

**The 60th Birthday of the
People Liberation Army/Navy [中国人民解放军海军]
And China's Maritime Security in the 21st Century**

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On April 23rd 2009, China organized a fleet review in the northern port of Qingdao to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the creation of the People's Liberation Army-Navy. Chinese scholars now insist on the interrelation between sea power and national prosperity. Wu Qi described sea power as “*a vital determining factor in the long term prosperity of the State*”, quoting the historical examples of the rise and decline of the past empires (1).

As the world's first economic power for several centuries, imperial China certainly missed its opportunities to become a sea power. Chinese maritime trade in the Indian Ocean predated the famed Eunuch-Admiral Zeng-He whose seven expeditions' 600th anniversary were widely celebrated in China in 2005. Some of his ships reached the Atlantic and he played an important geopolitical role by checking on the southern neighbors of the threatening Tamerlane (*Timur-i-lang 1336-1405*).

Fearful of foreign influences, Chinese rulers forbade the repetition of such naval expeditions. Four hundred years of self imposed isolation brought disaster when the Anglo-French squadrons forced their way into China's ports. Like Japan, China quickly learned the lesson and acquired Western warships and techniques. But when its modern battleships were neutralized by inferior Japanese cruisers at the battle of Yalu in September 17, 1894, China lost not only Korea

and Taiwan but also the prospect to use sea power to its advantage: ensued half a century of national calamities, culminating with Civil War and Japanese invasion (2).

Soviet and Western influences in the development of the PLA Navy.

When Mao seized power in 1949, he made it clear that imperialists would never again set foot in China. He stressed the necessity “to build up not only a strong army but also a strong navy” (3). With its February 1950 treaty with the USSR, Beijing secured access to Moscow’s military technologies. On the naval side, the Soviet alliance allowed the transfer and the construction in China of frigates, submarines and torpedo boats. This burgeoning naval force enabled the People’s Liberation Army [PLA] to capture the littoral islands still controlled by the Nationalists. As China failed to conquer the emblematic Quemoy and Matsu islets in 1958, Mao embarked on the hazardous path to build a nuclear ballistic missile submarine. The split with Moscow two years later ended a decade of intensive technology transfers and brain drain from the Soviet ally. But despite the internal turmoil caused by the Cultural Revolution, the PLA Navy still managed to build four classes of guided missile destroyers and frigates and reproduce Soviet submarines and missile boats during that second decade.

At first, the threat of the Taiwanese navy and US 7th Fleet off its coast and in Vietnam represented the rationale for this costly program. In 1969 however, Mao chose to challenge the Soviet leadership over the Communist block. He deliberately attacked Soviet troops on a disputed river island provoking Moscow’s ire and unexpected build-up across the long border. Facing explicit threats of Soviet pre-emptive nuclear strikes or invasion, Mao and the over ambitious Lin Biao – killed in 1971 after a failed coup attempt - accelerated the nuclear submarine programs while China embarked on

its historical rapprochement with the United-States now very much needed to counterbalance the Soviet menace (4).

As Mao's pragmatic successor, Deng Xiao Ping normalized relations with the United-States in 1978 and launched on that same year his vast reform that included opening up to Western capitalism and technologies. The US, the UK, France, Italy transferred armaments or dual technologies that helped to upgrade the PLA's hardware. Its backwardness had been made obvious after Beijing's ill-fated punitive expedition against Moscow's Vietnamese ally in 1979. It was mutually advantageous for Beijing and Washington to upgrade the PLA and complicate Soviet calculations (5). The technology transfers enabled the Chinese Navy to acquire combat systems, air defense missiles, anti-submarine sensors and torpedoes, naval helicopters, gas turbines and diesel engines. Meanwhile, China had managed to fire a ballistic missile from a submerged submarine and commissioned its first nuclear submarines (6).

In the aftermath of the UNCLOS treaty creating the economic exclusive zone [EEZ], China issued in 1985 a new strategic doctrine of "offshore defense". Peripheral conflicts and limited wars involving naval and air forces were deemed more likely. They found an illustration with China's brutal seizures of the Vietnamese occupied Paracels/Xisha and Spratley/Nansha islands in 1974 and 1988. The new doctrine aimed at "winning local wars under normal conditions". Liu Huaqing, the new navy commander (1982-87) and admirer of Gorshkov's blue water navy drew a map for future naval operations up to the first and second chain islands in the Western Pacific (7). While Western support had improved ships designs, the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre resulted in a Western arms embargo preventing further weapons transfers.