China has been undergoing an historic shift in emphasis from land to naval power. Is its maritime buildup a strategic necessity or an ill-conceived diversion?

China Sets Sail

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The People's Republic of China is in the process of an astonishing, multifaceted transformation. If the explosive growth of China's industrial economy over the past several decades is the most obvious component of that transformation, no less remarkable is China's turn to the sea. With its stunning advance in global shipbuilding markets, its vast and expanding merchant marine, the wide reach of its offshore energy and minerals exploration, its growing fishing fleet, and not least, its rapidly modernizing navy, China is fast becoming an outward-looking maritime state. At a time when the U.S. Navy continues to shrink in numbers if not relative capability, while the traditional naval powers of Europe are in sharp decline, this is a development that deserves careful consideration by students of contemporary global affairs.

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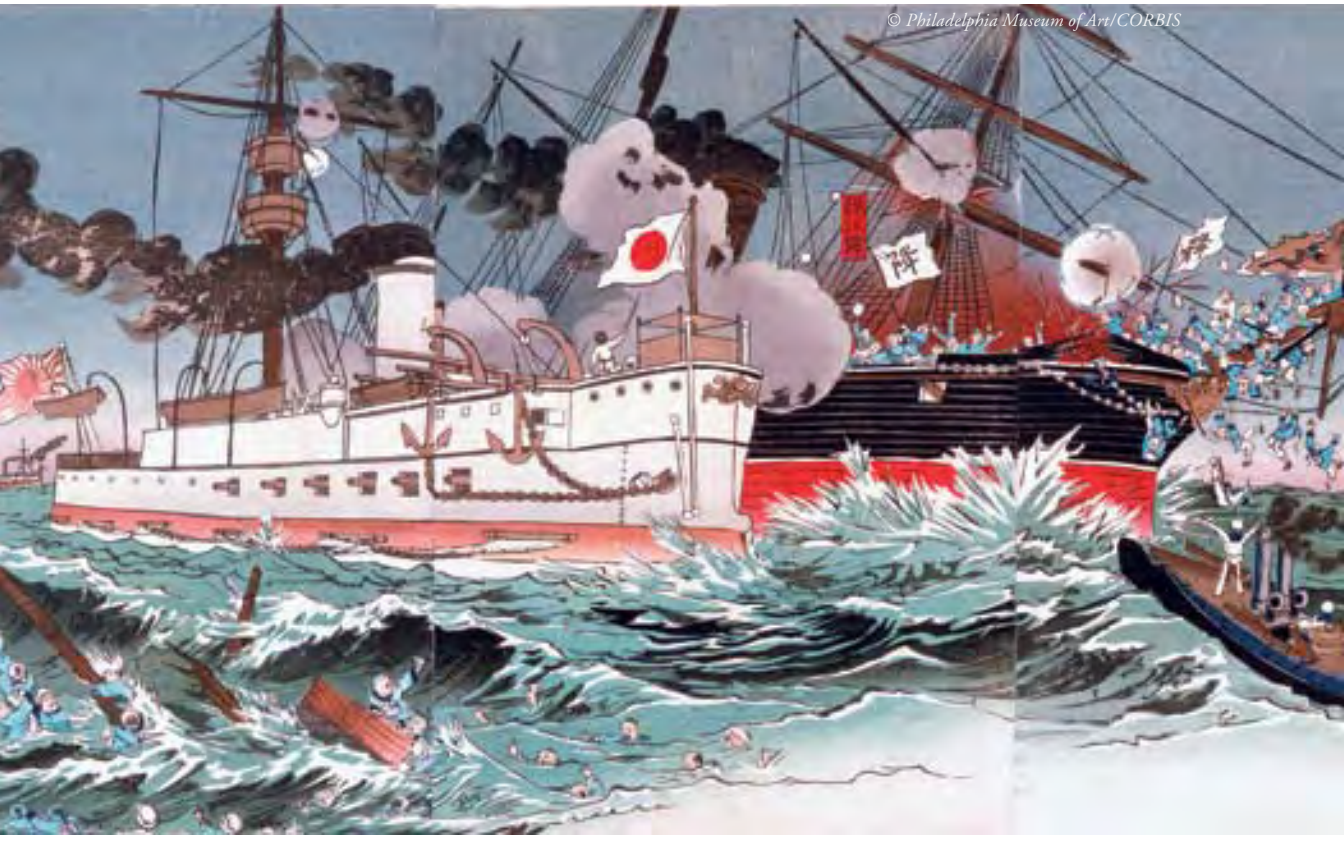
With but one notable exception, China's rulers throughout history have traditionally emphasized land power over sea power. Of course, ordinary Chinese living on the country's extensive coastline have always taken to the sea for their livelihood, but the economy of China has always been fundamentally rooted in its soil. To the extent that the Chinese engaged in commercial activities over the centuries, they did so primarily with a view to their large and largely self-sufficient internal market, readily accessible through China's great navigable river systems as well as its many seaward ports. Moreover, prior to 1840, the Chinese faced virtually no sustained security threats on their ocean flank. Historically, the security threat that preoccupied China's leaders was exposure to raiding or invasion by the steppe nomads of Inner Asia. This threat was always latent and sometimes lethal: More than one Chinese dynasty succumbed to the horsemen of the north. The strategic culture formed by this history and political geography was therefore a profoundly continentalist one.

Throughout most of the past two centuries, this strategic culture retained its power. In the 19th century, Qing China proved incapable of meeting the maritime challenge posed by the Western powers, even as it conquered vast new territories on its inner Asian periphery. In the

First Opium War (1839–42), a British fleet penetrating to the heart of China's riverine network threatened to shut down China's internal commerce, forcing the regime to sue for peace; it was at this time that Britain acquired Hong Kong. In the 1880s, defeat of a Chinese fleet at the hands of the French sealed the end of China's traditional influence in Indochina. By the last decade of the century, despite their acquisition of significant naval capabilities, the Chinese proved no match for their rapidly modernizing island neighbor. Humiliating defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 led to a Japanese protectorate in Korea and the loss of Taiwan.

Pressed by the Russians from the north as well as by Japan and the Western maritime powers, the imperial court was forced into commercial and territorial concessions. Popular resistance to these developments culminated in 1900 in the Boxer Rebellion, a series of spontaneous acts of violence against Western interests that the court tried to use to its political advantage. The result was a lengthy occupation of the imperial capital itself by forces of the Western powers and further humiliation for the regime. In 1905, China suffered passively as the Russo-Japanese War was waged on its territory and in its territorial waters. All of these developments helped to fatally weaken the foundations of the dynasty and, indeed, the legitimacy of the empire itself.

The fall of the Qing in 1911 led to a long period of internal instability. Local warlords contended with the Kuomintang movement under Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek), the Communists under Mao Zedong, and the Japanese army in a complex struggle for control of the territories bequeathed by imperial China. The eventual Communist victory in 1949 restored China to unity—except for Taiwan and some smaller offshore islands held by the retreating Kuomintang. This legacy of China's Civil War fundamentally changed the political and strategic geography of China and the thinking of China's Communist elites concerning national security: No longer could China all but ignore its seaward frontier. It is only recently, however, that these changes have had a transformative effect on Chinese security behavior.



***Japan Defeats the Chinese Fleet Near Phungtau* (1894), by Kobayashi Kiyochika**

The reason for the delay turns on several events that reinforced the inherent land-warfare orientation of Communist China's military elites. These events include the disintegration of the alliance between China and the Soviet Union in the 1950s, which resulted in a renewed threat to China's Inner Asian frontier. Also influential was the poor showing of the People's Liberation Army in its brief war with Vietnam in 1979, which focused the attention of the PRC leadership on modernization of the Chinese army at the expense of the navy.

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, China no longer faced an existential threat on its inner Asian frontier. Its primary security concerns were clearly shifting to the maritime domain. In the first instance, territorial disputes in offshore waters with various regional states assumed greater salience, beginning with the PRC's clash with Vietnam over the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea in 1974. Second, the evolution of Taiwan's domestic politics in a democratic direction was threatening to move the Republic of China away from its long-standing "One China" policy toward *de facto* and even *de jure* independence. At the same time, the apparent willingness of the United States to act as Taiwan's protector—despite its normalization of relations with the PRC in the 1970s and the quasi-alliance of the two countries in the 1980s—forced the Chinese to contemplate the prospect of eventually engaging the U.S. Navy in East Asian waters. Finally, the rapid growth of the Chinese economy made comprehensive modernization of China's naval forces at long last a feasible objective of Chinese Communist military policy.

The Long View

Looking at China's current maritime transformation in a longer historical perspective, though, it is possible to overstate the extent to which Chinese strategic culture over the centuries has been strictly continentalist.

Conventional historiography has exaggerated Ming neglect of the maritime domain, and ignored earlier but lesser known Chinese naval and maritime activities as well. The Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) had a seaport on the lower Yangzi River as its capital (Hangzhou), a city greatly admired by Marco Polo when he visited it. Its large shipyards supported a significant naval force. When the Mongols overthrew the Song, their Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) inherited these naval assets and accompanying nautical skills, enabling it to launch major (albeit unsuccessful) amphibious expeditions against Japan, Vietnam and Java—thought to be the largest such operations in all of the Middle Ages. In the 14th century, the Chinese made significant advances in shipbuilding technology and naval armaments, as well as in astronomy and cartography. The Chinese are, indeed, credited with having invented the magnetic compass.

Moreover, the Ming Dynasty first established itself by defeating its rivals in southern China largely through the use of naval power. The decisive battle of Lake Poyang (1363) involved hundreds of warships on both sides, larger than all but a few sea battles in earlier or for that matter later times. Riverine operations like this, too often slighted in conventional naval histories, are of central importance to the maritime history of China.

The great exception to the continentalist narrative is of course the series of voyages undertaken by the eunuch admiral Zheng He in the early 15th century (1405–33). Under the patronage of the Ming Emperor Yongle, Zheng He undertook an ambitious program of ship construction and maritime infrastructure development. Zheng commanded seven major expeditions, typically consisting of hundreds of ships and tens of thousands of men, which showed the Ming flag in the Strait of Malacca, the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and even East Africa. The fleet included warships mounting cannon as well as "treasure ships", of which the largest may have been 440 feet in length and displaced more than 20,000 tons; vessels on this scale dwarfed anything known in the West at that time. These vast and no doubt expensive enterprises do not seem to have brought commensurate benefit to the empire, however, and the impetus behind them flagged not long after Emperor Yongle's death. The mandarins of the imperial bureaucracy seem to have opposed them as risky and

wasteful; in the century following, imperial edicts discouraged long-distance maritime commerce, and Zheng He's navy fell into disrepair.

Navalism in Historical Context

The critical contemporary question is whether China's traditional continentalist strategic culture will constrain the country's development as a maritime power. In addressing this question, much may be learned from the attempted maritime transformations in the past by other states originally of a continentalist orientation. This includes what might be called the deep past, for surprising as it may seem, the only cases in the historical record of successful maritime transformations that endured are from the pre-Christian era: the Persian Empire and Rome. With these two (partial) exceptions, history has not been kind to land powers attempting maritime transformations. Even in the cases of Persia and Rome, maritime transformation was never fully realized. During the Punic Wars, for example, repeated failure to defeat the maritime Carthaginians at sea led the Romans to shift their approach in the Sicilian (and later in the African) theater to landward operations against ports. The Mithridatic War was fought the same way. The Romans were also slow to establish permanent fleets and a regime of maritime policing. One result was the persistence of a serious piracy threat in the western Mediterranean down to the 1st century BCE. Only under the empire did the Mediterranean truly become a Roman lake.

One sees the larger and more modern picture by considering together the experiences of classic continentalist powers such as the Ottoman Empire, France, Imperial Russia, Imperial Germany and Soviet Russia. National leaders in all these cases made remarkable efforts to project naval and maritime power, sometimes with real success for limited periods. Invariably, however, what was achieved never seems to have been commensurate with the effort in the longer run. In at least one case (Imperial Germany), the decision to go to sea was a strategic disaster.

France is perhaps the most puzzling case. With its ample shoreline, good harbors, large population and significant commerce from early times, it is surprising that the French did not more effectively establish themselves as a maritime people, despite having built an extensive overseas empire. Part of the explanation clearly lies with the preoccupation of French leaders with their landward borders from at least the time of Louis XIV. It may also have something to do with the centralization of the French state and the fact that Paris is not a maritime city. Moreover, for the French—with three distinct maritime frontiers in the homeland (a particular problem once Britain controlled Gibraltar), as well as distant colonial theaters that were difficult to defend in any case—the development of strategically effective naval power may well have been seen as essentially impossible.

Of all these cases, as it happens, the one most reminiscent of China is France. Common to both are not only good ports and ready access to the sea, but an inland capital and a system of inland waterways that lessened the nation's dependence on sea-going commerce. Like France, China has three relatively distinct maritime frontiers, and a history of less-than-optimal coordination between fleets stationed in each (this was a major cause of China's naval defeats by France in the South China Sea in the 1880s and by Japan in China's northern waters in 1895). Both countries have a history of fitful naval development together with skepticism or outright hostility toward naval and maritime expansion among important elements of their elites. And in both cases, the most compelling explanation for this is longstanding elite preoccupation with threats to the landward frontier, or opportunities afforded by it.

The extent to which aspiring maritime powers have failed to develop intelligible strategies for utilizing their navies is striking. When Louis XIV built the largest navy in the world at the turn of the 18th century, he did so without any clear sense of how to use it to support French expansion or commercial interests, either in Europe or in the New World. In the late 19th century, the Germans poured enormous resources into a "risk fleet" intended to challenge British naval superiority. Yet they did so without developing clear strategic objectives their navy should serve, analyzing tradeoffs between it and the land forces essential to

protecting Germany's exposed borders, or anticipating the adverse diplomatic consequences that resulted from the naval buildup—above all, the ruinous naval arms race it triggered with Britain.

Soviet Russia similarly embarked on an extremely expensive program of naval construction to counter American global naval mastery, while at the same time striving for superiority in conventional forces in Europe as well as nuclear strike capabilities. Both the German and Soviet efforts seem to have been motivated as much by vague notions of national prestige as by any strategic concept, and it seems unlikely that the Soviet Navy could have achieved much more against the United States in a hot war—nuclear weapons aside—than the German navy did against Britain during World War I.

History has not been kind to land powers attempting maritime transformations.

In any case, it would be wrong to suggest that great powers always make fine calculations concerning their strategic objectives and the best way to pursue them. In older eras, the vanity or personal obsession of a prince (Louis XIV, Peter the Great, Kaiser Wilhelm) may largely have accounted for a continental state suddenly taking to the sea. In recent times, more relevant is what may be called navalist ideology. That the teachings of Alfred Thayer Mahan concerning "the influence of sea power on history" affected the thinking of the German naval leadership—and indeed the Kaiser himself—at the turn of the 20th century is well known. Mahan also had a marked and equally unfortunate influence on Japanese naval thought. Today, the one country in the world where Mahan is still widely studied is the People's Republic of China.

If continentalist powers typically face formidable political, bureaucratic and cultural obstacles to maritime transformation, strong political leadership would seem essential to overcoming them. Again, the case of France is particularly instructive. With the partial exceptions of Richelieu and Louis XIV, the French monarchy consistently showed little appreciation or understanding of the navy or of the value of overseas empire, a phenomenon that carried over into the Napoleonic period. This being the case, the French were never able consistently to overcome the multiple obstacles to maritime transformation that characterized their politics and culture. Weakness and disorganization in the central government (even under the Sun King himself) were chronic problems; anti-commercial and anti-imperial attitudes were widespread among the elite; a weak financial system (in contrast with Britain) hobbled naval construction and supply; and relations between the navy and the army were consistently poor to non-existent.

Imperial Russia, of course, offers the unique example of Peter the Great. Peter traveled to the West to familiarize himself personally with advanced naval technologies and founded a maritime capital to foster trade and naval development, but it is fair to say that this level of navalist-oriented leadership was not matched subsequently. In the German case, the Mahan-inspired naval buildup of the late 19th century would simply not have happened without the aggressive leadership of Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz and the enthusiastic support of the Kaiser, overriding a military establishment completely dominated by the army. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this case is Tirpitz's relentless and very successful propaganda campaigns on behalf of increased naval expenditures and a navalist strategic orientation. In the Soviet case, a similar role was played by Admiral Sergei Gorshkov. As for the Soviet political leadership, Stalin became a committed supporter of a large blue-water fleet and intervened actively in the naval doctrinal debates of the 1930s. Postwar Soviet leaders, however, were much less favorable to the navy, especially after the emergence of nuclear weapons seemed to call into question the continuing utility of large surface combatants. In many respects, even in the golden age of Gorshkov in the 1970s, the Soviet navy remained the odd man out in a military establishment dominated by the ground and missile forces.

***I'm a Little Navy* poster from 1987**

China's Choices

There is no need to rehearse here the details of contemporary China's ongoing maritime transformation. The question rather is how to interpret these developments, especially since the Chinese themselves are not entirely of one mind about them. Indeed, for the first time there is a robust debate within the Chinese national security community concerning the meaning and limits of China's turn to the sea. Noted naval analyst Sr. Capt. Li Jie of the Naval Military Studies Research Institute (the Chinese Navy's strategic think tank) recently echoed many supporters of maritime transformation in stating, "History has proved that possessing maritime rights leads to prosperity, and being devoid of maritime rights leads to decline!" Still, many voices defend China's traditional continentalist orientation and express skepticism about the wisdom and affordability of acquiring a world-class navy. Debates also rage over lesser issues, such as the need for aircraft carriers as against a conventionally balanced surface fleet more generally.

One noteworthy contribution to this debate is a series produced by China Central Television entitled *The Rise of Great Powers*, which attempts to determine how nine nations (Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Japan, Russia and the United States) became great powers. It underscores the importance of internal unity; market mechanisms; related ideological, scientific and institutional innovation; and international peace. It suggests that national power stems from economic development fueled by foreign trade, which in turn can be furthered by a strong navy, but that naval development alone is unavailing. Such states as Portugal and the Soviet Union, which tried to further their national power by selectively developing the military component of maritime power, ultimately failed because of a lack of dynamic economic activity. China is clearly avoiding this strategic error; indeed, its commercial maritime development is proceeding much more rapidly and broadly than its naval development.

China's main security problem, to state it again, has always been the vulnerability of its landward borders, which resulted in China's prioritizing armies over navies in its security policy and conditioned the mentality of Chinese elites. Today, China faces no real threat in this regard. Yet tempting as it may be to assume this change in China's strategic geography is a permanent one, it would be shortsighted to do so. The interests of China and Russia today may largely coincide, but there can be no guarantee this will remain the case indefinitely; it is not difficult to imagine scenarios of potential conflict. It is also well to recall that China has fought wars with two other militarily potent neighbors within living memory (India and Vietnam).

Perhaps of greater immediate importance, however, is the internal threat to the integrity of China posed by ethnic minority groups. The recent rioting throughout Tibet, in other Chinese

provinces with significant Tibetan populations, and among the Uighurs in Xinjiang provided graphic reminders of the continuing salience of this issue. In general, while the fall of the Soviet Union may have stabilized China's northern border, it also destabilized China's western border by allowing the formation of independent, ethnically Turkic successor states in Central Asia. The level of Chinese concern over this situation should not be underestimated, even if the Chinese do not often speak of it publicly.

At the same time, there can also be little question that China's leaders are now determined to reclaim a place for China in the world as a great power. The strength of this determination, anchored as it is in a resurgent popular nationalism that has virtually replaced communism as the regime's legitimizing ideology, should also not be underestimated. Imperial China's "century of humiliation" at the hands of Western maritime powers remains the single most important historical point of reference for the Chinese leadership today. From this perspective, China's turn to the sea is taken to be mandatory, not optional (as could be argued was the case for the Ottomans, Russia and Germany, for example).

Official Chinese rhetoric makes the point. At an expanded Central Military Commission conference on December 24, 2004, Chairman Hu Jintao introduced a new policy that defined the four new missions of China's military: 1) serve as an "important source of strength" for the Communist Party to "consolidate its ruling position"; 2) "provide a solid security guarantee for sustaining the important period of strategic opportunity for national development"; 3) "provide a strong strategic support for safeguarding national interests"; and 4) "play an important role in maintaining world peace and promoting common development." The last two missions reflect new emphases for China's military, and the fourth is unprecedented. According to a subsequent article in *Liberation Army Daily*, the third includes maritime rights and interests. Specifically, Hu requires the military

> to not only pay close attention to the interests of national survival, but also national development interests; not only safeguard the security of national territory, territorial waters, and airspace, but also safeguard electromagnetic space, outer space, the ocean, and other aspects of national security.

Then, on December 27, 2006, in a speech to naval officers attending a Communist Party meeting, Hu referred to China as "a great maritime power" and declared that China's "navy force should be strengthened and modernized" in pursuit of "blue water" capabilities. China's 2008 Defense White Paper for the first time treats the ground forces as a distinct service equivalent to the Navy, Air Force and Second Artillery, suggesting that they are becoming less dominant within the military and that the PLAN (People's Liberation Army-Navy) may grow correspondingly over time in funding and mission scope.

Can China's Maritime Quest Succeed?

To what extent, then, does the ongoing buildup of Chinese naval and other modern military capabilities reflect a clear strategic vision or, as in the cases of Imperial Germany and the former Soviet Union, a dubious and economically unsustainable attempt to wield great power status? It is not yet possible to answer this question with confidence.

As mentioned earlier, Chinese navalists have become avid students of Alfred Thayer Mahan. Writing at the dawn of the modern American Navy in the late 19th century, Mahan preached the gospel of sea power as an unappreciated yet essential factor in the rise of great powers and as a vital safeguard of their overseas commercial interests. Mahan pointed to the importance of protecting sea lines of communication to markets abroad, and contended that sea-faring nations needed to establish a network of overseas bases or refueling stations to enable their navies to perform this function effectively. He argued that maritime powers must field a powerful fleet of capital ships capable of maintaining command of the sea, ultimately achieved through defeat of the adversary's navy in a climactic confrontation. While the Chinese government has not officially embraced such views, many prominent PRC military writers and academics espouse them, and they seem to exercise some influence over China's naval planning.

China's naval development has accelerated markedly since the 1995–96 Taiwan Strait Crisis, which convinced Beijing's leadership that carrier strike groups (CSGs) would be a vital platform for American power projection in any future U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan. The platforms and weapons systems that have emerged since then are asymmetric in nature and anti-access in focus; they target a full spectrum of vulnerabilities inherent in CSGs and other power-projection platforms. Navigation satellites, new-generation submarines, sea mines and cruise and ballistic missiles promise to give China an ability to defend its maritime periphery in ways that were simply impossible 15 years ago.

It is unlikely, however, that the Chinese think they can or should prepare to challenge the United States in a head-to-head clash of major surface forces in the Pacific. For the time being, they value the U.S. Seventh Fleet as a means to reassure regional stability that underwrites Chinese commerce and costs China nothing. However, they have recently shown signs of moving beyond a maritime strategy heavily reliant on submarines and land-based air and missile attack—a strategy reminiscent of the "Young School" approach popular at one time in both France and the Soviet Union—toward one that also includes major surface combatants. Most notably, after much inconclusive internal debate on this subject, the Chinese have shown new interest in developing an aircraft carrier.

The revival of interest in the exploits of the Ming admiral Zheng He also suggests that the Chinese are coming increasingly to appreciate the "soft power" dimension of navies.[1] But it is difficult for a submarine-centric navy to project soft power effectively. This limitation was conspicuous in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26, 2004, when the United States, India and Japan used ship-based aviation to aid thousands of victims, capabilities China lacked. Perhaps for this reason, China's navy has since commissioned a variety of hospital ships. Proponents of aircraft-carrier development suggest that deck aviation could serve a similar role. But the most concrete manifestation to date of China's commitment to projecting maritime soft power is its December 2008 deployment of ships to support UN-sanctioned counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.

However this may be, Mahan's ideas concerning commerce protection and the importance of sea lines of communication clearly resonate with the Chinese leadership. As China has become more dependent on seaborne oil imports from the Persian Gulf and Africa in recent years—a dependence that no amount of overland pipeline construction is likely to reduce anytime soon—it is plainly worried about a potential threat to its oil tankers in transit through the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean. In good Mahanian fashion, it appears to be in the process of helping to develop facilities and infrastructure of various kinds (most notably, the deep-water port at Gwadar in Pakistan) in friendly countries throughout this region.

Chinese intentions with regard to this so-called "string of pearls" strategy have been the subject of much speculation, but it is still unclear whether or to what extent China will shape its future naval planning around the projection of Chinese naval power toward the Middle East. The least that can be said is that evidence of permanent maritime infrastructure of this sort would be a strong sign that China's maritime transformation is here to stay.

How, then, should one assess China's contemporary turn to the sea? Despite the enduring pull of China's continentalist past, China *has* very likely embarked on a genuine maritime transformation. If that proves to be the case, it would be a remarkable if not singular event in the history of the last two millennia. As we have seen, however, even in successful cases of maritime transformation states tend to retain an imprint of their original continentalist orientation. Perhaps the most interesting issue in the contemporary Chinese case is whether it would mirror the experience of classic maritime powers such as Britain or the United States, or instead reveal, as the Chinese like to say, distinctive "Chinese characteristics." It is certain in any event that we have not yet seen the end of a process that could fundamentally transform not only China as a whole, but the shape of global politics for decades to come.

[1] See James Holmes & Toshi Yoshihara, "Soft Power Goes to Sea", *The American Interest* (March/April 2008).