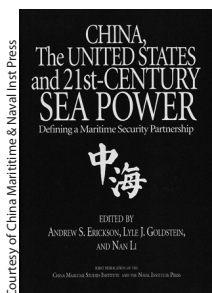


Book Reviews



Newport, RI: Joint Publication of the China Maritime Studies Institute and the Naval Institute Press, 2010

530 pages

\$47.95

China, The United States and 21st Century Sea Power: Defining a Maritime Security Partnership

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At first glance, this collection of essays would appear to be based on a questionable premise, that the People's Republic of China is interested in defining a maritime partnership with the United States to keep the peace in the western Pacific, the South China Sea, and the Indian Ocean. Repeated confrontations—verbal, at sea, and in the air—in recent years make that seem unlikely.

As the essays unfold, however, a more realistic assessment of China's naval capabilities and intentions appear over the horizon. In particular, contributions by a senior Chinese naval officer and several civilian scholars lead to the conclusion that Sino-US naval relations are far more competitive than cooperative and will continue to be well into the future.

These essays bear close reading because they faithfully reflect the thinking and policies of the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which comprises all of China's armed forces. The disclaimers that a contribution is based on personal opinion can be ignored as can platitudes about “mutual trust” and “peaceful development.” Rear Admiral Yang Yi, Director of the Institute for Strategic Studies at the PLA's National Defense University, is forthright: “One undeniable fact is that China and the United States harbor strategic suspicions toward each other.”

Admiral Yang asserts that the United States is “bogged down” in the Middle East and the US military is stretched so thin “that it has impaired the routine building of its defense capability.” Conversely, he writes, China has enjoyed political stability, economic prosperity, and a “Revolution in Military Affairs with Chinese characteristics.” Moreover, he contends: “The United States needs a threat like China to maintain its military hegemony,” with China taking the role he says the Soviet Union played during the Cold War. Today, he maintains, “only China can fulfill that role.” The admiral argues that China and the United States are “both making military preparations for worst-case scenarios in the Taiwan Strait.”

Taiwan, the self-governing island off the coast of China, is Chinese territory in the eyes of Beijing. The United States says sovereignty is unsettled and must be decided peaceably by people on both sides of the strait. Until that difference is resolved, Admiral Yang concludes, “it is unrealistic for the PLA and the US military to engage in substantial military cooperation.”

A political scientist at Peking University, Yu Wanli, outlines the development of China's naval strategy over the past six decades from coastal defense and near-seas defense to the ambitions of some Chinese leaders to build a blue-water navy. He makes the pertinent point, however, that China's maritime strategy is "subject to the influence of China's traditional land power culture." Dr. Wu states that the late Alfred Thayer Mahan, the American maritime strategist, has influenced Chinese thinking but not to the point where the Chinese navy is ready to adopt a "far-oceans strategy" or a "dominance of the oceans" doctrine. Instead, he says, "there has emerged a great debate on sea power in China's academic and strategic thinking circles." No matter how the debate turns out, Dr. Wu concludes, "almost all scholars agree that the development of Chinese sea power will inevitably result in contradiction and conflict with the existing maritime hegemon—the United States."

An economist who is vice president of the National Institute for South China Sea Studies, Zhu Huayou, focuses on the vital waterway through which more shipping passes than through the Panama and Suez Canals combined. That sea-lane is crucial to Southeast Asian nations, to China, Korea, and Japan, and to US warships transiting between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Unfortunately, Dr. Zhu lapses into platitudes: "Increased mutual understanding is the fundamental condition for Sino-US maritime cooperation." He ducks the critical issue, which is that China insists that it holds "indisputable sovereignty" over what it claims is an internal sea while the United States considers it an international passage governed by freedom of navigation.

Andrew S. Erickson, an experienced China hand, an editor of this volume, and a political scientist at the Naval War College, is mildly optimistic that the US Navy and the PLA Navy can reach an accommodation rather than seeking to blow each other out of the water. He bases his positive view on the US Maritime Strategy and a skeptical but serious Chinese response.

The 2007 Maritime Strategy emphasizes "conflict prevention," securing the "global maritime commons" in the interests of both nations, and using humanitarian operations "to build mutual trust." Dr. Erickson says it has been subjected to meticulous Chinese scrutiny, with translations passed to top leaders. He warns, however, that "Chinese analysts express concern that the United States retains power to threaten core Chinese interests," including control of Taiwan, sovereignty over the South China Sea, and sea-lane security. Those concerns, he concludes, "offer a useful caution regarding the possibilities of US-China cooperation in the near term."