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China Maritime Report #54: Chairman Xi's Navy

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Main Findings

- Xi Jinping has played a critical role in the Chinese Navy's rapid transformation into a large, technologically advanced sea service capable of conducting an expanding catalog of maritime operations, from the littorals of the People's Republic of China (PRC) to the Atlantic Ocean.
- Since assuming power in November 2012, Xi Jinping has participated in at least 15 engagements with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). He has inspected multiple PLAN units, including the Navy's two nuclear submarine units; attended the commissioning of new naval vessels; visited the PLAN headquarters; and presided over two major fleet reviews.
- In 2014, Xi oversaw the update to the PRC's military strategy, which placed unprecedented emphasis on maritime operations in defense of Beijing's territorial claims (especially Taiwan) and protection of China's growing overseas interests. This paved the way for enormous investments in new naval platforms and increased the PRC's naval presence around the world.
- From 2015 to 2017, Xi led a sweeping military reform and reorganization campaign. The first phase, which sought to optimize the PLA's command structure, raised the status of the PLAN and allowed naval officers to hold key positions in the PLA's three coastal Theater Commands. The second phase strived to streamline the structure of the PLA's operational forces, and it resulted in the large-scale transfer of personnel from the PLA Army to the PLAN.
- Xi has played a direct role in the formulation of PRC naval strategy and policy. He personally decided to prioritize the construction of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, to build a carrier-centric navy, to establish China's first overseas military base, and to expand the size of the PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC).
- Xi's efforts to build a powerful navy are predicated on a strong, personal belief in the vital importance of maritime power for China's national "rejuvenation." In his words, "Strong countries are strong at sea, while weak countries are weak at sea." Xi's interest in maritime affairs predates his rise to leadership over the Party, state, and military.
- Early in his tenure as paramount leader, Xi Jinping signaled his intention to reorient the PLA for maritime operations, declaring, "Threats to national security are mainly *at sea*, the focus of military struggle is mostly *at sea*, and the center of gravity of the nation's expanding national interests is *at sea*." PLAN leaders commonly refer to this judgement as Xi Jinping's "three at-seas" (三个在海上).
- While continuing to frame China's maritime dispute strategy as a balancing act between assertiveness (维权) and stability (维稳), Xi seems to believe that China was too conciliatory towards other claimants during the tenure of his predecessor, Hu Jintao. In a July 2013 speech, he called for China to shift the balance in favor of greater assertiveness. PLAN sources show that Xi played an active role in China's construction of massive military bases on disputed features in the South China Sea.

Introduction

On morning of December 8, 2012, just a few weeks after assuming leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Central Military Commission (CMC), Xi Jinping arrived at the port of Shekou, in southern China's Shenzhen city, where he boarded the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) destroyer *Haikou* for a four-hour voyage into the South China Sea.

At the time, the *Haikou* was no ordinary warship. A Type 052C (Luyang II) destroyer, she “represented the Chinese navy's highest level of surface combatant.” The *Haikou* was known as “China's Aegis” (中华神盾), in reference to the U.S. Navy combat system that Chinese engineers had copied and installed on the ship. Aside from her advanced technologies, the *Haikou* was celebrated for having already completed two counter-piracy escort missions to the Gulf of Aden, including the PLAN's inaugural mission (December 2008-April 2009).¹

After receiving a briefing on the state of the PLAN, Xi toured the combat information center, scanned the horizon from the bridge, and signed his name in the ship's logbook. He prioritized interactions with ordinary sailors, asking them their names, where they were from, what they did, how many years they had been in the navy, and how military service had impacted their lives. He dined with them in the enlisted mess and joked with them about seasickness.²

Although Xi's time aboard the *Haikou* was short and unremarkable, it was freighted with symbolism. This was his first “inspection” (视察) of a PLA unit outside of Beijing since assuming leadership, and he chose to visit a naval combatant.³ In doing so, he clearly demonstrated his personal commitment to naval power. Thirteen years later, this commitment has translated into an unprecedented expansion in the capabilities of the Chinese navy. Today, the *Haikou*, once the finest ship in the PLAN, is now just one unit of a stunted class of destroyers that has been superseded by two newer designs, one of which—the Type 055 (Renhai) cruiser—may be the most advanced surface combatant in the world.⁴

¹ 刘声东 [Liu Shengdong] and 严德勇 [Yan Deyong] 习主席与士兵在一起 [“Chairman Xi is with the Sailors”] 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 14 December 2012, p. 1. The *Haikou* participated in the 1st and 10th Gulf of Aden escort task force missions. For a record of the two escort missions, see 苏银成 [Su Yincheng], 海口舰官兵讲述护航故事: “中华神盾”扬威亚丁湾 [“Officers and Enlisted of the Haikou Tell Stories of the Escort Mission: ‘China's Aegis’ Wins Glory in the Gulf of Aden”], 人民日报 [People's Daily], 31 December 2014, http://www.81.cn/2018shlj/2014-12/31/content_8100065.htm.

² Liu, “Chairman Xi is with the Sailors,” p. 1.

³ 韩杰 [Han Jie], 周舟 [Zhou Zhou], and 宋逸 [Song Yi], 习主席对人民海军的期许重托 [“Chairman Xi's Expectations and Commitments for the People's Navy”], 学习军团 [Learning Corps], 22 April 2024, www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/qwfb/16302721.html. Note that the “Learning Corps” is the Wechat account of the PLA News and Communications Center. See http://www.81.cn/2022zt/2023-01/29/content_10214947.htm. See also 李学勇 [Li Xueyong], 李宣良 [Li Xuanliang], 梅常伟 [Mei Changwei], and 陈国全 [Chen Guoquan], 向海图强春潮涌——党中央、中央军委和习主席关心人民海军建设发展纪实 [“A Spring Tide for Becoming Strong from the Sea—A Record of the CCP Central Committee, CMC, and Chairman Xi Interest in the Construction and Development of the People's Navy”], 新华网 [Xinhua], 22 April 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2019-04/22/c_1124400733.htm; 刘建伟 [Liu Jianwei] and 雷彬 [Leibin], “中华神盾”逐梦崭新航程——海军海口舰认真学习宣传贯彻党的二十大精神纪事 [“‘China's Aegis’ Embarks on a New Journey of Dreams—The Navy's Haikou Earnestly Studies and Promotes Implementation of the Spirit of the 20th Party Congress”], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 21 November 2022, <http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/wzll/hj/4926597.html>; and 习近平领航人民海军逐梦深蓝 [“Xi Jinping Leads the People's Navy on its Path to the Deep Blue”], 央视新闻 [CCTV News], 21 April 2019, <https://news.cctv.com/2019/04/21/ARTIqK96Yb6v7F35IorMJhrE190421.shtml>.

⁴ The *Haikou* was commissioned in December 2005. She was the second of the Type 052C class, which ceased production at six hulls. 纪梦楠 [Ji Mengnan], 海口舰舰长樊继功: 机会总是留给有准备的人 [“The Captain of the *Haikou*, Fan

And the PLAN's "far-seas" operations have expanded from the Gulf of Aden to new corners of the world, including the South Atlantic and the Bering Sea.



Figure 1: Xi Jinping Aboard the Destroyer *Haikou* (8 December 2012).⁵

While the PLAN itself deserves the greatest credit for the progress achieved since 2012, it could not have made such remarkable strides without the strong support of CMC Chairman Xi Jinping. The available record shows that Xi has played an active role in the PLAN's transformation. Since embarking on the *Haikou*, Xi has visited multiple PLAN units and organizations to provide his personal guidance and ensure that the service is meeting his expectations.⁶ He has updated the PLA's military strategy to emphasize maritime operations, thereby paving the way for heavy investments in naval power and requiring the service to expand its areas of operation. He has weighed in on PLAN force structure plans, including the decisions to build a carrier-centric navy, prioritize development of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), and construct China's first overseas naval base. He has pushed for extremely difficult organizational reforms, which have put the PLAN on a more equal footing with the PLA Army (PLAA) and increased its size. Lastly, he has successfully advocated for more assertive policies in disputed areas along China's maritime periphery, including a massive expansion of PLAN facilities in the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

Xi Jinping's active involvement in naval affairs is founded on a sophisticated understanding of the importance of maritime power for the fate of the PRC. Because of his strong-held beliefs and the policies they have spawned, at the very least he must be regarded as the PRC's first "navalist" leader, and he may rank among the world's greatest navalist statesmen in modern history.⁷

Jigong: Opportunities Come to Those Who are Prepared", 国防时空 [*Defense Times*], 8 April 2019, http://www.mod.gov.cn/gfbw/gfjy_index/xjdx/4839014.html.

⁵ 十八大以来习近平总书记的基层足迹 ["General Secretary Xi Jinping's Footprints in the Grassroots Since the 18th National Congress"], 人民网 [*People Online*], 5 February 2013, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/0205/c1024-20440229-7.html>.

⁶ 本报评论员 [Anonymous PLA Daily Commentator], 向海图强，建设一支强大的人民海军 ["Look to the Sea to Get Strong, Build a Powerful People's Navy"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 13 April 2018, p. 2, <https://dlib.eastview.com/browse/doc/50838268>.

⁷ A "navalist" is a person who believes in the importance of naval power and advocates for a powerful navy.

This report comprises two main parts. Part one chronicles the PRC’s key policy actions since Xi’s ascension to power in 2012 that have undergirded the PLAN’s emergence as a major maritime force in East Asia and beyond, attributing them, where possible, to his direct involvement. Part two connects the policy record with Xi’s expressed beliefs about maritime and naval power, thereby making the case that Xi is the chief architect behind the PRC’s rise as a naval and maritime power. The report concludes with a summary of key findings.

Xi Jinping’s Known Engagements with the PLAN⁸

#	Date	Event
1	8 December 2012	Embarked on the PLAN destroyer <i>Haikou</i> for a four-hour voyage into the South China Sea. ⁹
2	9 April 2013	Visited PLAN forces in Sanya, Hainan. Boarded the Type 071 LPD <i>Jinggangshan</i> and an SSBN, ate a meal with sailors at a PLAN nuclear submarine base, and inspected a destroyer flotilla that included the <i>Haikou</i> . ¹⁰
3	28 August 2013	Visited a Comprehensive Test and Training Base for shipborne aircraft and boarded the <i>Liaoning</i> (CV-16) carrier. ¹¹
4	6 February 2014	Held a video teleconference with the captains of PLAN ships that were escorting Syrian chemical weapons shipments. This occurred while he was in Russia. ¹²
5	20 May 2014	Declared the opening of the Joint Sea-2014 (海上联合—2014) China-Russia naval exercise together with Vladimir Putin. ¹³
6	24 May 2017	Visited the PLAN Headquarters, where he called on the service to “set its sights on world-class” (瞄准世界一流). While there, he had a video teleconference with crew of the frigate <i>Yantai</i> , which was then conducting a combat readiness patrol. ¹⁴

⁸ This list is incomplete. Not every engagement makes the news. According to one authoritative article, as of April 2016, Xi Jinping had inspected PLAN units on six separate occasions after becoming CMC Chairman. The table only shows three instances, four if the 28 August 2013 engagement is counted twice. See 邓冉子 [Deng Ranzhi], 衔枚疾走，向胜战的远方 [“Marching Forward Towards Victory”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 19 April 2016, p. 4.

⁹ Liu, “Chairman Xi is with the Sailors,” p. 1.

¹⁰ 习近平回信勉励海军潜艇部队某艇员队 [“Xi Jinping Sends a Letter to Encourage the Boat Crew of a Navy Submarine”], 新华社 [Xinhua], 11 May 2023, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202305/content_6856430.htm; 陈国全 [Chen Guoquan], 肖永 [Xiao Yong], and 侯融 [Hou Rong], 从南湖红船到走向深蓝的钢铁巨舰，总有一种血脉在传承——能打胜仗，“中华神盾”铸剑海疆 [“From the Red Boats on Nan Lake to the Giant Steel Ships Steaming Towards the Deep Blue, There is a Common Bloodline—Their Ability to Win Battles, ‘China’s Aegis’ Forges its Sword on the Maritime Frontier”], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 10 June 2016, p. 7; 习近平视察海军驻三亚部队 登井冈山舰和新型潜艇 [“Xi Jinping Inspects Naval Forces at Sanya, Boards the *Jinggangshan* and a New-Type Submarine”], 中国新闻网 [China News Online], 11 April 2013, <https://www.chinanews.com/gn/2013/04-11/4723279.shtml>.

¹¹ Li, Li, Mei, and Chen, “A Spring Tide for Becoming Strong from the Sea.”

¹² 孟娜 [Meng Na] and 徐剑梅 [Xu Limei], 习近平和普京与参加叙化武护航的中俄军舰舰长通话 [“Xi Jinping and Putin Speak with the Captains of Chinese and Russian Ships Escorting Syrian Chemical Weapons”], 新华社 [Xinhua], 7 February 2014, https://www.gov.cn/dhhd/2014-02/07/content_2580812.htm.

¹³ 习近平和普京共同出席中俄海上联合军事演习开始仪式 [“Xi Jinping and Putin Attend the Opening Ceremony for China-Russia Bilateral Naval Exercise”], 新华社 [Xinhua], 21 May 2014, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-05/21/content_2683339.htm.

¹⁴ 沈金龙 [Shen Jinlong] and 秦生祥 [Qin Shengxiang], 人民海军：扬帆奋进 70 年 [“The People’s Navy: Advancing Forward on the Sea for 70 Years”], 求是 [Qiushi], 16 April 2019, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2019-04/16/c_1124364140.htm.

7	3 November 2017	Visited the CMC joint command center (军委联指中心). While there, he held a video teleconference with PLAN officers and enlisted based on PRC-occupied Spratly features and PLAN personnel stationed in Djibouti. ¹⁵
8	12 April 2018	From aboard the destroyer <i>Changsha</i> , participated in the South China Sea Fleet Review involving 48 vessels, 76 aircraft, and 10,000+ officers and enlisted. ¹⁶
9	11 June 2018	Visited a Northern Theater Command Navy submarine base. While there, he boarded a nuclear submarine and interacted with an enlisted sonarman. ¹⁷
10	23 April 2019	Attended the fleet review in Qingdao to commemorate the 70 th anniversary of the founding of the PLAN. ¹⁸
11	17 December 2019	Visited Sanya for the commissioning of the <i>Shandong</i> (CV-17) carrier. ¹⁹
12	13 October 2020	Visited the PLAN Marine Corps Headquarters in Guangdong. ²⁰
13	23 April 2021	Visited the Sanya naval base to be present at the commissioning of three PLAN platforms: <i>Changzheng</i> 18 (SSBN), <i>Dalian</i> (Type 055 cruiser), and <i>Hainan</i> (Type 075 landing helicopter dock). ²¹
14	11 April 2023	Visited the Southern Theater Command Navy. ²²
15	5 November 2025	Attended the commissioning of the <i>Fujian</i> (CV-18) carrier. ²³

¹⁵ Li, Li, Mei, and Chen, “A Spring Tide for Becoming Strong from the Sea”; 习近平：强化备战打仗的鲜明导向 全面提高新时代打赢能力 [“Xi Jinping: Strengthen the Focus on Preparing for War and Comprehensively Improve the Ability to Win in the New Era”], 新华社 [Xinhua], 3 November 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2017-11/03/c_1121903813.htm.

¹⁶ 习近平出席南海海域海上阅兵 [“Xi Jinping Attends a Fleet Review in the South China Sea”], 新华社 [Xinhua], 12 April 2018, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-04/12/content_5282030.htm.

¹⁷ 锻造共和国“水下盾牌”——北部战区海军某潜艇部队备战打仗记事 [“Forging an ‘Underwater Shield’ of the Republic”—A Submarine Unit of the Northern Theater Navy Prepares for War”], 新华社 [Xinhua], 20 August 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-08/20/c_1126390544.htm.

¹⁸ 习近平出席庆祝人民海军成立 70 周年海上阅兵活动 [“Xi Jinping Attends a Fleet Review to Celebrate the 70th Anniversary of the Founding of the People’s Navy”], 新华社 [Xinhua], 23 April 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2019-04/23/c_1124406339.htm.

¹⁹ 我国第一艘国产航空母舰交付海军 习近平出席交接入列仪式 [“China’s First Domestically Built Aircraft Carrier Delivered to the Navy, Xi Jinping Attends Commissioning Ceremony”], 新华社 [Xinhua], 17 December 2019, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2019-12/17/c_1125357773.htm.

²⁰ 李宣良 [Li Xuanliang] and 黎云 [Li Yun], 习近平在视察海军陆战队时强调 加快推进转型建设 加快提升作战能力 努力锻造一支合成多能快速反应全域运用的精兵劲旅 [“During His Inspection of the PLAN Marine Corps, Xi Jinping Emphasized Accelerating the Transformation and Construction of the Marine Corps and Accelerating the Upgrading of Combat Capabilities, In an Effort to Forge an Elite Force that is Composite, Multi-Functional, Rapid Response, and All-Domain”], 新华社 [Xinhua], 13 October 2020, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2020-10/13/c_1126601561.htm.

²¹ 向海图强 习近平引领人民海军建设驶向新航程 [“Looks to the Sea to Get Strong, Xi Jinping Leads the People’s Navy’s Construction to a New Course”], 人民网 [People Online], 23 April 2022, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0423/c164113-32406594.html>.

²² 习近平在视察南部战区海军时强调 深化练兵备战 加快转型建设 全面提高部队现代化水平 [“While Inspecting the Southern Theater Navy, Xi Jinping Stresses Deepening Military Training and Preparation for War, Accelerating Transformation and Construction, and Comprehensively Improving the Force’s Modernization Level”], 新华网 [Xinhua], 12 April 2023, http://www.news.cn/politics/2023-04/12/c_1129516582.htm.

²³ 梅常伟 [Mei Changwei], 我国第一艘电磁弹射型航空母舰入列 习近平出席入列授旗仪式并登舰视察 [“China’s First Electromagnetic Aircraft Carrier is Commissioned, Xi Jinping Attends the Ceremony and Inspects the Ship”], 新华网

Chairman Xi's Actions

This section examines the key policies that have led to the expansion in Chinese naval power and operations since 2012, and where possible, Xi's personal role in key decisions. It highlights three decisions in particular: 1) to update China's military strategy with a focus on maritime operations, both near and abroad; 2) to launch a massive reorganization of the PLA, resulting in an increase in the size and status of the PLAN; and 3) to more aggressively pursue China's maritime claims in the East China Sea and South China Sea.

Updating the Military Strategic Guidelines.

Within the first two years of Xi Jinping's tenure as Chairman of the CMC, the PLA updated its "Military Strategic Guidelines" (军事战略方针), which lay out key principles and assumptions undergirding China's military strategy.²⁴ As Xi Jinping himself described them, they provide "the general outline governing the construction and use of military forces." All military activities must "carry out and reflect [their] requirements."²⁵

While the Guidelines are not publicly available, their core themes are reflected in other authoritative documents, above all China's 2015 national defense white paper, "China's Military Strategy." Among other changes, the 2014 update explicitly prioritized military operations over water, which the 2015 white paper called "maritime military struggle and preparation for maritime military struggle" (海上军事斗争和军事斗争准备). As Taylor Fravel writes, this was the first time that the maritime domain—indeed, any domain—had ever been singled out for emphasis in the Guidelines.²⁶ The 2015 white paper described the philosophical underpinning of this change, declaring that "the ocean involves the country's long-term stability and sustainable development," and stating that China "must break through the traditional thinking of focusing on the land and neglecting the sea and attach great emphasis to strategic management of the sea and safeguarding maritime rights."²⁷

"Maritime military struggle" clearly refers to conflicts over Taiwan or a disputed island in the East China Sea or South China Sea.²⁸ However, the 2015 white paper also includes significant content on protecting China's overseas interests, suggesting that this mission was included in the updated Military Strategic Guidelines. It states that "[with the] continuous expansion of China's national

[Xinhua], 7 November 2025, <https://www.news.cn/politics/leaders/20251107/0d634fd7fa4a4537be2844261e93abc5/c.html>.

²⁴ "M. Taylor Fravel, "China's New Military Strategy: 'Winning Informatized Local Wars,'" *China Brief*, vol. 15, no. 13 (2 July 2015), <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-new-military-strategy-winning-informationized-local-wars/>.

²⁵ 坚持以新形势下军事战略方针为统揽 ["Persist with the Military Strategic Guidelines for the New Situation as the Overarching Principle"], 人民日报 [*People's Daily*], 1 November 2017, http://www.81.cn/jwzl/2017-11/01/content_7808498.htm.

²⁶ Fravel, "China's New Military Strategy."

²⁷ 中国的军事战略 ["China's Military Strategy"], *PRC State Council*, May 2015, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2015-05/26/content_2868988.htm. For a useful discussion about the maritime (and other) elements of the updated Guidelines, see Joel Wuthnow and M. Taylor Fravel, "China's Military Strategy for a 'New Era': Some Change, More Continuity, and Tantalizing Hints," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol. 46, nos. 6-7 (2023), pp. 1156-8.

²⁸ The 2019 national defense white paper, entitled "China's National Defense in the New Era," contains a paragraph on "safeguarding national unity" (i.e., the Taiwan mission), in which it calls for "strengthening preparation for military struggle with a focus on the maritime direction" (加强以海上方向为重点的军事斗争准备). 新时代的中国国防 ["China's National Defense in the New Era"], *PRC State Council*, July 2019, https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2019-07/24/content_5414325.htm.

interests, international and regional turmoil, terrorism, piracy, natural disasters, and pandemics may constitute threats to Chinese national security.” As a result, “the security of overseas energy/resources and strategic passages, as well as the security of overseas interests such as overseas organizations, personnel, and property is a pronounced issue.” The white paper lists “safeguarding overseas interests” as one of the PLAs “strategic tasks” (战略任务). In the section describing the Military Strategic Guidelines, the document calls for the PLA to “strengthen international security cooperation in areas of crucial importance to China’s overseas interests and safeguard the security of overseas interests.”²⁹

As the Chairman of the CMC, Xi Jinping would naturally be involved in any effort to update the Guidelines. However, PLA sources explain that he “personally led the formulation of the military strategic guidelines.”³⁰ The specific decision to reorient the military for maritime operations was purportedly his doing. One article published under the byline of the Chinese Academy of Military Science Mao Zedong Military Thought Research Institute examined Xi Jinping’s personal influence on the Military Strategic Guidelines, citing his many contributions to the drafting process. According to the authors, he “clarified the requirements for preparation for military struggle.” In their words, “based on evolution in the form of war and the national security situation, Chairman Xi placed the basis for preparation for military struggle on winning informatized wars, *prioritizing maritime military struggle and preparation for maritime military struggle* [emphasis added].”³¹

Investing in New Naval Platforms and Support Infrastructure

The 2014 update to the Military Strategic Guidelines paved the way for enormous investments in naval platforms. These have yielded new classes of surface combatants, including the Type 052D (Luyang III) and the Type 055 (Renhai) cruiser; the PLAN’s first big-deck amphibious assault ship, the Type 075 (Yushen); resumed production of the Type 071 (Yuzhao) landing platform dock (LPD), with five new units joining the fleet; the construction of two new aircraft carriers, the *Shandong* (commissioned in December 2019) and the *Fujian* (commissioned in November 2025); and significant improvements to the PLAN’s nuclear powered submarine fleet.³² Moreover, PLAN forces have moved into China’s first overseas naval support base, in Djibouti.

While Xi probably left it to the PLAN to choose what to build to meet the needs of the strategy, he apparently was directly involved in at least three key decisions. According to one authoritative article, “Chairman Xi Jinping personally promoted *sea-based nuclear force construction* and

²⁹ “China’s Military Strategy.”

³⁰ 聚焦打赢砺雄师 [“Focus on Winning the Battle and Honing the Troops”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 25 September 2017, p. 1.

³¹ 军事科学院毛泽东军事思想研究所 [Academy of Military Sciences Institute of Mao Zedong Military Thought], 强国强军 战略先行——深入学习贯彻习主席新形势下军事战略方针重要论述 [“To Strengthen the Country and the Party, Strategy Comes First—In-Depth Study and Implementation of Chairman Xi’s Important Discourse on the Military Strategic Guidelines Under the New Situation”], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 2 September 2016, p. 6. The update to the Military Strategic Guidelines would have informed the PLAN’s revised service strategy, first revealed in 2018, which placed a greater emphasis on global maritime operations. See Ryan D. Martinson, “China’s Oceanic Aspirations: New Insights from the Experts,” *Orbis* (February 2022), p. 269.

³² Christopher P. Carlson and Howard Wang, “A Brief Technical History of PLAN Nuclear Submarines,” China Maritime Report, No. 30, *China Maritime Studies Institute*, August 2023, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1029&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>.

personally made explicit the need to develop *aircraft carriers* [emphasis added].³³ The first part of this claim was later confirmed by a 2019 article written by then-PLAN commander Shen Jinlong and then-Political Commissar Qin Shengxiang, in which they explained, “nuclear forces are the strategic cornerstone for safeguarding national sovereignty and security, and sea-based nuclear forces are important components of the nuclear force system....Chairman Xi is extremely interested in (非常关心) the construction of the nuclear submarine force.”³⁴ Moreover, PLA accounts indicate that he was personally involved in the decision to build a base in Djibouti. In the words of admirals Shen and Qin, “Chairman Xi was extremely focused on construction of our first overseas support base, and [he] personally decided to establish the support base in Djibouti.”³⁵



Figure 2: The Commissioning of the Aircraft Carrier *Shandong* (17 December 2019).³⁶

To be sure, in recent years the PLAN has been stripped of some key elements of its force structure. For instance, in 2022, the Navy delivered nearly two dozen Type 056 corvettes to the China Coast Guard (CCG).³⁷ A year later, the service transferred fighter, bomber, air defense and other units to the PLA Air Force.³⁸ While these moves represented a significant loss of combat power, they make sense

³³ 冯丹宇 [Feng Danyu], 不负重托 勇往直前 [“Live Up to Our Responsibilities and Bravely More Forward”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 21 October 2017, p. 1.

³⁴ Shen and Qin, “The People’s Navy: Advancing Forward on the Sea for 70 Years.”

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “China’s First Domestically Built Aircraft Carrier Delivered to the Navy, Xi Jinping Attends Commissioning Ceremony.”

³⁷ “China Coast Guard and Government Maritime Forces: 2024 Recognition and Identification Guide,” *Office of Naval Intelligence*, April 2024, https://www.oni.navy.mil/Portals/12/Intel%20agencies/China_Media/2024_Recce_Poster_Coast_Guard_Govt_U_new.jpg?ver=K7SsX6_f50ohUsN4qZuQqg%3d%3d.

³⁸ “PLA Naval Aviation Reorganization 2023,” *China Aerospace Studies Institute*, 31 July 2023, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/3475163/pla-naval-aviation-reorganization-2023/>.

when seen in the context of PLAN's strategic transformation into a blue-water navy. Displacing roughly 1,500 tons, the Type 056 is ill-equipped for operations beyond the First Island Chain, and the ships transferred to the CCG suffered from inferior anti-submarine warfare capabilities, giving them only marginal utility in high-end maritime conflict scenarios. By giving up its shore-based fighters and bombers, the PLAN could focus its energies and resources on transforming itself into a carrier-centric navy, just as the U.S. Navy had done decades before.

Expanding the PLAN's Areas of Operations

When Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, he inherited a navy that was already conducting significant operations outside maritime East Asia. PLAN counter-piracy escort task forces had been continuously operating off the Horn of Africa since early 2009, and PLAN surface combatants had been regularly transiting the First Island Chain to train and operate in the Philippine Sea since 2007. The PLAN's strategic concept of "Near Seas Defense, Far Seas Protection" was already codified.³⁹

However, it is clear that major *evolutionary* changes to PLAN deployment patterns have occurred in the Xi era. In 2014, the service began deploying submarines to the Indian Ocean.⁴⁰ In 2015, a PLAN surface task force operated in the Bering Sea for the first time, and others have returned several times.⁴¹ Since 2017, PLAN counter-piracy escort task forces have often returned home via the South Atlantic, visiting ports on the west coast of Africa and gaining familiarity with these new operating areas.⁴² By 2018, PLAN surface combatants had begun routinely operating in the Sea of Japan.⁴³

While it is hard to track Xi Jinping's personal impact on these operational changes, they are a natural result of other initiatives in which he was clearly involved. With defense of overseas interests being included in the 2014 update to the Military Strategic Guidelines, it makes sense that the PLAN would develop the ability to operate in new parts of the world. Moreover, the rapid construction of new, large-displacement surface combatants on Xi Jinping's watch has provided the PLAN with the capabilities needed to carry out these deployments.

Making Organizational Reforms that Favor Maritime Warfare

Aside from updating PLA military strategy, Xi also launched major reforms to the structure, organization, and composition of the PLA.⁴⁴ These reforms occurred in two main phases from 2015 to 2017. The first phase led to the revamping of the CMC, elimination of the PLA's four "general departments," and replacement of the nine military regions with five theater commands. The focus of these reforms was to improve the PLA's command structures, and the PLAA was stripped of its

³⁹ Martinson, "China's Oceanic Aspirations: New Insights from the Experts," p. 254.

⁴⁰ Sam Lagrone, "Chinese Submarine Headed to Gulf of Aden for Counter Piracy Operations," *USNI News*, 30 September 2014, <https://news.usni.org/2014/09/30/chinese-submarine-headed-gulf-aden-counter-piracy-operations>.

⁴¹ Sam Lagrone, "Chinese Warships Made 'Innocent Passage' Through U.S. Territorial Waters off Alaska," *USNI News*, 3 September 2015, <https://news.usni.org/2015/09/03/chinese-warships-made-innocent-passage-through-u-s-territorial-waters-off-alaska>.

⁴² Ryan D. Martinson, "China as an Atlantic Naval Power," *RUSI Journal*, vol. 164, no. 7 (18 December 2019), <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-journal/china-atlantic-naval-power>.

⁴³ See, for instance, "Joint Staff Press Release," *Japan Ministry of Defense*, 30 August 2018, https://www.mod.go.jp/js/pdf/2018/p20180830_02.pdf.

⁴⁴ Xi was also instrumental in the decision to consolidate the bulk of China's maritime law enforcement forces into the China Coast Guard. Chinese leaders had recognized the need to do this for years and even made a failed attempt at doing so. This was a reform that Xi pushed within half a year of assuming leadership.

dominant position and made coequal with the other services, including the PLAN.⁴⁵ As a result, PLAN officers became eligible to hold key leadership positions in the three coastal theater commands (north, east, and south).⁴⁶

The second phase, initiated in late 2016, involved the reform of lower-level PLA units to make them leaner, more agile, and better organized to fight the type of conflict predicted by the Military Strategic Guidelines. The PLA updated its force structure, which was optimized for land warfare (陆战型的力量结构) and “territorial defense” (国土防御型的兵力布势), in favor of “new-type operational forces” (新型作战力量), including those specializing in “far seas protection” (远海防卫) operations.⁴⁷ This resulted in significant reorganization and downsizing in many parts of the PLA, especially the PLAA.⁴⁸ However, one force in particular grew significantly during this phase: the PLAN Marine Corps (PLANMC). The PLANMC went from just two brigades, both assigned to the Southern Theater Navy, to eight total brigades distributed across the three coastal theater commands. Several of the new brigades largely consisted of PLAA personnel transferred to the PLAN.⁴⁹

The available record shows that Xi Jinping was directly involved in both phases of the reforms. He served as the head of the CMC Leading Small Group for Deepening National Defense and Military Reform (中央军委深化国防和军队改革领导小组), created in March 2014.⁵⁰ At the time, this was seen as a demonstration of Xi’s “great determination” to reform the PLA.⁵¹ Subsequent commentary pointed out that this was the first time in PRC history that the Party Secretary had assumed such an active role in military reform.⁵²

With Xi’s direct involvement, the Leading Small Group made rapid progress. Xi led the Group’s first (15 March 2014), second (27 January 2015), and third plenary sessions (14 July 2015), the last of

⁴⁵ Phillip C. Saunders and Joel Wuthnow, “China’s Goldwater-Nichols: Assessing PLA Organizational Reforms,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 3 (2016), P. 73; Dennis J. Blasko, “The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms: the PLA Army,” in Phillip C. Saunders, Arthur S. Ding, Andrew Scobell, Andrew N.D. Yang, and Joel Wuthnow, eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms* (Washington, D.C., National Defense University Press, 2019), p. 350.

⁴⁶ Nan Li, “The Southern Theater Command and China’s Maritime Strategy,” *China Brief*, vol. 17, no. 8 (9 June 2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/southern-theater-command-chinas-maritime-strategy/>.

⁴⁷ 开创改革强军新局面——党的十八大以来国防和军队改革成就综述 [“Create a New Situation of Reforming and Strengthening the Military—An Overview of the Achievements of National Defense and Army Reform Since the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CCP Central Committee”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 3 July 2024, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Dennis J. Blasko, “The PLA Army After ‘Below the Neck’ Reforms: Contributing to China’s Joint Warfighting, Deterrence and MOOTW Posture,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, vol 44, no. 2 (2021), pp. 149-183.

⁴⁹ Conor Kennedy, “The New Chinese Marine Corps: A ‘Strategic Dagger’ in a Cross-Strait Invasion,” China Maritime Report No. 15, *China Maritime Studies Institute*, October 2021, pp. 3-4, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1014&context=cmsi-maritime-reports>.

⁵⁰ 坚持以强军目标引领改革围绕强军目标推进改革 为建设巩固国防和强大军队提供有力制度支撑 [Persist with the Goal of Goal of Strengthening the Military to Lead the Reform and Advancing the Reform Around the Goal of Strengthening the Military to Provide Strong Institutional Support for Building a Consolidated National Defense and a Strong military], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 16 March 2014, p. 1.

⁵¹ 许三飞 [Xu Sanfei], 抓住时机加快改革步伐关系军队发展和未来 [“Seizing the Opportunity to Accelerate the Pace of Reform is Related to the Development and Future of the Army”], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], 28 March 2014, p. 7.

⁵² David M. Finkelstein, “Breaking the Paradigm: Drivers Behind the PLA’s Current Period of Reform,” in Saunders, Ding, Scobell, Yang, and Wuthnow, eds., *Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA*, p. 53; 向海图强 习近平的“海军强军梦” [“Become Strong From the Sea: Xi Jinping’s Dream of a Powerful Navy”], 央视网 [*CCTV Online*], 23 April 2018, <https://m.news.cctv.com/2018/04/23/ARTIkfWWIKvq0lrH2W19Wvuc180423.shtml>.

which reviewed and “passed in principle” (审议并原则通过) the “Suggestions on the Overall Plan for Deepening National Defense and Military Reform” (深化国防和军队改革总体方案建议). On 16 October 2015, Xi chaired the CMC Executive Meeting (中央军委常务会议) that passed the “Implementation Plan for Leadership Command System Reform” (领导指挥体制改革实施方案). Xi attended the 24-26 November 2015 CMC Reform Work Conference (中央军委改革工作会议), delivering a major speech that launched the first phase of the military reform (标志着新一轮国防和军队改革进入实施阶段).⁵³

Xi also played an active role in the second phase of the PLA reforms that began after the 2-3 December 2016 “CMC Army Scale and Structure and Force Organization Reform Work Meeting” (中央军委军队规模结构和力量编成改革工作会议). He attended the meeting and delivered another major speech.⁵⁴ In particular, Xi appears to have played a critical role in the decision to expand the size of the PLANMC, which occurred in this second phase. In December 2020, the PLAN Party Committee issued a policy document that stated that “Chairman Xi has attached great importance to naval construction...[and] has been particularly interested in the construction of the PLANMC, personally deciding to expand the PLANMC into a corps leader grade [organization].”⁵⁵ Numerous other sources have claimed that Xi “personally decided the structure and buildup of” (亲自决策组建) the PLANMC.⁵⁶

Increasing China’s Maritime Assertiveness

Since 2012, China has taken vigorous steps to assert its claims to disputed islands and other maritime space. Of note, Xi exerted major influence on Beijing’s maritime dispute policy even before he

⁵³ 习近平在中央军委改革工作会议上强调 全面实施改革强军战略 坚定不移走中国特色强军之路 [“At the CMC Reform Work Meeting Xi Jinping Emphasized the Comprehensive Implementation of the Strategy of Reforming and Strengthening the Military and Unswervingly Taking the Road of Strengthening the Military with Chinese Characteristics”], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 27 November 2015, p. 1; 军队领导和指挥体制改革时间轴 [“Timeline of the Reform of the Military Leadership and Command System”], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 18 December 2018, p. 14.

⁵⁴ 钱晓虎 [Qian Xiaohu] and 韩成 [Han Cheng], 书写改革强军的时代答卷——新时代国防和军队建设成就综述之二 [“Writing the Answer Sheet of the Era of Reform and Strengthening the Military—Overview of the Achievements of National Defense and Military Construction in the New Era”], 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 26 July 2022, p. 1. Xi said that the reform would implement the military strategic guidelines for the new situation. The Xinhua article summarizing his remarks can be found here: 习近平在中央军委军队规模结构和力量编成改革工作会议上强调抓住机遇 一鼓作气 乘势而上 扎实推进军队规模结构和力量编成改革 [“At the CMC’s Work Conference on Reforming the Size and Structure of the Military and the Force Composition Xi Jinping Emphasized that He Would Seize the Opportunity to Push Forward the Reform of the Size and Structure of the Army and the Formation of Forces in a Solid manner”, 解放军报 [PLA Daily], 4 December 2016, p. 1.

⁵⁵ 杨涛 [Yang Tao], 海军党委引发《关于深入贯彻落实习主席重要讲话精神加强对海军陆战队指导帮带的决定》 [“Navy Party Committee Issues ‘Decision on Deepening Implementation of Chairman Xi’s Important Speech to Strengthen Guidance and Support for the PLANMC”, 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 8 December 2020, p. 1.

⁵⁶ 袁华智 [Yuan Huazhi], 高举思想旗帜 建设“拳头部队” [“Raise High the Flag of Thought, Build a ‘Fist’ Force”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 23 October 2017, p. 2; 张方威 [Zhang Fangwei], 倾情感悟信仰的味道 [“Getting a Taste of Faith”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 12 July 2021, p. 3; 谷文武 [Gu Wenwu] and 王智涛 [Wang Zhitao], 深悟辉煌成就 坚定看齐追随 [“Deeply Understand the Brilliant Achievement, Steadfastly Watch and Follow”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 10 August 2022, p. 2; 贺跃华 [He Yuehua], 锻造打胜仗的“尖刀” [“Forge a ‘Sharp Blade’ That Can Win Victory”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], May 2018, p. 1; and 唐博特 [Tang Bote] and 牛涛 [Niu Tao], 探索基层建设规律 集智攻关现实难题 [“Explore the Pattern of Grassroots Construction and Collect the Wisdom to Solve Real Problems”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 28 September 2020, p. 1.

assumed leadership of the CCP and CMC. Sometime in the second half of 2012, when Hu Jintao was still in power, Xi took charge of the newly-created “Office of the Leading Small Group for Maritime Rights and Interests Work” (中央海洋权益工作领导小组办公室),” which was responsible for formulating and coordinating policy for handling China’s maritime disputes.⁵⁷ This would have made him a key, if not *the* key, voice in China’s consolidation of control over Scarborough Shoal following the standoff with the Philippines in April and May 2012 and the decision to greatly expand patrols to the disputed Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea that began in September 2012.

Since then, the PRC has taken other assertive steps in the waters of maritime East Asia. In late 2013, for instance, China instituted an air-defense identification zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea. In the same year, it began maintaining a permanent patrol presence at the Luconia Shoals in Malaysia’s exclusive economic zone. In 2014, the PRC started disrupting supply missions to the Philippines outpost at Second Thomas Shoal, and it placed a drilling rig in disputed waters south of the Paracels, provoking a dramatic clash with the other claimant—Vietnam. China has deployed large numbers of well-equipped maritime militia forces to maintain presence in disputed waters of the South China Sea and support coast guard and naval operations to control them. While the main protagonists in these actions have been paramilitary forces (coast guard and militia), they often operate under the explicit or implicit protection of PLAN ships, submarines, and aircraft.⁵⁸

Some analysts have correctly pointed out that Xi Jinping’s China has not radically altered its approach to pursuing its maritime claims, which favors incremental and opportunistic advances, non-lethal methods, and use of paramilitary instead of conventional military forces.⁵⁹ Indeed, many of the actions observed since 2012 have deep roots in the Hu Jintao era, perhaps earlier, and the “Scarborough Shoal Model” (黄岩模式) of seizing disputed territory without using armed force has not been widely applied, as some expected.⁶⁰ Moreover, recent tensions with the Philippines are probably not due to changes in PRC policy, but are an outcome of Manila’s renewed commitment to upholding its (far more legitimate) maritime claims following the departure of the pro-Beijing Duterte administration.

One action that is undeniably new and expansionary is the PRC’s dramatic augmentation of its military outposts in the Paracel and Spratly islands in the South China Sea. To be sure, other claimants have expanded their own holdings through the years, but nothing close to the speed and scale of PRC actions beginning in 2013.⁶¹ The infrastructure and facilities installed on the reclaimed features gave China a huge advantage in the struggle for control and influence in the South China

⁵⁷ 彭美 [Peng Mei], 师小涵 [Shi Xiaohan], and 邢丹 [Xing Dan], 中国海警局亮剑--中国海警局诞生终结“五龙治海” [“The China Coast Guard Flashes Its Sword—the Creation of the China Coast Guard Ends the Era of ‘Five Dragons Managing the Sea’”], 人民文摘 [People’s Weekly], no. 9 (2013) http://paper.people.com.cn/rmwz/html/2013-09/01/content_1307445.htm.

⁵⁸ These events are covered in Ryan D. Martinson, *Echelon Defense: The Role of Sea Power in Chinese Maritime Dispute Strategy* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2018), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-red-books/15/>.

⁵⁹ Rush Doshi, “Hu’s to Blame for China’s Foreign Assertiveness?” *Brookings*, 22 January 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/hu-to-blame-for-chinas-foreign-assertiveness/>; and Andrew Chubb, “Xi Jinping and China’s Maritime Policy,” *Brookings*, 22 January 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/xi-jinping-and-chinas-maritime-policy/>.

⁶⁰ 张洁 [Zhang Jie], 黄岩岛模式与中国海洋维权政策的转向 [“Huangyan Model and the Shift of China’s Maritime Rights-Protection Strategy”], 东南亚研究 [Southeast Asian Studies], no. 4 (2013), pp. 25-31.

⁶¹ “China Island Tracker,” *CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, accessed on 25 April 2025, <https://amti.csis.org/island-tracker/china/>.

Sea. PLAN leaders described it as “a historic breakthrough” (历史性突破).⁶² Three of the bases have runways and hangar facilities that can accommodate PLAN aircraft. All can provide logistics support for PLAN and other maritime forces operating in these waters. Moreover, they allow the PLAN to employ smaller surface combatants that would not otherwise have the endurance to be there, such as Type 022 fast-attack craft.⁶³

The decision to expand the Spratly and Paracel bases was so provocative and costly that Xi Jinping would have been involved in the deliberations. Indeed, authoritative PRC sources make clear that he was the decisive voice in this policy action. In a May 2016 speech, for example, then PLAN Deputy Political Commissar Ding Haichun (丁海春) declared, “construction in the Paracel and Spratly islands was a major political, strategic, and national/ethnic project personally decided and promoted by Chairman Xi.”⁶⁴ Admirals Shen Jinlong and Qin Shengxiang later confirmed this point, stating that “Chairman Xi pushed forward the construction of islands and reefs in the South China Sea with a firm will, changed the strategic posture of the military struggle in the maritime direction, and demonstrated the firm determination to fight for every inch of land and sea.”⁶⁵ Guo Rui (国瑞), Director of a “special navy project” (海军某专项工程办公室主任), was almost certainly describing South China Sea island building when he wrote the following: “Chairman Xi personally decided and advanced a certain major strategic project, leading and guiding it throughout the whole process. Every time the project’s construction entered a key phase or moment, Chairman Xi would provide important instructions, with the CMC and Navy Commander issuing requirements for implementing them.”⁶⁶

Chairman Xi’s Ideas

In the years since Xi Jinping came to power, the PLAN has dramatically improved its material capabilities, expanded its operating areas, benefited from major organizational changes across the PLA, and supported greater PRC assertiveness in the East and South China Seas. Many of these changes are directly attributed to Xi Jinping himself, and all can be indirectly attributed to him, given his position as CCP Party Secretary and Chairman of the CMC. His commitment to building and employing naval power stems from a firmly held set of personal beliefs about the nature of maritime and naval power and its importance to China’s future. These beliefs are reflected in his speeches, comments, and remarks.

Maritime Power as the Foundation of National Strength

At the heart of Xi Jinping’s navalist thinking is a belief that the fate of any nation is profoundly influenced by its willingness to embrace the oceans. To become—and remain—wealthy, strong, and secure, a nation must engage in maritime trade, exploit marine resources, and protect its maritime

⁶² 海军党委 [Navy Party Committee], 努力把人民海军全面建成世界一流海军 [“Strive to Build the People’s Navy into a World Class Navy”], 求是 [Qiushi], no. 11 (2018), http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2018-05/31/c_1122897922.htm.

⁶³ Jairo Bolledo, “Filipino TV Crew Chased by Chinese Ships Armed with Missiles,” *Rappler*, 8 April 2021, <https://www.rappler.com/philippines/filipino-tv-crew-chased-by-chinese-ships-armed-missiles-west-philippine-sea/>.

⁶⁴ 于贤顺 [Yu Xianshun], and 李高建 [Li Gaojian], 海军组织赴西南沙慰问演出活动 [“The Navy Organizes a Live Performance in the Paracels and Spratlys”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 4 May 2016, p. 1.

⁶⁵ Shen and Qin, “The People’s Navy: Advancing Forward on the Sea for 70 Years.”

⁶⁶ 国瑞 [Guo Rui], 明确党员标准扛起党建责任 [“Clarify the Standards of Party Members to Carry the Responsibility of Party Building”], 人民海军 [People’s Navy], 3 May 2016, p. 3.

rights and interests. He expressed these views very early in his tenure, in remarks delivered at a Politburo meeting held on 30 July 2013.

In that speech, Xi declared, “Throughout history, the development of great powers has always been closely related to the ocean.” To prove his point, he cited the example of Western overseas expansion. The Western powers adopted “advanced navigational technologies” (先进航海技术), which allowed them to “open up new sea routes, expand overseas colonies, control world trade, and plunder the world’s resources, thereby creating the conditions for becoming world powers.”⁶⁷

China, too, had once embraced the ocean, indeed was “among the earliest nations to exploit the ocean” (是最早利用海洋的民族之一), and this had led to great prosperity. However, according to Xi’s account, mid-way through the Ming dynasty (1358-1644), just when the West was getting ready to “establish maritime hegemony” (建立海上霸权), China shut down maritime trade. Its economic and technological development slowed, and its national power began to decline. After the first Opium War, China was invaded multiple times, mostly from the sea, and it was reduced to a “half colonial, half feudal” (半殖民地半封建国家) country.⁶⁸

Xi concluded, “History tells us that facing the ocean leads to prosperity, while rejecting the ocean leads to decline. Strong countries are strong at sea, while weak countries are weak at sea” (历史经验告诉我们，面向海洋则兴、放弃海洋则衰，国强则海权强、国弱则海权弱).⁶⁹

This great law of geopolitics naturally applies to contemporary China. Due to its long coastline, thousands of offshore islands, and three million square kilometers of claimed maritime space, the PRC has “broad maritime strategic interests.” Thus, in Xi’s words, “how China develops in the maritime realm and how well it resolves its maritime problems have a bearing on the survival and development of the Chinese nation and have a bearing on the country’s future prosperity and peace.”⁷⁰

These reflections on the connection between maritime power and the rise and fall of nations are not the work of a clever speech writer, but Xi’s own longstanding beliefs, with roots traceable to when he served in government and party posts in Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai in the 1990s and early 2000s. In a November 2004 interview with *Zhejiang Daily* newspaper, for instance, Xi declared:

Throughout the history of world economic development, one obvious trajectory is that going from the land to the sea and going from the sea to the world leads to power and prosperity. In today’s world, most developed countries and regions have relied on the ocean for their path to

⁶⁷ 习近平同志在中共中央政治局第八次集体学习时的讲话 [“Xi Jinping’s Speech at the Eighth Collective Study Session of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee”] July 30, 2013, Accessed from the website of the Xiamen University Party School (厦门大学党委党校) on 4 May 2025, <https://dwdx.xmu.edu.cn/04/b9/c127a1209/page.htm>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Less than a month after his speech, Xi visited Liaoning province’s Dalian city, to inspect 大连船舶重工集团海洋工程有限公司, which was then in the midst of building an oil/gas drilling rig (自升式石油钻井平台). After listening to a company brief, Xi purportedly declared, “maritime endeavors are related to national and ethnic survival and development. They are related to the rise or fall, and security or peril, of the nation” (海洋事业关系民族生存发展状态, 关系国家兴衰安危). See 习近平: 向海洋进军, 加快建设海洋强国 [“Xi Jinping: Advance to the Sea, Accelerate Construction into a Maritime Power”], 人民网 [People Online], 8 June 2022, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0608/c1001-32441597.html>.

development. The ocean, especially ports, made tremendous contributions to their successful development and prosperity.

The 21st century is the ocean century. In order to seize new advantages in the oceanic era, the world's maritime states are adjusting their marine policies, making developing the marine economy a major strategy for their development. In order to accelerate its modernization and raise its comprehensive national power and international competitiveness, China has proposed the strategy of building itself into a maritime power.⁷¹

As the previous quote suggests, at the heart of Xi's "maritime power" vision is a belief that for the PRC to realize its full potential it must develop its marine economy and achieve advances in marine science and technology. As he expressed in his July 2013 Politburo speech, "an advanced marine economy is an important support for constructing [China] into a maritime power." Thus, China must "bolster its marine development capabilities and expand fields for marine development, letting the marine economy become a new driver of growth." In particular, he highlighted several specific industries: marine biologic resources, seawater utilization, shipbuilding, offshore oil and gas, marine mineral resource exploration and development, maritime transportation, and ocean tourism.⁷²

To build itself into a maritime power, the PRC must "greatly develop marine high-tech and new technologies." In his 2013 speech, Xi called for "breakthroughs" in specific fields, namely, technologies related to deep sea, green tech, and security-related technologies. He highlighted the need to "engage in oceanic and polar scientific research, engage in deep and distant-ocean surveys and research, and expand international cooperation in marine science and technology, thereby making preliminary preparations for exploiting oceanic and polar resources."⁷³

True Maritime Powers are Capable of Protecting Their Maritime Rights and Interests

Given the logic outlined above, maritime powers must be able to effectively guarantee their rights to leverage the wealth-producing attributes of the ocean and protect the interests that these rights engender, according to Xi. Thus, safeguarding China's "maritime rights and interests" is a core pillar of China's maritime power strategy.

Xi was not the first person to highlight this point. He was not even the first PRC leader to do so. It was, after all, Hu Jintao, in his 18th Party Work Report (November 2012), who declared that China must "resolutely safeguard national maritime rights and interests and build [itself] into a maritime power."⁷⁴ Moreover, state documents from earlier in the Hu Jintao period highlighted the connection between maritime power and "rights protection." Take, for instance, the "Outline Plan for National Maritime Undertaking" (国家海洋事业发展规划纲要), issued by the State Council in 2008. It cited the "goal of transforming China into a maritime power" (以建设海洋强国为目标), and one of its four principles was to "prioritize rights and interests" (坚持权益优先原则). This meant

⁷¹ 发挥海洋资源优势建设海洋经济强省 ["Leverage Marine Resource Advantages, Build a Powerful Marine Economy Province"], 浙江在线新闻网站 [Zhejiang Online News Site], 25 November 2004, <https://zjnews.zjol.com.cn/05zjnews/system/2004/11/25/003942707.shtml>.

⁷² "Xi Jinping's Speech at the Eighth Collective Study Session of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee."

⁷³ Ibid. Since his Politburo speech, Xi has on multiple occasions emphasized the connection between maritime power and the marine economy/sci-tech. See "Xi Jinping: Advance to the Sea, Accelerate Construction into a Maritime Power."

⁷⁴ 胡锦涛在中国共产党第十八次全国代表大会上的报告 ["Hu Jintao's Report at the 18th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party"], 新华社 [Xinhua], 17 November 2012, www.gov.cn/lidhd/2012-11/17/content_2268826.htm.

“safeguarding the sovereignty of China’s territorial seas and China’s maritime rights and interests, strengthening monitoring/management of China’s jurisdictional waters, and guaranteeing the security of sea lanes and marine transport.”⁷⁵

Xi’s contribution was to clearly define the problem and offer an explicit solution. In his 2013 Politburo speech, he pointed out that over one half of the three million square kilometers of PRC-claimed maritime space overlapped with the claims of China’s neighbors. Thus, the PRC faced an “extremely complex and severe situation” when it came to safeguarding its maritime rights and interests. To prevail, China had to bolster its capabilities. Specifically, it needed to “strengthen its construction of maritime rights protection law enforcement forces and *accelerate the pace of naval modernization and construction* [emphasis added].”⁷⁶

Over time, Xi has continued to hold the view that a strong PLAN is vital to achieving the goal of transforming the PRC into a maritime power. In remarks delivered to the PLAN Headquarters on 24 May 2017, for instance, he declared that “a strong and modern navy...is a strategic support for building China into a maritime power” (是建设海洋强国的战略支撑).⁷⁷

China Has Been Too Conciliatory In Its Maritime Disputes

While the question of whether China’s maritime operations have become significantly more assertive in the Xi Jinping era may be debatable, Xi’s belief that greater assertiveness is warranted is not. This is the only plausible conclusion from his July 2013 Politburo speech. His remarks are framed as “four shifts” (四个转变), or fundamental changes, that the PRC must make to achieve its goal of becoming a maritime power. The first “shift” was to transform the Chinese marine economy into one that was based on “quality and efficiency” (向质量效益型转变). The second shift involved the marine ecological environment, calling for “a more sustainable approach to marine development” (向循环利用型转变). The third shift advocated for “a greater focus on innovation” (向创新引领型转变) in the fields of marine science and technology. For his fourth shift Xi declared: “China must safeguard national maritime rights and interests, striving to promote a shift in maritime rights protection towards a coordinated and balanced approach” (维护国家海洋权益，着力推动海洋维权向统筹兼顾型转变).⁷⁸

Some foreign observers misinterpreted the meaning of Xi’s fourth “shift,” believing that he was signaling a desire to pursue a less assertive policy.⁷⁹ In fact, the opposite was true. The elements that needed to be “balanced” were actions to protect China’s maritime rights and interests (*weiquan*, 维权) and actions to maintain stability with its neighbors (*weiwen*, 维稳). Since at least the Hu Jintao period, PRC policymakers had believed that the best approach to handling China’s maritime disputes was to balance these two contradictory actions. If the proper balance were found, China could

⁷⁵ 国家海洋事业发展规划纲要 (2006-2010 年) [“Outline Plan for National Maritime Development (2006–2010)”], *State Oceanic Administration*, 17 September 2009, https://web.archive.org/web/20140822132605/www.soa.gov.cn/zwgk/fwjgwywj/gwyfgwj/201211/t20121105_5264.html.

⁷⁶ “Xi Jinping’s Speech at the Eighth Collective Study Session of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee.”

⁷⁷ 习近平：努力建设一支强大的现代化海军 [“Xi Jinping: Strive to Build a Powerful and Modern Navy”], 人民网 [People Online], 25 May 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0525/c64094-29298073.html>.

⁷⁸ “Xi Jinping’s Speech at the Eighth Collective Study Session of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee.”

⁷⁹ M. Taylor Fravel, Xi Jinping’s Overlooked Revelation on China’s Maritime Disputes,” *The Diplomat*, 15 August 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/08/xi-jinpings-overlooked-revelation-on-chinas-maritime-disputes/1/>.

advance its interests without destabilizing its relations with other claimants. In his speech, Xi suggested that in the past the balance had been wrong, that China had been too conciliatory to its neighbors, to its own detriment.⁸⁰ In his words, “we love peace and resolutely take the path of peaceful development, but we absolutely cannot give up our legitimate rights and interests much less sacrifice the country’s core interests.”⁸¹

Xi’s policy does not radically differ from the past. Like his predecessor, he believes that both “rights protection” and “stability maintenance” are important. A balance between the two is essential. China can advance its interests, but not at the cost of stability. In his words, it must “achieve the goal of advancing while keeping things stable” (实现稳中求进).⁸² Rather, he believes that China must shift that balance in favor of more “rights protection” (and less “stability maintenance”), a view that is congruent with the uptick in PRC assertiveness since 2012.

Well over a decade later, Xi continues to see China’s maritime disputes through the rights protection/stability maintenance dialectic. Both elements remain important to him. When he visited the PLAN Southern Command Navy in Zhanjiang in April 2023, for instance, he called for the force to “resolutely defend China’s territorial sovereignty and maritime rights/interests and strive to safeguard the overall stability of the periphery.”⁸³

The Ocean is the Main Military Arena Today and in the Foreseeable Future.

While the ocean presents opportunities, it is also a source of great danger. As Xi highlighted in his 2013 Politburo speech, the Qing dynasty was invaded multiple times from the sea. While China is more secure today than it was then, foreign forces operating from the sea still pose grave threats to the security and prosperity of the Chinese nation. Xi articulated this view early in his tenure as head of the CMC and CCP, though the specific date and setting are unknown. According to multiple accounts, Xi declared, “Threats to national security are mainly *at sea*, the focus of military struggle is mostly *at sea*, and the center of gravity of the nation’s expanding national interests is *at sea* [emphasis added]” (国家安全的威胁主要在海上, 军事斗争的焦点主要在海上, 国家利益拓展的重心主要在海上)⁸⁴ Some PLAN sources refer to this statement as Xi’s “three at-seas” (三个在海上).⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Ryan D. Martinson, “China’s Great Balancing Act Unfolds: Enforcing Maritime Rights vs. Stability,” *National Interest*, 11 September 11, 2015, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/chinas-great-balancing-act-unfolds-enforcing-maritime-rights-13821>; and Martinson, *Echelon Defense*, p. 56.

⁸¹ “Xi Jinping’s Speech at the Eighth Collective Study Session of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee.”

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ “While Inspecting the Southern Theater Navy, Xi Jinping Stresses Deepening Military Training and Preparation for War, Accelerating Transformation and Construction, and Comprehensively Improving the Force’s Modernization Level.”

⁸⁴ See, for instance, 英雄赞歌：壮怀激烈 [“Hymn of Heroes” Magnificent], 长沙晚报网 [*Changsha Evening News Online*], 10 December 2019, https://www.icswb.com/h/152/20191210/632546_m.html; 喻文兵 [Yu Wenbing], 积极应对院校面临的风险挑战增强建设世界一流海军院校的使命担当 [“Actively Respond to the Risks and Challenges Facing PME Institutions and Strengthen the Mission of Building a World-Class Naval PME Institution”], *政工学刊* [*Journal of Political Work*], no. 10 (2019), pp. 5-7.

⁸⁵ 董震 [Dong Zhen], 把握大势，时不我待推进转型 [“Grasp the Big Picture, Promote Transformation as if Time Were of the Essence”], *人民海军* [*People’s Navy*], 6 July 2018, p. 3. When he wrote this, author Dong Zhen was the commander of the Northern Theater Navy submarine base.

Given the centrality of maritime warfare, it is natural that the CMC would make this the focus of PLA preparations for combat operations. The section on the PLAN's "Strategic Tasks" in the December 2013 edition of the *Science of Military Strategy*, cites, without attribution, Xi Jinping's "three at-seas," and then draws the obvious conclusion: "[thus,] coping with maritime local wars under informatized conditions has become the focus of preparation for military struggle."⁸⁶

Xi Jinping reiterated the importance of maritime conflict when he met with PLA and PAP delegates at the National People's Congress in March 2024. He called for prioritizing the development of "strategic capabilities in emergent domains" (新兴领域战略能力建设), namely, the maritime, aerospace, and cyberspace domains. In the maritime domain, he declared, China must "comprehensively plan and prepare for maritime military struggle, safeguarding maritime rights and interests, and marine economic development, thereby improving its ability to strategically manage the sea."⁸⁷

Xi's concern for the third "at-sea"—i.e., China's expanding overseas interests—has manifested in other settings, including discourse associated with the "holistic national security concept" (总体国家安全观). In one phrase, the "holistic national security concept" captures all of China's key national security concerns. At the first meeting of the newly-created National Security Council (中央国家安全委员会), held in April 2014, Xi cited eleven specific security concerns: political security, territorial security, military security, economic security, cultural security, social security, scientific and technological security, cyber security, ecological security, resource security, and nuclear security.⁸⁸ A 2018 compilation of his speeches on the holistic national security concept, however, added a twelfth concern: security of overseas interests. The compilation included a previously undisclosed excerpt from a December 2015 speech that vividly conveyed Xi's fears:

The international security situation is very complex. Internationally we are basically undefended and without any effective options. If we encounter some great risk, we can evacuate our nationals, but our ability to secure our citizens and legal persons is very limited. *You talk about weaknesses—this is a very big weakness [emphasis added]. We must...gradually increase overseas security support capabilities, protect the security of our citizens and legal persons located overseas, and protect our financial, oil, mining, shipping, and other overseas commercial interests.*⁸⁹

Xi Jinping's personal commitment to expanding the size and capabilities of the PLANMC may in large part be due to the force's unique ability to protect China's interests abroad. Indeed, when he

⁸⁶ Full quote: "Today and for a fairly long time into the future, the expansion of our national interests is mainly at sea, national security threats are mainly at sea, and the focus of military struggle is mainly at sea; thus, coping with maritime local wars under informatized conditions has become the focus of preparation for military struggle." 寿晓松 [Shou Xiaosong], ed., *战略学 [Science of Military Strategy]* (Beijing: Military Science, 2013), p. 209.

⁸⁷ 全面提升新兴领域战略能力 聚力打好实现建军一百年奋斗目标攻坚战 ["Comprehensively Improve Strategic Capabilities for New Domains, Fight the Battle to Achieve the Goals of the 100 Year Anniversary of the Founding of the PLA"], 新华网 [Xinhua], 8 March 2024, <http://lianghui.people.com.cn/2024/n1/2024/0308/c458561-40192048.html>.

⁸⁸ 中央国家安全委员会第一次会议召开 习近平发表重要讲话 ["The First Meeting of the Central National Security Council, Xi Jinping Gives Important Speech"], 新华社 [Xinhua], 15 April 2014, https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-04/15/content_2659641.htm.

⁸⁹ 中共中央党史和文献研究院 [CCP Central Committee Research Institute for Party History and Documents (eds.)], 习近平关于总体国家安全观论述摘编 [*Excerpts from Xi Jinping's Discourse on the Holistic National Security Concept*], (Beijing: CCP Documents Press, April 2018), p. 46.

visited the PLANMC Headquarters on 13 October 2020, he declared: “The PLANMC is an elite amphibious combat force with important responsibilities for safeguarding the security of national sovereignty and territorial integrity, safeguarding national maritime rights and interests, and *safeguarding national overseas interests* [emphasis added].”⁹⁰

Conclusion

Since Xi Jinping came to power, the PLAN has made tremendous strides in its efforts to transform itself from a “regional navy” (地区海军) to a “world-class navy” (世界一流海军).⁹¹ The credit for this dramatic expansion in the missions, status, and capabilities of the Chinese navy goes first and foremost to the service itself, as well as the engineers, scientists, and workers who have supported its growth. However, the precondition for these advances was political interest and support. As the Secretary General of the CCP and Chairman of the CMC, Xi Jinping has played a critical supporting role.

Indeed, PRC sources reveal that Xi was personally involved in many of the key initiatives that have empowered the PLAN. He chaired the Leading Small Group that oversaw the PLA’s sweeping reform and reorganization program. He put his authority behind the decision to greatly expand the size of the PLANMC, even as other services were reducing the size of their operational forces. Xi oversaw the update to the PLA’s Military Strategic Guidelines, which prioritized preparation for maritime conflict. He convinced leaders in the CMC and the PLAN that China needed to build a carrier-centric navy and that its SSBNs had to play a meaningful role in the PRC’s nuclear force structure. He pushed for the construction of China’s first overseas military base. Xi’s influence has led to an uptick in PRC maritime assertiveness in the East China Sea and South China Sea and an expansion in the PLAN’s global operations.

To a significant extent, Xi’s efforts have been driven by a personal commitment to building maritime and naval power, undergirded by a sophisticated understanding of the importance of the oceans to China’s “national rejuvenation.” Xi believes that the rise and fall of great powers is predicated on their ability to harness the wealth-producing attributes of the ocean and defend their maritime rights and interests. Xi is acutely aware that China’s most likely future conflict will be fought at sea, the most dangerous threats to PRC national security are located in the waters of the Western Pacific, and China’s expanding overseas interests can only be protected with naval power. While Xi seeks to avoid conflict over disputed territories in the East and South China Seas, he believes that China must robustly pursue its maritime claims—which, in his view, his predecessors were not always willing to do. Naval power is the essential solution to all of these fears and concerns. In Xi’s own words, “In the history of China’s rejuvenation the need for a powerful People’s Navy has never been as urgent as it is now.”⁹²

⁹⁰ Li and Li, “During His Inspection of the PLAN Marine Corps, Xi Jinping Emphasized Accelerating the Transformation and Construction of the Marine Corps and Accelerating the Upgrading of Combat Capabilities.”

⁹¹ Navy Party Committee, “Strive to Build the People’s Navy into a World Class Navy.”

⁹² “Xi Jinping Attends a Fleet Review in the South China Sea.”

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