

DOCTRINAL SEA CHANGE, MAKING REAL WAVES: EXAMINING THE NAVAL DIMENSION OF STRATEGY

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Powered by the world's second largest economy and defense budget, beyond its shores China has been formulating and implementing a consistent, incremental strategy of prioritizing the upholding and ultimate resolution of its outstanding territorial and maritime claims in the Near Seas (Yellow, East, and South China Seas), while more gradually developing an outer layer of less-intensive capabilities to further its interests and influence farther afield.

Although China is often frustratingly opaque to outside analysts with respect to specific military hardware capabilities, when it comes to the military "software" of strategy that informs the organization and use of its forces the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is often far more transparent, at least in its broader objectives and dimensions. Demonstrably authoritative PLA texts, such as the Academy of Military Science's (AMS) multiple versions of *Science of Military Strategy* (战略学, or SMS), are increasingly joined by official Defense White Papers (DWP) as well as a wide range of other publications and data. Considering this material together offers a fairly clear picture of where China stands militarily and its intended course for the future.

Naval and broader maritime security development, the subject of this chapter, represents the forefront of Chinese military development geographically and operationally. In this sphere, the aforementioned sources portray the PLA Navy (PLAN) as undergoing a significant strategic transformation in recent years. Likewise transforming to support comprehensive efforts at sea

are China's maritime law enforcement (MLE) forces, four of which are consolidating into a China Coast Guard (CCG), and its maritime militia. The PLAN thus retains a lead role in the Near Seas, although there the world's largest blue water coast guard and largest maritime militia share important responsibilities—typically in coordination with what will soon be the world's second largest blue water navy. Beijing is thus pursuing a clear hierarchy of priorities whose importance and realization diminishes sharply with their distance from mainland Chinese territorial and maritime claims, while engaging in a comprehensive modernization and outward geographic radiation of its forces.²

This ongoing sea change is encapsulated particularly clearly (if not always concisely or without repetition) in the 2013 and previous editions of SMS, as well as China's 2015 DWP. This first-ever defense white paper on strategy offers the latest high-level doctrinal and strategic expression of Beijing's military development efforts—and indicates more specifically how SMS (2013) is being refined, amplified, and implemented in practice. In particular, it suggests that China's leadership is embracing new realities and displaying new sophistication in prioritizing and envisioning maritime force development, integration, and utilization across a wide range of peacetime and wartime contingencies. It charges the PLA with safeguarding China's increasingly complex, far-ranging interests through an ideally seamless comprehensive approach combining peacetime presence and pressure with combat readiness. There is unprecedented emphasis on maritime interests and operations to uphold them—imposing new challenges and opportunities on China's maritime forces, with the PLAN at their core. The DWP goes so far as to state that the “traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned... great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests.”³ It underscores determination to strengthen Chinese “strategic management of the sea” and

“build a combined, multi-functional and efficient marine combat force structure.”

These official publications build logically on predecessor documents and are echoed rather consistently in other contemporary documents. They are not merely words on the page, but rather are reflective of China’s increasing naval and maritime developments at home and growing interests and activities abroad. This reality is underscored by the unprecedentedly robust maritime content in the 13th Five Year Plan (FYP) (2016–20) passed by the National People’s Congress and released on March 17, 2016. Operationalizing many of the concepts discussed in the aforementioned publications, this most authoritative and comprehensive of all national planning documents declares that China will:

1. Build itself into a “maritime power”
2. Strengthen the exploration and development of marine resources
3. Deepen historical and legal research on maritime issues
4. Create a highly effective system for protecting overseas interests and safeguard the legitimate overseas rights/interests of Chinese citizens and legal persons
5. Actively promote the construction of strategic strong points (战略支点) for the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”
6. Strengthen construction of reserve forces, especially the construction of maritime mobilization forces⁴

“By any standard,” as Ryan Martinson cogently contends, “China has already undergone a maritime transformation.”

Nevertheless, “Chinese policymakers believe that China’s transformation is far from complete. There is much more wealth to be generated, power to be accreted, interests to be protected, and prestige to be enjoyed through adroit crafting of marine policy.” China’s top development plan thereby embodies “maritime aspirations that are increasingly global in scale and scope.”⁵

Given the strong demonstrable link between China’s official writings about military and naval strategy and its ongoing implementation of much of their content in practice,⁶ it is time to examine those vital texts deeply for signs of Beijing’s past, present, and future course and speed at sea—the purpose of the remainder of this chapter.

The Underpinnings of Modern Chinese Naval Strategy: The PLA Navy in the Jiang Zemin Era

AMS published the modern era’s first update to its seminal strategic work, the *Science of Military Strategy*, in 2001. Encapsulating numerous changes to China’s approach to military modernization under Jiang Zemin in the aftermath of the U.S. defeat of Saddam Hussein’s army in the first Gulf War and the birth of the “Revolution in Military Affairs,” the 2001 Chinese-language version was used to educate senior PLA decision-makers, including those on the Central Military Commission (CMC), as well as the officers who would one day become China’s future strategic planners. Leading foreign China scholars considered it along with a variety of other texts, such as the more operationally- and tactically-focused *Science of Campaigns* (战役学), published by China’s National Defense University in 2000, to better understand actual PLA strategy and doctrine. The closest U.S. equivalent to these volumes collectively might be *Doctrine for Joint Operations* (JP 3-0).

In 2005, a version translated by a team of experts was published as China's first English-language volume on strategy, as part of an apparent effort to make PLA thinking accessible to an overseas audience. Its editors, Major Generals Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, enjoyed significant ability to shape PLA strategy as advisors to the CMC and Politburo Standing Committee. SMS 2001 is worth considering carefully, even though it has now been superseded by the 2013 edition, as it represents an authoritative basis of comparison for examining the PLA Navy's subsequent strategic evolution.

SMS 2001 documents the beginning of what is today widely recognized as a significant transformation of China from a chiefly-land power to a hybrid land-and-sea power. The authors describe the current age as an "era of sea" in which maritime states, like their predecessors, will employ Mahanian and other strategies to "actively develop comprehensive sea power" and "expand strategic depth at sea." Throughout the volume, the continuing relevance of People's War was emphasized as a foundation of Chinese military strategy, including at sea. Although at the time this fixation seemed quaint or even obsolete to many non-PLA-specialists, it is today finding significant currency in the wide-ranging development and operations of China's maritime militia.

This irregular sea force dates to the early years of the People's Republic, and finds important missions in China's continuing doctrine of "People's War at Sea," yet even today it is insufficiently recognized or understood by most foreign observers, even those charged with military operations vis-à-vis the Asia-Pacific. This enormous force, charged in part with upholding Beijing's "maritime rights and interests," is unparalleled in virtually any other country save Vietnam, which cannot compete in either scale or capabilities. It played a meaningful role in one of China's last serious military conflicts; two maritime militia trawlers played a critical role in helping

China win the 1974 Battle of the Paracels against Vietnam.⁷ Today, China's most elite maritime militia units are playing an important role in such international maritime events as the 2009 Impeccable Incident between China and the United States and the 2014 HYSY-981 Oil Rig Standoff between China and Vietnam.⁸ While copious open source information on China's maritime militia has been available in Chinese for multiple decades, SMS 2001 offered a compelling confirmation that China's 'Little Blue Men' were a significant component of Chinese naval strategy on its periphery and a force to be reckoned with.

Now, China appears poised to take the development and deployment of its maritime militia to a yet-higher level. With regard to the sixth area of emphasis noted above in China's latest FYP—"maritime mobilization forces"—a recent *PLA Daily* article made the following point concerning earlier draft text: "Although this passage in the Plan is very brief, it has delighted Hainan provincial military district political commissar Liu Xin. In the past two years he has called for "vigorously promoting maritime militia construction." Liu Xin states that the fact that the construction of maritime mobilization forces was written into the Plan 'suggests that this has become national strategy.'"⁹ As paramount leader and Commander-in-Chief Xi Jinping continues his thoroughgoing downsizing and reorganization of the PLA to make it leaner, meaner, and more capable of fighting and winning modern wars through integrated joint operations, the maritime militia may well strengthen its ranks with the addition of demobilized naval forces.¹⁰

SMS 2001's explanation of AMS's view of the evolving nature of warfare at the end of the Jiang Zemin era, and its strategic implications for Beijing, also remains highly relevant. AMS strategists argued that China, as both a land and a sea power, faces multi-faceted strategic opportunities and challenges. Despite its 18,000-kilometer coastline, China is geographically

constrained by the world's longest island chain, centering on strategically-, politically-, and economically-vital Taiwan. Taiwan is far from the only territory that mainland China claims but does not control, however: "1,000,000 square kilometers," of maritime territory, "one ninth of China's national land territory," remains under contention. The authors also identify energy supply security in particular as critical to China's national development. Their statement that the South China Sea possesses "rich oil reserves equivalent to that of [the] Middle East" conflicts with Western assessments, however, leaving the reader wondering about the true strategic underpinnings of Beijing's claims there. In keeping with China's geographically informed hierarchy of strategic priorities, strategic analysis of Taiwan in SMS 2001 appeared clearer and more consistent than that concerning the South China Sea as a whole. Today, Beijing's doctrinal publications, official statements, and efforts vis-à-vis that vast body of water reflect somewhat clearer—if still more externally-unappealing—thinking.

Chinese strategists at the time foresaw possible threats to China's "sovereignty, maritime rights, and great cause of reunification" that, should all other measures fail, may necessitate defensive (and therefore inherently just) war on China's "borderlines, seacoasts, and air spaces." The resulting "high-tech local wars" may well require the PLA to confront a technologically-superior adversary. Accordingly, the authors of SMS 2001 suggested emphasizing preemption, fielding a broad spectrum of advanced military technologies, and integrating civilian and military forces in missions (e.g., "guerilla warfare on the sea"—again, a strong suggestion of the maritime militia and its role) that incorporate political, economic, and legal warfare. Its advocacy of emphasis on emerging technologies includes asymmetric platforms it collectively termed "trump cards" (杀手锏, sometimes poorly translated into English as "assassin's mace"¹¹) that presaged China's rapid development and deployment of the world's largest force of advanced sub-

strategic ballistic and cruise missiles.¹² In the decade and a half since SMS 2001, Beijing has pursued a maritime security development strategy that is massive in scale and scope and wide-ranging in its implications, but hardly mysterious overall; this foundational work remains relevant as a clear exposition of the goals and approaches that continue to inform China's ongoing turn to the sea.

Chinese Naval Strategy at the Dawn of the Xi Jinping Era

As with so many areas of China's development in recent years, doctrinal publications and the "facts on the water" that they inform are noteworthy for both their strategic consistency and their rapidity of physical implementation (in terms of hardware and personnel development and deployment, as operational employment). Whereas SMS 2001 was a sweeping intellectual document outlining both the general rationale for things that China was starting to do and many apparently nebulous aspirations for further progress, the 2013 edition describes in more acute, compelling detail a significant step forward in maritime security development that is clearly unfolding in practice before the watchful eyes of foreign observers.

SMS 2013 argues that China must build geographically outward on its existing doctrine of "active defense" by "carrying out forward edge defense" and therefore extend the potential culminating point of any future conflict as far from the mainland as possible. In an era in which China's national interests have "surpassed the traditional territorial, territorial sea, and territorial airspace scope to continuously expand toward the periphery and the world, continuously extending toward the ocean, space, and electromagnetic space," and in which "the main war threat has switched from the traditional inland direction toward the ocean direction," the PLA "must expand its military strategic view and provide strong and powerful strategic support within a greater spatial scope to maintain

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[China's] national interests."¹³ Under these conditions, Chinese strategists fear specifically that a "strong adversary" (a euphemistic reference to the United States, perhaps in concert with one or more allies) will project "its comprehensive distant combat superiority in the oceanic direction" to threaten China's interests. Accordingly, "the difficulty of guarding the home territory from the home territory and guarding the near seas from the near seas will become greater and greater." Therefore, the PLA must "externally push the strategic forward edge from the home territory to the periphery, from land to sea, from air to space, and from tangible spaces to intangible spaces."¹⁴

The concept of "forward edge defense" articulated in SMS 2013 has clear naval-maritime implications; it feeds the general call for strategic capabilities projection radiating coast-, sea-, and ocean-ward from China's continental core, and specifically for the establishment of a Chinese "arc-shaped strategic zone that covers the Western Pacific Ocean and Northern Indian Ocean."¹⁵ Should China lose the strategic initiative, this "protruding" arc can become a "strategic outer line" whose deterrence, absorption, and control is enabled by "operations with the mainland and the coastal waters as the strategic inner line."¹⁶ This relates to a formulation appearing increasingly in this and other Chinese sources: "using the land to control the sea, and using the seas to control the oceans" (以陆制海, 以海制洋).¹⁷ In keeping with the outward expansion of Chinese defense parameters, the first half of this phrase (representing a continental approach to maritime security) has long been employed in Chinese writings, but the second half (befitting Beijing's emerging hybrid land-sea power posture) is newer in its emphasis.¹⁸

PLA strategists see the PLA Navy as now being in its third historical period, as defined by Chinese paramount leaders' progressively advanced visions for it; a period in which the previous period's strategy of "near-seas defense" has been

joined by an additional outer layer of “far-seas protection” (远海护卫).¹⁹ As the 2015 DWP elaborates, “The PLAN will continue to organize and perform regular combat readiness patrols and maintain a military presence in relevant sea areas” while also developing growing power projection capabilities as a limited blue water navy.

This is clear doctrinal enshrinement of the hierarchically prioritized, layered approach to Chinese maritime/military development and deployment that may be observed inductively from a plethora of data points and sources. It is precisely this current concept that the PLAN and its sister sea services are presently in the process of growing into and fulfilling.

Beginning in 2004 with Hu Jintao’s assigning “New Historic Missions” to the PLA and a corresponding new strategy to the PLAN, the third era in the service’s development “gradually extends the strategic front lines from the near-seas outward into the far-seas, where national survival and development interests [are also at stake].” Answering this call is requiring the PLAN to “deal with multivariate maritime threats” and “accomplish diverse maritime missions.”²⁰

As part of “preparation for military struggle” in order to safeguard China’s “expanding national interests,” the PLAN must “deal with informatized maritime local war.” The 2015 DWP further emphasizes “winning informatized local wars” (打赢信息化局部战争) as the new “basic point” of China’s latest “military strategic guideline.” In an indication of growing emphasis on furthering outstanding island and maritime claims in the Near Seas, the document stresses that “basic point for [Preparation for Military Struggle] will be placed on winning informatized local wars, highlighting maritime military struggle and maritime PMS.” Under these conditions, *Science of Military Strategy* (2013) assigns the PLAN eight “strategic missions”:

1. *Participate in large-scale operations in the main strategic axis of operations.* Front-line operational responsibilities mean that the PLAN “must prepare for military struggle involving the most difficult and complex situations.”
2. *Contain and resist sea-borne invasions.* During its Century of Humiliation, Chinese coastal areas suffered repeatedly from such incursions; today unprecedented wealth and infrastructure is concentrated there. The PLAN has a special responsibility to protect against such contingencies, particularly involving the “large-scale high-intensity medium-to-long-range strikes” thought to be key to potential opponents’ ways of war.
3. *Protect island sovereignty and maritime rights and interests.* Chinese official statements and doctrinal publications, including the 2001 SMS, have long outlined and emphasized Beijing’s claims, concerns, and goals in this regard. The 2013 SMS asserts that “Around 1.5 million square km of [China’s] jurisdictional waters are under the actual control of other nations, and over 50 islands and reefs have been occupied by other states.” China’s three major sea forces—the PLAN, CCG, and maritime militia—all have important roles to play in this regard.
4. *Protect maritime transportation security.* This speaks to an outer layer of Chinese maritime interests and effort ranging far beyond the Near Seas. Sea lanes are regarded as “the ‘lifeline’ of China’s economic and social development.” Threats from non-state actors such as pirates are already addressed effectively by the PLAN’s continuous Gulf of Aden escort task forces since December 2008, but the additional concern that “once a maritime crisis or war occurs, China’s sea transport

lanes could be cut off' is much harder to address. Accordingly, the authors predict, "the Navy's future missions in protecting sea lines of communications (SLOCs) and ensuring the safety of maritime transportation will be very arduous."

5. *Engage in protecting overseas interests and the rights/interests of Chinese nationals.* The massive "going out" abroad of PRC passport holders in recent years to pursue resources and wealth on land and sea creates new interests and vulnerabilities, particularly in the form of growing risks to their life and property. Overseas PLAN rescue missions assumed "a new precedent" with the service's limited role in the 2010 Libya evacuation, and SMS 2013 holds that "protecting national overseas interests and the rights of citizens and expatriates will become a regular strategic mission of the Navy." The 2015 DWP places unprecedented emphasis on having the PLA "safeguard the security of China's overseas interests."

6. *Engage in carrying out nuclear deterrence and counterattack.* China is in the process of taking its nuclear deterrent to sea. The PLAN must thereby "leverage the advantages of concealment, strike capability and the operational range of sea-based nuclear forces, and collaborate with other strategic nuclear forces to actively carry out nuclear deterrence and nuclear counterattack missions."

7. *Coordinate with the military struggle on land.* Unlike in the Cold War, when Maoist thinking and dire technological limitations relegated the PLAN to at best a tripwire subordinate to the ground-force-centric focus on luring the enemy into a ruinous war of attrition deep in the mainland, the service is now capable and

empowered in its own right as a front line force to ideally help prevent conflict from ever approaching China's shores. On this basis, the PLAN "should play a strategic flank and containment role on the naval battlefield, as well as strongly coordinate with and support onshore operations."

8. *Protecting the security of international sea space.* In fulfilling the goal promulgated in a report from the 18th CPC National Congress to "build China into a maritime power," the PLAN is also charged with safeguarding "international sea security" in increasingly numerous and diverse ways under the rubric of "harmonious oceans." This will not only help China ensure its own specific security interests, but also further assert itself more generally as "a major power with global influence" that is credited with "fulfilling its international responsibilities."²¹ On a related note, the PLAN is charged with multifarious military operations other than war (MOOTW),²² whose missions must reflect the diversity of the threats they are designed to address.²³ "In particular," the authors close their navy-specific section by stressing, "China should fully use the international platform provided by the multinational far seas escort and joint rescue missions to continuously expand and deepen maritime security cooperation." Doing so "will gradually improve China's voice and influence in international maritime security affairs."²⁴

This relates to a larger emphasis in the 2015 DWP, in wording echoing repeated statements by Xi: "the national security issues facing China encompass far more subjects, extend over a greater range, and cover a longer time span than at any time in the country's history." Accordingly, the PLA must embrace a "holistic view of national security" encompassing both traditional and nontraditional security, and to be prepared for full-

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...spectrum operations including peacetime probing and pressure, as well as “comprehensively manag[ing] crises” in addition to fledged combat readiness.

In order to fulfill its eight “strategic missions,” the PLAN must make the following specific efforts:

1. *Comprehensively strengthen the construction of maritime information systems.* The further strengthening and integration of such C4ISR capabilities is central to improving the PLA Navy’s ability to fight and win modern wars, a key emphasis under Xi. “In comparison with developed countries’ navies, there is still a large gap in the level of China’s information systems, with some important areas in which the Navy is completely lacking.” The PLAN must therefore transform “its model of generating combat power and build an informatized navy” by extending “key nodes” outward, improving and better networking information systems, and improving data fusion. American observers might term this a quest to prepare for “network-centric warfare with Chinese characteristics.” Other PLA sources encapsulate the idea, using the tumid phrasing typical of PLA writing, as integrated “information systems-based system of systems operations” (ISSSO), a concept first endorsed by Hu in 2005, but “not fully articulated and operationalized by PLA strategists until after early-2010.”²⁵

2. *Accelerate the navy’s development of next-generation main battle armaments.* Herein lies a statement that reflects much discussion in leading PLA circles, but almost certainly remains debated in its specific prioritization and advisability by some Chinese strategists. In addition to ongoing emphasis on submarines, aircraft, and missiles, SMS 2013 states, “the

Navy's developmental focus will be placed on large and medium surface combatants with aircraft carriers as the core." This reflects both an ambitious effort to pursue a U.S.-style gold standard, and a perhaps more measured and nuanced commitment to forming a "carrier development and usage model with Chinese characteristics" (有中国特色的航母发展和运用模式).²⁶ In any case, this deck aviation centrality is part of an effort, informed by "developmental trends of the world's great power navies," to "possess a three-dimensional strike capability that combines undersea, surface, and aerospace, and long, intermediate, and close ranges." While clearly inspired in part by efforts to promote China's "international standing" as a great power, this big bet on the biggest possible ships in an era of growing long-range anti-carrier weapons recognized explicitly in the 2015 DWP as entailing accelerated worldwide use of "long-range, precise, smart, stealthy and unmanned weapons" (an asymmetric physics-based capabilities competition on which China itself is working hard to capitalize) hinges on an assumption that is debated intensely even in hidebound U.S. Navy circles: "In the foreseeable future, aircraft carriers will remain as the main platform for comprehensively projecting maritime firepower, troops, and information power."

2. *Strive to develop sea-based strategic nuclear forces.* Despite Chinese progress in this area, AMS strategists perceive "a large gap in comparison with developed countries," voicing particular concern regarding foreign ballistic missile defense systems. They therefore recommend applying a recently-established PLA Rocket Force approach to "developing and equipping of new types of strategic nuclear submarines" which will be "nuclear and conventionally capable, and able to conduct both types of operations." Such a course of

action would raise potential foreign concerns regarding miscalculation, to put it mildly.

3. *Adjust maritime force deployment and battlefield layout.*

At the heart of this mandate is “organically linking the three strategic areas of coastal mainland, near-seas and far-seas.” This progressive radiating of capabilities outward, and particularly southward, from mainland China, together with their consolidation and integration, will be underpinned in at least two major ways. First, China will “gradually build a large area maritime defense system stretching forward [from] the mainland and relying on islands and reefs,” an effort now clearly visible in industrial-scale feature construction, augmentation, and fortification in the Spratlys and Paracels. Second, China will “strengthen construction of large and medium sized ports and core airports focusing on strategic home ports to fulfill the stationing, mooring, and supply needs of carriers, strategic nuclear submarines, and heavy destroyer-escort formations.” These efforts are clearly underway in the form of Chinese port development in the greater Indian Ocean region, particularly with China’s establishment of its first overseas naval supply facility in Djibouti.

4. *Concentrate on the features of future naval war to optimize force structure.*

The PLAN is charged with improving the structure and efficiency of its commands and forces alike. Organization must shift from service-based to mission-based, with new combat and support forces developed and special operations and amphibious forces expanded. ‘Carrier battle groups’ are envisioned to be at the core of the PLAN’s future force structure, as “a strategic ‘fist’ for mobile operations at sea.”²⁷

Finally, with respect to preparing for its potential strategic use in war in accordance with China's overall maritime combat capabilities under informatized conditions, AMS strategists argue that the PLAN should "highlight" the following four aspects in its preparations for future naval operations:

1. *Give prominence to operational depth.* In keeping with the aforementioned imperative to coordinate fluidly among geographically-defined operational areas radiating out from China's mainland, "China must plan overall for the two battlefields of the near seas and far seas" in a unified, mutually-reinforcing fashion. Enemy efforts cannot be allowed to render PLAN operations "confined to or bottled up within the near seas"; rather, China's navy must be capable of "fighting out" to meet the enemy at a culminating point as far from China's homeland as possible and turning the tables by engaging in integrated multi-domain operations that "combine strikes against the enemy's front lines and rear areas." This is part of a larger pattern articulated in the 2015 DWP in which the PLA as a whole and the Navy in particular are charged by the Party with safeguarding increasingly complex, far-ranging interests in "critical domains" involving "seas and oceans, outer space, cyberspace, and nuclear forces."
2. *Give prominence to offensive operations.* This is viewed as essential for "winning the initiative and striving for victory" in "future maritime local wars," in which PLA strategists believe the party being first to act will be at a distinct advantage. Relevant missions include "maritime joint sea and air strike mobile formations, blockades by submarine forces, air assault and air strikes, and special forces infiltration and sabotage." This appears to be precisely what the 2015 DWP is referencing in its

injunction to “enrich the strategic concept of active defense.”

3. *Give prominence to Integrated Joint Operations.*

“Integrated Joint Operations” (一体化联合作战) is a PLA term of art referring to “truly joint” operations in the sense that jointness has long been conceived by Western militaries, in contrast with earlier PLA efforts at joint operations that more resemble what the West knows as “combined arms”. This is part of a larger effort articulated in the 2015 DWP to “establish an integrated joint operational system in which all elements are seamlessly linked and various operational platforms perform independently and in coordination.” IJO is “the primary form of the Navy’s operations in the near-seas” because it represents the “foundation for forming systemic advantages in maritime local wars.” While the PLAN is unambiguously “the main combat force at sea,” and the lead force by default in any joint maritime security activity and the coordination thereof, it is nevertheless part of still-coalescing “maritime combat system” that “integrates the three services as well as both civilian and military [elements] to serve the needs of the overall situation.” In other words, China’s MLE, particularly the four being consolidated into a unified CCG²⁸ as well as the maritime militia units, are an important part of this equation. These civil maritime and irregular forces may pursue peacetime and other discrete missions under their own purview, but in recent years their involvement in the most significant international maritime confrontations (such as the aforementioned Impeccable and HYSY-981 oil rig incidents) has occurred in close coordination with PLAN forces that appear to monitor them carefully, and perhaps even direct them, in a capacity that U.S. government terms “overwatch.”²⁹