-N now fields. These include an effective indigenous nuclear submarine program, stealth enhancement technologies, advanced indigenous sensor suites and an increasingly sophisticated command and control infrastructure. The PLA-N's modernisation is backed by a robust and ever-growing manufacturing base and an increasingly capable design, research and development sector.

Human factors, such as improved military training and professionalism, have also made major contributions to PLA-N advancement. China's sailors and officers are increasingly well trained and educated; they are regularly at sea and continually practicing their trade. Any analysis of the PLA-N must recognise the professional and technical proficiency of Chinese naval personnel.

Type	Number (building)	
	1997/98	2007/08
Nuclear Ballistic Missile Submarines	1	1 (4)
Nuclear Attack Submarines	5	5 (1)
Conventional Attack Submarines	55 (3)	53 (1)
Aircraft Carriers	0	0 (1)
Guided Missile Destroyers	18	27 (2)
Guided Missile Frigates	35 (2)	47 (4)
Fast Attack Catamaran	0	40+(15)
Fast Attack and Patrol Craft	426 (11)	169
Amphibious Warfare Vessels	107 (5)	269
Supply Ships	111+ (3)	90+
Replenishment Ships	3	5
Hospital Ships	0	3

*Changes in the PLA-N's existing and planned force structure 1997-2008 (reserve numbers not shown).<sup>3</sup>*

China's nuclear deterrent capability is being supplemented by the new *Jin* class nuclear ballistic missile submarines. Meanwhile, the PLA-N's next generation of nuclear attack submarines – the *Shang* class – will improve its long range submarine capability. Complementing this has been the further development of conventional submarines including the *Yuan* class, which reportedly uses air-independent propulsion. The PLA-N has also acquired 12 *Kilo* class submarines from Russia, an example of covering a perceived capability gap by importing foreign platforms.



*PLA-N Song class submarines (sinodefence)*

The PLA-N maintains a large and diverse surface fleet. Significantly, it has removed from inventory many of its aging, shorter endurance vessels, whose effectiveness in modern maritime conflict was somewhat questionable. Instead, the PLA-N is developing its next generation of surface combatants, with new indigenous and Russian-built warships rapidly replacing those which are obsolete.

Arguably, the most impressive jump in PLA-N capability can be seen in the destroyer force. The acquisition of the Russian designed and manufactured *Sovremenny* class destroyer marks a great leap forward. Similarly, the *Luzhou* and *Luyang* classes represent a 'coming of age' in indigenous destroyer design and construction. The development of the destroyer force, especially air warfare capable destroyers, is suggestive of the PLA-N's determination to protect its seaborne trade further afield than was previously possible.



*The Chinese destroyer Harbin in Sydney Harbour (RAN)*

Like the destroyers, Chinese frigates have also been the focus of recent attention. Indigenous design has advanced significantly with the advent of the *Jiangkai* class. Larger and more robust than its predecessors, the newest frigate in the PLA-N boasts improved air defences and stealth enhancing technologies as well as an organic helicopter for anti-submarine warfare.

The sharp decline in the numbers of active fast attack and patrol craft (FAC) over the last ten years (a 60 per cent reduction), clearly reflects the Chinese shift away from coastal defence towards offshore defence. The PLA-N's remaining FACs are generally less capable than comparable vessels in other modern navies. However an exception to this is the *Houbei* class of fast attack catamaran; the PLA-N is the only navy to operate an advanced, heavily armed, vessel of this type.

Amphibious warfare vessels are an important PLA-N capability with large numbers of ships and watercraft in service. While many of these vessels are restricted to coastal or limited duration operations, they do provide China with a number of strategic options. Indeed, the recent development of the 20,000 tonne *Type 071* assault ship may be an early step towards a much more flexible and perhaps expeditionary PLA-N. Also noteworthy are the fleet auxiliaries, which are essential for naval operations in the Pacific. The PLA-N maintains an increasing number of tankers and replenishment ships giving Chinese warships far greater endurance and hence reach. The three hospital ships might also suggest that the PLA-N is willing to contemplate conducting 'soft power operations', such as humanitarian tasks outside home waters.

Notwithstanding these varied developments, the PLA-N continues to rely upon land-based air support and does

not appear to be developing forces similar to the US Navy's aircraft carrier battle group (CVBG). This does not mean that such a capability can be ruled out in future. China has been studying carriers for a number of years and has acquired three non-operational carriers for disposal; HMAS *Melbourne* (II) and the ex-Soviet Navy's *Varyag* and *Minsk*. *Varyag* has been under conversion at the Dalian shipyards for some years, and despite a repaint and repairs to the superstructure, seems unlikely to be recommissioned any time soon. Until recently, it was doubtful that Chinese shipbuilding industry had the facilities or technical expertise to build an indigenous carrier. The newly completed Changxing shipyards, however, could be used to construct a carrier from the keel-up, if desired.<sup>4</sup>

Even if China does not pursue the construction of carriers, the PLA-N is fast becoming a more capable and credible force. The last decade has seen much consolidation and refinement in the fleet. Sea denial operations, to protect home waters from maritime incursions, no doubt remain an important part of Chinese naval doctrine, but the emphasis has most certainly changed. During the 1980s and 1990s the PLA-N developed a capability to defend the 'first island chain'. More recently, the desire to protect China's maritime approaches has led to the development of a fleet for operations further afield into the Pacific, and into a 'second island chain'.<sup>5</sup> In fact, elements of the PLA-N have already demonstrated a capability for effective operations in the Indian Ocean.

China's next generation nuclear attack submarines and air defence destroyers are equally capable of providing a defensive 'bubble' around commercial shipping, military sea-lift ships, or a sea control force. This need not, however, suggest that the PLA-N is developing an aggressive power projection and sea control force to dominate the Pacific, or planning to challenge other regional navies for sea supremacy in a Mahanian sense. Indeed, the 2008 PRC Defence White Paper states the Navy has been striving to 'gradually develop its capabilities of conducting cooperation in distant waters and countering non-traditional security threats'.<sup>6</sup>

The growth and modernisation of the PLA-N is a fascinating insight into how a modern China sees its place in the world and deals with its geo-strategic realities. The PLA-N now has the potential to play an important and stabilising role in the region and, in partnership with other navies, across the globe.

1. G Till, *Seapower: A guide for the twenty-first century*, Frank Cass, London, 2004, p.22.
2. JR Holmes & T Yoshihara, *Chinese naval strategy in the 21st century: The turn to Mahan*, Routledge, London, 2008; and BD Cole, *The great wall at sea*, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, 2001, pp. 165-9.
3. These figures come from R Sharpe (ed), *Jane's Fighting Ships 1997-98*, and *2007-08*, Jane's Information Group, Surrey, 1997 and 2007.
4. Sinodefence, 'New facility offers carrier building capability', <[www.sinodefence.com/research/new-facility-carrier-building/](http://www.sinodefence.com/research/new-facility-carrier-building/)> (13 February 2009).
5. TM Kane, *Chinese grand strategy and maritime power*, Frank Cass, London, 2002, p. 73.
6. See China's national defence in 2008: part V. the Navy, <[www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2009-01/21/content\\_17162859.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2009-01/21/content_17162859.htm)> (13 February 2009).

