Sometime between 2015 and 2020, China’s Navy crossed a critical threshold: it fielded more battle force ships than the U.S. Navy, making it the world’s largest navy numerically. Today, at around 360 hulls, it exceeds its American rival by more than sixty warships.
The gap continues to grow rapidly. And China has two other fleets subordinated to its armed forces: the Coast Guard and Maritime Militia. In total: three sea forces, each the world’s largest numerically, that total over 700 ships even by conservative accounting.

**China’s Three Armed Forces & Their Fleets**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People’s Liberation Army</th>
<th>People’s Armed Police</th>
<th>People’s Armed Forces Militia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Powering all China’s seapower buildup, unprecedented in recent history, is the world’s largest shipbuilding industry (https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/chinese-naval-shipbuilding-full-steam-ahead). By funding facilities and training, employing, and rotating workers, Chinese commercial shipbuilding subsidizes and supports military shipbuilding efforts.

This is the culmination of a decades-long effort to pursue disciplined, evolving maritime strategy according to a strict hierarchy of priorities. In doing so, Beijing has gone from playing a bad hand relatively well to a good hand extremely well.

**Growth of China’s Maritime Forces Since 2000 (ONI)**
This tsunami of Chinese shipbuilding has tremendous potential implications for the PRC’s effort to coercively envelop Taiwan, resolve other sovereignty disputes in its favor, carve out the region as zone of exceptionalism to international rules and norms, and project Beijing’s power and influence around the world. More broadly still, it offers modern history’s sole example of a “land” power successfully becoming a “sea” power and sustaining that status over time.

The last six centuries have seen law- and commerce-promoting sea powers develop an open global maritime order. Continental authoritarian empires, most recently the Soviet Union, periodically went to sea to challenge this process but ultimately could not afford to sustain the effort. Now China is combining authoritarianism and economic dynamism in a new way. Much is at stake, including some of the most fundamental issues that people have come to take for granted.

### ONI: China Already Has More Battle Force Ships than U.S. Navy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ballistic missile submarines</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear-powered attack submarines</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diesel attack submarines</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frigates, corvettes</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total China navy battle force ships, including types not shown above</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total U.S. Navy battle force ships</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>297</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** Table prepared by CRS. Source for China’s navy: Unclassified ONI information paper prepared for Senate Armed Services Committee, subject “UPDATED China: Naval Construction Trends vis-à-vis U.S. Navy Shipbuilding Plans, 2020-2030,” February 2020, 4 pp. Provided by Senate Armed Services Committee to CRS and CBO on March 4, 2020, and used in this CRS report with the committee’s permission. Figures are for end of calendar year. Source for figures for U.S. Navy: U.S. Navy data; figures are for end of fiscal year.

**Note:** n/a means not available.

The sources excerpted and linked below offer insights into the PRC military shipbuilding powering this sea change. Among them, the most comprehensive work published to date is the Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI)-Naval Institute Press (NIP) volume [Chinese Naval Shipbuilding](https://www.amazon.com/Chinese-Naval-Shipbuilding-Ambitious-Development/dp/1682470814/).

To further chart a course of understanding, the following sources offer specific information on the fleets that Beijing is fielding:

- [Advantage at Sea](https://www.19fortyfive.com/2020/12/advantage-at-sea-u-s-maritime-strategy-focuses-on-china/), the new U.S. Maritime Strategy, offers unprecedented insights on China’s sea forces, the challenge they pose, and the need for American countermeasures.


Dr. Andrew S. Erickson is a professor of strategy in the U.S. Naval War College (NWC)'s China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI). Erickson is currently a Visiting Scholar in full-time residence at Harvard University’s John King Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, where he has been an Associate in Research since 2008. He is also an Executive Committee member of Israel’s Haifa Maritime Center and a life member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

The opinions expressed herein are the author's and not necessarily those of The Maritime Executive.

MORE TOP STORIES


EDITORIALS TOP STORIES


The Fish We Eat are Eating Plastic (https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/the-fish-we-eat-are-eating-plastic)
