9 Chinese Maritime (Militia) Strategy

Increasingly More Exceptional Than Unique

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Is Chinese maritime strategy part of a universal field of strategic thought, or should it be seen as a distinct intellectual tradition that cannot easily be mapped onto Western concepts of maritime strategy? The answer depends in part on how generally, or more specifically, one frames the question. Beijing's goals represent its desired ends; the way to realize them is its maritime strategy; and the means are its multiple sea forces.

To understand the People's Republic of China (PRC) maritime strategy in practice, it is thus necessary to clearly understand its three major sea forces: the People's Liberation Army (PLA)-controlled PLA Navy (PLAN), the People's Armed Police (PAP)-controlled China Coast Guard (CCG), and the Militia-controlled People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM).[2] Each is a component of China's Armed Forces; each is the world's largest force of its kind by number of ships, by a significant margin; and each exhibits distinctive "Chinese characteristics"—but all within a universal framework of readily comparable examples. The PLAN is least distinctive,[3] and ever less so, as it strives to become a "world-class navy" converging on the American gold standard, particularly in force structure.[4] The PAFMM remains most distinctive, but even it has become less so over time and no longer truly practices Maoist "People's War at Sea."

Overall, China's sea forces and the strategy informing them have become progressively less distinctive with time and distance, and these trends continue today. PRC uniqueness at sea is increasingly yielding to PRC exceptionalism: employing universally recognizable, comparable military maritime strategic approaches, but doing so with superlative resources and unparalleled construction in great and growing respects.

China's Layered Logic: Capabilities Rippling Outward

As Commander of China's Navy, Admiral Liu Huaqing—China's most influential naval leader of the 20th century—oversaw the service receiving its first specific strategy, Near Seas Active Defense, circa 1985. In 1988, before becoming the senior of two Vice Chairmen on the Central Military Commission (CMC), Liu established a three-island-chain-based development plan.[5] After extending blue-water presence through the First Island Chain bisecting Taiwan by 2010,

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Beijing sought to transcend the Guam-centered Second Island Chain by 2025 and the Hawaii-anchored Third Island Chain by 2050. Under paramount leader Xi Jinping, China is pursuing an updated version of Liu's strategy with unprecedented resources and resolve. In 2015, the PLAN received a new strategic layer: Near Seas Defense *plus* Far Seas Protection to address burgeoning overseas interests in at least a foundational fashion. Most recently, circa 2018, China's navy was assigned yet another outward strategic layer, currently being operationalized: "near seas defense, far seas protection, (global) oceanic presence, and expansion into the two poles."[6]

Beyond broad top-tier policies that strongly prioritize military maritime development and its rippling radiation outward in expanding geographic layers over time, Beijing's maritime strategy and its implementation may defy specific authoritative confirmation in some respects. Rapid development, risk mitigation, Communist hagiography, and preservation of policy leeway—the latter two factors facilitated through propaganda obfuscation—generate confusion and unfounded "exoticization" of PRC maritime strategy and practice by PRC officials and foreign observers alike. Nevertheless, scrutinizing Chinese-language sources rigorously elucidates the broader outlines of China's maritime trajectory, which is hardly mysterious or entirely unique. Ideological depictions of PRC conceptions of "sea power" or "maritime power" as inherently unique in official PRC statements and PRC scholarship are generally unconvincing.[7] Extensive neo-Mahanian scholarship rather represents both the study of previous foreign sea power ideas and the relevance of such ideas' universal elements to China's own challenges—at least some of which overlap with those of other great powers that have sought great *sea* power.[8]

Overall, a multi-force, layered nature distinguishes PRC sea power today in both concept and practice. "China should comprehensively use various types of forces, combining the military, maritime law enforcement, and militia into a trinity," a team of PLAN and PLA researchers emphasizes. Most fundamentally, "China should… expand, to the maximum extent possible, to the front lines of ocean defense and offshore islands/reefs…. China should build forward bases [前进基地] and support bases [保障基地] on islands/reefs in important geographic locations, and it should build a comprehensive supply system for large vessels and aircraft carrying out ocean defense tasks."[9]

Beijing as a maritime power is second only to the United States in military capability overall, and in a league of its own by most civilian industrial and commercial standards. It boasts manifold maritime superlatives—including the world's largest fishing fleet, number of fishers, aquaculture and pisciculture industries, commercial fleet by shipping capacity, merchant marine, marine sector, and fleets of space support and oceanographic research vessels. A large nationally flagged tanker fleet, global port infrastructure and logistics, and emerging overseas facilities likewise support PRC sea power.[10] But whereas American sea power is globally dispersed, PRC sea power remains largely concentrated near China's mainland, shaped by its national system and geography, even as it spreads modestly around the world.

"It would be as if Washington stacked up the entire US Navy in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico," states former US Coast Guard Liaison to China Capt.

Bernard Moreland, USCG (Ret.), "which together are about the size of China's claimed near seas."[11] US planners would consider such a concentration of the US Navy in one region an unacceptably wasteful use of naval resources. However, for China such a concentrated approach means that it has far greater firepower deployed and operating in the area where high-end war is most likely to occur. America's Navy is larger than China's in tonnage and smaller in hull count, but in the most likely maritime battlespaces of East Asia it is severely outmatched numerically by the PLAN and has long, difficult supply line issues while China enjoys proximate advantages with interior lines.

China exhibits its greatest distinctiveness at sea along its immediate coastlines and in the Near Seas (Yellow, East, and South China Seas) in upholding and advancing its sovereignty claims in these contested waterspaces. There it engages in maritime gray zone operations distinct from the "hybrid warfare" practiced by Russia.[12] Peter Dutton offers the most comprehensive conceptual study of China's maritime gray zone operations to date. Beijing strives to redefine the legal status of contested ocean space from foreign or international in nature to its own domestic sovereign space and therein employs non-militarized coercion—typically involving CCG and PAFMM "vanguard" frontline forces—to enforce as historically aggrieved defenders its "domestic" sovereignty and laws there. In doing so, China eschews higher degrees of force in favor of longer periods of time (trading force for time), in order to erode opponent states' will to resist while paradoxically imposing the burden of escalation on them and thereby complicating their countering—potentially tremendously.[13] However, rapid maritime force development and growing assertiveness in its employment may reflect Xi's impatience to recalibrate this force-time equation as China strengthens further at sea.

Today Vietnam is the only other country to have a significant sized, similarly tasked Maritime Militia—a similarity that stems from Beijing and Hanoi's shared Leninist political-bureaucratic-legal system. Other countries do not use a maritime militia in part because only authoritarians could possibly get away with deploying such a force while attempting to shroud it in "plausible deniability."[14] The maritime militias of China and Vietnam were originally organized, tasked, and (later) legally defined similarly as elements of their respective nations' armed forces. However, China has taken its third sea force to a level unmatched by any other country—even Vietnam. Tellingly, China and Vietnam have waged their own gray zone contest—the 2014 HYSY-981 Oil Rig Incident. Both sides' Maritime Militia and Coast Guard-type forces likewise participated. The encroachment on its claimed Exclusive Economic Zone made this struggle critically important to Vietnam's interests, and near its forces' ports for maximum deployment. Hanoi had every interest to match Beijing at sea but proved qualitatively and quantitatively unable to do so. Vietnam was outclassed and overcome, giving the lie to repeated PRC public claims that Vietnam's Maritime Militia is stronger than China's.[15] Might China's multi-sea-force success inspire attempts at emulation particularly of its most affordable, low-profile, and distinctive element: the Maritime Militia? Potential emergent cases beyond Vietnam remain speculative given insufficient reliable data.[16]

Meanwhile, the CCG differs from the USCG in its extensive missioning and activities to advance disputed sovereignty claims in China's favor. It differs from many other developing countries (e.g., Indonesia) in its ultimately successful multi-stage consolidation of the vast majority of its Maritime Law Enforcement (MLE) forces into a single Coast Guard. It differs from all other Coast Guard/MLE forces in its sheer number of ships. The CCG has developed a militarized organizational culture, has received and incorporated manifold former PLAN vessels, and is now successfully fielding and operating lightly armed versions of PRC warships through a new large-ship construction program.[17] It acts as a second navy in many respects: operating aggressively on the front lines of Beijing's sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea, playing key roles in exercises against Taiwan, and training and coordinating closely with China's Navy and Maritime Militia.[18]

China organizes two types of elite PAFMM forces charged and empowered with involvement in international sea incidents: part-time and full-time. For part-time forces, local governments provide subsidies and other support to commercial organizations employing marine industry workers, mostly fishermen, to operate PAFMM vessels for official missions on an *ad hoc* basis outside of their regular commercial activities. While retaining their day jobs, these mariners can be activated on demand. They are organized and trained by shore-based PLA provincial military districts, with additional training and coordination by the PLAN and CCG, under policies crafted by the National Defense Mobilization Department, which reports directly to the CMC.[19]

The part-time exemplar is the Tanmen Maritime Militia. Homeported in Hainan Island's Tanmen township, from 1989–1995 the Tanmen Maritime Militia, under the authority of the PLAN Southern Theater Navy (then the South Sea Fleet), was involved in the occupation and construction of PRC outposts in the Spratly Islands, including Subi, Fiery Cross, and Mischief Reefs. The organization was described by Xi as a "model maritime militia unit" during a visit to Tanmen harbor in 2013 to recognize the unit's frontline contribution to Beijing's victory in the 2012 Scarborough Shoal Incident. During the visit, Xi encouraged the Tanmen maritime militia to support "island and reef development" in the South China Sea.[20]

The full-time pioneer-exemplar is the Sansha City Maritime Militia in the Paracel Islands. Established in 2015, it is a salaried full-time maritime militia force, employing many former PLAN and CCG sailors, with its own command center and equipped with at least 84 purpose-built vessels.[21] Other full-time forces likewise forgo fishing entirely to engage in rotational forward deployments to contested South China Sea features. The Taishan Maritime Militia, for instance, provoked the 2021 Whitsun Reef incident with the Philippines.[22]

Does China's Maritime Militia Practice "People's War at Sea" Today? Not So Much…

China's leader himself pays homage to People's War, and its Maoist distinctiveness is enshrined in official statements to this day. In a major address in 2022, Xi stated, "We will study and gain a good grasp of the characteristics of informatized

and intelligent warfare and the laws that govern it, provide new military strategic guidance, and develop strategies and tactics for a people's war."[23] The "China Keywords" program run by the China International Publishing Group and the China Academy of Translation elaborates: "As Xi Jinping reaffirmed, we should never ditch our magic weapon that is people's war, however the environment we find ourselves in changes. Instead we should tap its full potential in the new era by responding to new dynamics and new imperatives, and developing new techniques and tools and incorporating them in our people's war strategy in an innovative manner."[24] Leadership emphasis on people's war continues to be reflected in major strategic and doctrinal statements, including in PRC defense white papers.[25]

Drawing on storied achievements of seven-plus decades ago, some Chinese sources today specifically describe the gray zone ("rights protection") missions of the PAFMM as the ultimate in maritime Maoism: "People's War at Sea." But rhetoric no longer matches reality. Particularly in peacetime, the PAFMM no longer truly engages in a maritime extension of Maoist guerrilla warfare in mobilizing locally supported "armed civilians" for coastal defense in depth.

That was indeed a key operational element in the PRC's early years, when along the mainland coast it regularly faced Kuomintang (KMT) raids and picked off KMT-held islands. As Toshi Yoshihara explains masterfully in his seminal survey, the nascent PLAN waged its 1949–1950 island seizure campaigns against the KMT not in miniature emulation of the Soviet "Young School," but rather innovated to address its own coastal warfare challenges in ways that shape its institutional identity even now.[26] As Xiaobing Li documents extensively in his complementary pioneering history, such indigenous concerns and solutions became a major source of tension between PLAN officers and their Soviet advisors, contributing to wholesale Soviet departure in 1960.[27] Technological and ideational independence from Soviet assistance pre-1960 may be exaggerated in subsequent PLAN hagiography, and PLAN shortfalls, accidents, and defections post-1960 are only now being elucidated publicly by Li and others.[28] Nevertheless, insistence by PRC naval founders—foremost among them the inaugural PLAN Commander Xiao Jinguang—that "material factors had to confirm to China's unique strategic circumstances" indeed yielded "a distinctive Chinese way of warfare" that included a doctrine of "sabotage warfare at sea."[29]

The PLA's 1949–1950 offshore campaigns clearly operationalized core elements of People's War. Securing local support in mobilizing junks and boatmen, together with fishing communities' deep knowledge of terrain, currents, and weather, proved pivotal to the pursuit of KMT-held islands.[30] When the PLA coordinated such local support well, it typically won; when it fell short, it typically lost. Creatively motorizing junks and retrofitting them with army artillery arguably reverberates in recent retrofitting of PLA-mobilizable ferries with ramps.[31] Echoes of these pioneering examples of People's War at Sea may be found in the 1955 Yijiangshan Campaign, the 1965 "86 Sea Battle," and the 1974 Paracels Sea Battle.[32] Toward the end of the People's War era, the PLAN helped Hanoi sweep mines. After civilian ship transfer of "inflatable, waterproof supply bags" proved inadequate, China's Navy established a Ho Chi Minh Trail at Sea via Cambodia.[33]

In his prime, Mao succeeded in promoting People's War over the objections of Peng Dehuai and other Party-Military leaders who favored a more professional, Soviet-style approach. Mao was similarly successful in overcoming opposition to extending his doctrine seaward. Despite the lack of masking terrain and landed inhabitants there, Mao insisted: "The navy has its own characteristics, but we cannot emphasize the navy's specialness. We must carry forward the army's good traditions. We cannot toss them aside. The navy must also rely on the people; it must rely on fishermen. It must plant roots among the fishermen."[34] The initial decades of PAFMM development were a clear beneficiary of Mao's People's War doctrine.[35]

Throughout this Cold War era, Taiwan proved completely beyond the reach of People's War at Sea. This was because of severe PLA(N) limitations that left even the victories Yoshihara chronicles close run; the far wider geographic scope of the Taiwan Strait than the often literally-just-offshore battles of 1949–1950 and subsequently; and the lack of Fifth Column forces on Taiwan even remotely equivalent to the Qiongya Column, evolving since the 1920s, that greatly facilitated PLA conquest of Hainan in 1950.[36]

What, then, post-1974 and post-Cold War? Attempting to connect these undeniable antecedents to present practice yields severely diminishing returns. Drawing in part on the proud history that Yoshihara and Li document, PLA(N) leadership sometimes invokes the concept of People's War at Sea symbolically to encourage PLA-Party political connectivity and stimulate PAFMM development and operations—but the concept appears far more marginal, peripheral, tangential, and uneven in practice. At most, it is a convenient, politically correct catch-all concept that fills a terminological vacuum left by the lack of a single enduring overarching concept to describe PAFMM support of PRC maritime "rights and interests."[37]

In the China Maritime Studies Institute's (CMSI) most targeted examination of the issue to date, Dale Rielage and Austin Strange conclude:

> The early history and use of China's maritime militia were clearly influenced by the people's war doctrine. Under Mao Zedong, people's war at sea was a maritime extension of people's war; was largely a warfighting concept for coastal defense; and was actually used in armed conflict (e.g., in the 1974 battle of the Paracels). This influence has left an indelible mark on the identity of the service. However, publicly available Chinese strategic discourse currently contains relatively few references to people's war at sea, even as the PAFMM has played an increasingly important role along China's maritime frontier. Those references that do exist focus on possible wartime functions of the PAFMM, not on the rights protection operations that characterize China's gray zone activities.[38]

Despite searching carefully in such key locations as PRC Defense White Papers, the official PLAN newspaper *People's Navy*, and the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) electronic database, Rielage and Strange found scant mentions of People's War at Sea in strategic discourse.[39] The present author's subsequent

survey of recent Chinese writings on PLAN strategy and PAFMM, and the continued paucity of such findings in CNKI, further suggest that there is not much discussion of People's War at Sea these days—let alone substantive doctrinal operationalization. A previously cited article by a team of PLAN and PLA researchers discussing "Chinese Ocean Defense" contains a brief mention of "People's War" in the context of maritime administrative control, but without much explanation.[40] In a PLA Academy of Military Sciences-published article, PLAN authors trace China's naval strategy's evolution and development, likewise without mentioning People's War.[41] Two authors, at least one with direct knowledge of PAFMM force development, weigh the force's role in warfighting—with no mention of People's War.[42] In another article, PLAN professors at the Naval Command College discuss the Navy's strategic roles, with no mention of People's War.[43] Another article, by two PLA Naval Research Institute authors, addresses PLAN strategic requirements and future roles, with no mention of People's War.[44]

The following are some of the few examples of pedigreed Chinese-language sources published over the past decade that do discuss People's War at Sea in the context of naval strategy. A 2002 article penned by the Zhejiang Provincial Military District's Commander incorporates People's War at Sea.[45] In a 2009 article, two PLA Army Command College military scholars tackle People's War under informatized conditions.[46] In a 2010 article, two authors from the PLAN Command College explore the use of Mao Zedong Thought to inform People's War under informatized conditions, with some discussion of Far Seas deployments and the use of "civilian" forces to support them.[47] The best single-author source the present author and his colleagues have located is a 2014 article in which a Nanjing Military Region Mobilization Department head offers several inputs regarding a People's War at Sea in both peacetime and wartime.[48] The best more recent source the author and his colleagues have located addressing the topic directly is a 2017 piece from officers at the Eastern Theater Command Political Work Department's Mass Work Liaison Department. They focus on dealing with the "strong enemy"—a typical reference to the United States.[49]

While not exhaustive, this representative mix of curated Chinese-language sources strongly suggests that it is not mainstream to discuss People's War in the context of naval strategy. It is still invoked in other contexts—specifically by military officers involved in mobilization work—since it is their job to frame things this way. While some might argue that in certain ways PAFMM gray zone activities resemble People's War at Sea, this term does not in fact usefully describe the PAFMM's role in PRC dispute strategy. Rather, PRC leaders and strategists are repackaging this concept for political reasons.

To the continually lessening extent that demonstrably authoritative sources invoke the People's War at Sea concept, they describe not peacetime rights protection operations but rather wartime doctrine. And even to the extent that People's War at Sea can be said to remain a substantive doctrinal concept in some specific applications therein—such as certain wartime operations for which PAFMM forces are authoritatively documented to train—it remains uncertain how reliable

or effective such measures would prove in practice. In a widespread example, an article advocates that in wartime, China should:

> Create maritime militia detachments that operate in disguise and create obstacles for foreign forces (*weizhuang shezhang*). Use corner reflectors, false radio waves, and false heat sources. At sea, or on islands/reefs or floating objects, set up false targets including false vessels, false missiles, and false combat aircraft. Adopt methods and means such as deformation camouflage, electronic camouflage, and color camouflage. Force the enemy to make errors of judgment and entice the enemy to conduct strikes against false targets. Achieve the aim of deceiving the enemy, baffling the enemy, and confusing the enemy.[50]

However potent on paper, that could prove extremely difficult to achieve in practice—and that is even assuming that PAFMM personnel would be willing and able to perform their roles in situations imposing tremendous casualties and confusion in the fog of actual war. Maoist maneuvering and risk-taking are no substitute for the exacting operational imperatives that even the lowliest militiamen would have to support for China to prevail in major warfare. The chapter has closed on People's War at Sea truly worthy of the name, even as China is writing new, related chapters.

New Waves: Seaward Superlatives Supersede Earlier Distinctions

As new chapters in China's maritime operations unfold, the reason for its layered approach lies in an arguably pronounced version of a common pattern. Nations with significant forces and capabilities typically deploy them in overlapping patterns in accordance with their roles and performance parameters, both to maximize capacity and options and to enhance reliability through redundancy. All coastal states use a layered approach to maritime security; nearly all have both Coast Guard and Navy layers. What makes China rare in the world (and unique as a great power) is that it has a third layer (the Maritime Militia).[51] The key point is not that Beijing uses a layered approach *per se*, but that it has an additional third layer, and together these layers of force structure allow for unusual flexibility and efficiency. As a historically continental power ruled by a centralized Leninist Party since 1949, China pursues a strict hierarchy of national security priorities with intensity decreasing progressively with geographical distance from Beijing. PRC military and security forces, with their capabilities and range rings overlaid, offer a striking illustration of this pattern.[52] Fundamentally, China has already arrived as a great sea power, but concentrates its most significant, numerous, and diverse capabilities close to its immediate periphery. This is no accident: the Near Seas, historically conduits for foreign invasion of China, today contain all Beijing's unresolved territorial and maritime sovereignty disputes—the core focus of its present military development.

It is on China's immediate periphery that the formative fundaments Yoshihara describes are "still visible in the Chinese naval force structure today," particularly in "conventional submarines, shore-based aircraft, and coastal combatants,"[53] as

well as an emphasis on many small paramilitary and "civilian" ships. Today the CCG and PAFMM, as well as civilian ferries[54] and other auxiliary vessels such as deck cargo ships,[55] potentially crewed by militiamen,[56] clearly echo this "hodge-podge force" with a "small-ship ethos" on a sheer spectrum of smallest to largest vessels not found in any other nation's maritime forces.[57] As Yoshihara rightly emphasizes, "the conscription of the merchant and fishing fleets suggests that the civil-military integration of maritime power dates back to the earliest days of the PLAN. In light of this history, perhaps it is not surprising that China has been so adept at seamlessly employing a combined fleet of naval combatants and civilian maritime law enforcement vessels in recent years."[58]

In all this we can see the persistence in official PLA publications of a distinctive "sabotage warfare" concept with roots in People's War tradition. Doctrinally, this concept is typically explicated in wish or laundry-list form; leaving unclear how precisely it might be operationalized; and how realistic it would be for the PLAN, together with China's Armed Forces overall, to do so in practice in critical contingencies. Since PRC texts are themselves unlikely to fully clarify these issues, it is useful to examine recent force structure developments and operations for clues.

China works unremittingly to apply its greatest strengths, particularly its world-leading commercial-military shipbuilding industry, to objectives in ways that are often distinctive in scope, scale, or specialization. In an effort that echoes US construction of Mulberry Harbors to support the 1944 D-Day Invasion—a mobile pontoon causeway system by which to unload ship-transported vehicles ashore—but is unique in today's world, China has been building, and training with, self-propelled *Shuiqiao* bridge-landing barges.[59] Among the three interconnectable variants, the most distinctive feature is a telescoping 120-meter-long "Bailey Bridge" deployable from its bow across water, mud, seawalls, mines, or other obstacles. Other key attributes include up to eight "jack up" legs extendable to the seabed for stability and a self-supporting stern ramp to which other ships can dock and deploy armored vehicles, potentially in a lengthy configuration of up to three vessels connected end-to-end, producing a 2,690-foot (820-meter) relocatable pier. This dedicated system is purpose-built to support an amphibious invasion of Taiwan by landing on beaches high volumes of wheeled and tracked military vehicles, together with associated personnel and materiel. It may represent the missing piece in the puzzle for China to be able to attempt to deploy ferry-delivered follow-on forces in support of an amphibious assault to the most advantageous locations along Taiwan's coastline and thereby be able to utilize commercial ships without holding a port. Its emergence suggests that China has learned from its own weather-sensitive exercises with amphibious-deployed causeways and the US military's failed Gaza pier: hastily constructed ship-to-shore extensions are highly vulnerable. Leveraging China's shipbuilding superiority to produce purpose-built ships capable of themselves connecting as modular bridge elements to ensure a rapid delivery of follow-on ground forces offers a better answer to the particular problems that Beijing seeks to solve. There are no other such ships anywhere in the world, because no other country than China is preparing to try to be able to invade Taiwan.

In keeping with China's "all of the above" approach to specialized shipbuilding, another area of notable force structure innovation is its recent record as the most prolific developer by far of new types of experimental and test submarines. While some of these remain too obscure to assess in depth, the Type 041 *Zhou*-class likewise represents an unusual solution to a distinctive PRC problem: the imperative to lurk quietly, with complete air independence, in waters surrounding Taiwan in search of US and allied ships and submarines, then maneuver rapidly as necessary upon discovery. Accordingly, China is seemingly developing a submarine with a minute nuclear reactor to provide extended slow-speed endurance while holding the battery in reserve. Submarine nuclear batteries are rare, but the United States and Soviet Union/Russia have also developed them, while Canada conducted considerable related research but failed to pursue nuclear-powered submarines of any type.[60]

None of China's new platforms are entirely novel; earlier sea powers pursued broadly analogous systems. But it is China that stands out for developing the leading exemplars today, and for being able to produce them at unrivaled scale. Their ultimate impact will hinge on the extent to which China is able to integrate them effectively into organization and training—particularly the increasingly sophisticated, comprehensive exercises that China's Armed Forces conduct vis-à-vis Taiwan. Beijing is pursuing large-scale drills, particularly their maritime aspects, regularly and methodically, with a view to both intimidating Taiwan and its supporters and assembling component capabilities for future military operations against the island.[61] The systematic, all-aspect preparation is akin to a new device user scanning their finger or face from many angles to assemble a full profile for future automatic identification. As Admiral Samuel Paparo, Commander, Indo-Pacific Command, emphasized in his most recent congressional testimony, "Beijing's aggressive maneuvers around Taiwan are not just exercises—they are dress rehearsals for forced unification."[62]

Conclusion: Earlier "Chinese Characteristics" Ebbing, New Superlatives Rippling Out

So much depends on framing the discussion. PRC maritime strategy and its operationalization, of which naval strategy and practice is a subset, fit within the overall Western/global ecosystem of maritime and strategic concepts. Yet within this universal context, China also exhibits distinctive patterns differentiating it from Western and other counterparts in both emphasis and operationalization in key respects. For comparative context, among foreign counterparts, the maritime forces of Iran and its clerical regime may be even more distinctive than those of China, at least in their command and control. Their dual organizational structure is akin to Beijing having separate Party and State navies. While many dictatorships and other authoritarian states have multiple overlapping, or even competing, land forces—including loyalist praetorian guards tasked with ensuring leadership survival above all else—Iran is the only country to have such politically competing, operationally overlapping forces at sea.[63]

Within China's own context, patterns vary significantly by service and area of operations. PRC maritime distinctiveness is stratifying by sea force and diminishing with time and distance. PAFMM missions and operations exhibit pronounced "Chinese characteristics"—even as these characteristics have evolved over time. CCG missions and overlapping operations exhibit some distinctiveness and some more universal attributes. Navy force structure converges increasingly on the international gold standard of the US Navy—with convergence in missions lagging somewhat but nevertheless likewise progressing rapidly.

PLAN forces and operations increasingly strive toward American "gold standard" force structure and capabilities. By 2035, the Pentagon projects, China seeks to build six aircraft carriers beyond the three it already deploys.[64] However, as part of a Soviet/Russian legacy, China's blue-water forces exhibit both potent emphasis on anti-surface missile firepower and lingering limitations. Their operations remain constrained by Beijing's historic lack of overseas bases. China appears to be *partially* compensating with a vast array of overseas port investments and access arrangements supporting the PLAN's 48-and-counting task force deployments since December 26, 2008 to the Gulf of Aden and beyond.[65]

Having established its first PLA Support Base—"overseas strategic strongpoint" (海外战略支点)—in Djibouti in 2017,[66] in April 2025 China established a Joint Logistics and Training Center at Cambodia's Ream Naval Base.[67] Beijing is actively considering establishing additional overseas support sites in some subset of 21 other potential host nations across the Indian Ocean, Africa, and the Western Pacific.[68] China's lack of overseas basing, which requires deep host-nation commitment through alliances that Beijing has thus far eschewed, represents the greatest remaining PLA(N) weakness that prevents it from being a world-class military in general, and navy in particular, on a par with that of the United States. To the extent to which Beijing does not ultimately emulate Washington in developing and operationalizing a robust network of capable overseas bases, it will limit its ability to emulate American projection of sea power—and ability to engage in major combat operations—globally.[69]

In the naval domain, China's formative foundation might be termed "continentalist" in nature—although it has long had major maritime fundaments as well.[70] However, the most relevant set of comparative cases may be among land powers that have attempted to go to sea. Arguably, China is now a hybrid "land-sea" power—having completed the first such sustainable seaward transformation since the Persian and Roman Empires two millennia ago.[71] Nobody could reasonably expect a former "continental" power to fully transcend its landward interests, linkages, and liabilities, or to forgo building on the strengths that interior lines afford.[72]

Hence, we should hardly be surprised to see China emerging today as a naval-maritime power with "Chinese characteristics." This includes having the world's largest armed forces in ship numbers but layered geographically among three major sea forces—with China's navy now operating globally. China's sea forces radiate out increasingly within their respective areas of responsibility, strongly supported by a land-based "anti-Navy" centered on the world's largest conventional ballistic and cruise missile forces—backstopped by nuclear forces that are already

the world's third-largest after the United States and Russia at over 600 operational warheads by the end of 2024, with over 1,000 anticipated by 2030.[73]

Neither China's maritime strategy nor its sea forces are entirely unique or unprecedented, at least above a certain level of generalization. They may usefully be compared and contrasted within a universal set of literatures, concepts, metrics, indicators, and historical analogies. At the same time, Beijing's maritime strategy and practices are powerfully exceptional in aggregate today, where it all comes together at sea.

Notes

1 The views expressed are the author's alone, based solely on open sources. In addition to the publications cited here, he has consulted more than 160 translations performed by Ryan Martinson, Conor Kennedy, and other CMSI colleagues. He is further indebted to Martinson, Kennedy, Christopher Carlson, and anonymous reviewers for helpful inputs. For broader context concerning the present argument, see Andrew S. Erickson, "Essence of Distinction: The Ends, Ways, and Means of China's Military Maritime Quest," *Frontiers in Political Science* 6:1448241 (September 11, 2024), https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2024.1448241/full.

2 China's MLE fleet contains the CCG together with its subordinate organizations: the State Oceanic Administration (SOA), Bureau of Fisheries (BOF)/Fisheries Law Enforcement (FLE), Maritime Customs Service (GAC), and Public Security Bureau (PSB)/PAP Maritime, as well as two other major PRC organizations outside the CCG—the Maritime Safety Administration (MSA) and China Rescue and Salvage (CRS). MLE forces outside the national-level CCG include a portion of China Marine Surveillance (CMS) and Fisheries Law Enforcement (FLE) vessels organized at the subnational level, MSA vessels outside the CCG even at the national level, and CRS vessels outside the CCG even at the national level which generally play only supporting—not sovereignty-upholding—or perhaps even traditional MLE roles.

3 For relevant historically informed parallels and analogues, see Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific, Second Edition: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018).

4 Christopher H. Sharman and Andrew S. Erickson, "China's Future World-Class Navy: Ends, Ways, Means," in Benjamin Frohman and Jeremy Rausch, eds., *The PLA's Long March toward a World-Class Military: Progress, Ambitions, and Obstacles* (Seattle, WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2025), 196–218.

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