

# China Looks to the Sea: A Historical Analysis of Geopolitical Strategy

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**China is rapidly developing into one of the most powerful states in the international system. To take its place as a regional hegemon, and a true international giant, one of the most important steps for China was to modernize and drastically expand its navy. Over the past three decades, it has done this. Since the opening up of the People's Republic of China in the 1970s and Deng Xiaoping's modernizations of the 1980s, China and the United States have been on a militaristic and economic collision course in East Asia. By looking at 19th century Chinese history, I elucidate the "century of humiliation" experienced by China and how strategic naval failures during this time period are still providing lessons to modern naval strategists. I also look for a comparative example to Imperial Germany, and examine the strategic failures of a similar search for world power. My strategic analysis of the expansion of Chinese naval power concludes by providing a basis by which to compare the United States and China in an impending clash between these two powerful nations.**

## INTRODUCTION

"China," Napoleon Bonaparte is believed to have said, "is a sleeping giant. When she awakes she will shake the world" (BBC, 2011). Two hundred years later, the famous Frenchman appears to be quite correct: the rise of China has become the question of the decade for American policymakers and scholars around the globe. Any attempt by China to claim her place as a giant in the international order would not come without significant developments in China's infrastructure, economy, and military; in fact, over the past 3 decades China has reformed all three. Perhaps most importantly, to truly develop into an international power China needs to develop her navy into a world class fighting force. However, as naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan noted in his timeless treatise on sea power, "The history of Sea Power is largely... a narrative of contests between nations, of mutual rivalries, of violence frequently culminating in war" (Mahan, 1916, 1). China's rise will not come without significant conflict. What will follow is a contest of technology and strategy, of wills and skills, and of resources to determine mastery of the high seas. The People's Republic of China is strengthening their navy with the intent of becoming the dominant naval and geopolitical force in East Asia, and certain historical examples can shed light on the strategic process by which the Chinese Navy is rapidly developing.

## THE CURRENT SITUATION

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), as of 2010, is one of the largest in the world and the

most powerful of East Asian nations. It has grown exponentially in the past three decades, both in size and strength. The PLAN boasts a surface fleet of 26 heavy destroyers, 51 frigates, 79 light missile boats, 62 amphibious vessels, and 20 minesweepers among a variety of support ships. Almost all these, in contrast to most of the history of the PLAN, are Chinese built and designed (Cole, 2010, 93). Perhaps most telling for an analysis of the strategic goals of China's navy is its acquisition of an ex-Soviet aircraft carrier, repaired and re-outfitted as the Shi Lang (Cole, 2010, 91). Having recently landed a plane on the Shi Lang in fall of 2012, China joins an elite club of naval nations with an active carrier in commission. Although this ship will be used primarily for training purposes, it represents a great leap forward in Chinese sea power. The most formidable weapons used by her ships are China's anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM). While not quite as 'home grown' as many of the ships, that does not make them any less effective. These missiles are carried by ships and aircraft of the PLAN, but the most dangerous weapons to opposing navies are actually China's shore based ASCMs. Though they are not technically under the umbrella of the Navy (they are controlled by the artillery corps), they have the potential to hit and destroy a carrier underway after being fired from inland China. These missiles are still under development, with new technology being produced to effectively control the guidance system, but they represent an increased effort by China to control the waters surrounding the mainland (Cole, 2010, 100-112).

China's most impressive armada lies not on

the waves, but under it: her submarine force is among the largest and most effective in the world. Similar to the surface fleet, PLAN submarines are now mostly Chinese-built and designed models. The 21 Ming class, fourteen Song class, and four Yuan class submarines are conventional diesel powered boats that can operate very effectively over short ranges. The twelve Kilo class, one Xia class, and four diesel-powered Jin class submarines and are undersea platforms for the most effective anti-ship cruise missiles China deploys. Lastly, China also has six long range nuclear submarines of two classes (four older Han model boats and two newer Shang class) as well as three subs of the newest Jin class undergoing final tests (Cole, 2010, 95-97). These numbers, 62 in total, will only continue to increase: China has averaged producing between two and five submarines a year in the past fifteen years over its three major shipyards (Globalsecurity.org, 2012). Although numbers can be deceiving, and certainly don't tell the whole story with regards to naval power, they can still offer some clue as to how far China has come with developments in the PLA Navy: China has a total of 238 surface ships of varying tonnage and firepower, 62 submarines with many more in development and under production, and one carrier (commissioned on a training purpose). The United States has 10 carriers (by far the largest fleet of carriers in the world), 71 submarines, and 102 surface ships (US Navy Vessel Register, 2012). In a future conflict, these two fleets would be far more comparable than US public opinion often assumes.

## PLAN HISTORY

### *Creation and Pre-Cultural Revolution*

To understand the People's Liberation Army Navy, it is important to understand its origin and history. Historical missions and operational tasks of the PLAN are still relevant today in determining overall naval strategy. In 1949, Mao Zedong declared the founding of the People's Republic of China, and with it the People's Liberation Army and PLA Navy became institutions of the Chinese state. The early years for the PLAN were marked by a low priority and low esteem: "The communists' victory in 1949 was an Army victory, not a Navy one; the People's Liberation Army was unable to project power across even the narrow Taiwan Strait" (Cole, 2010, 7). The stated mission of the PLAN in this time period was to defend mainland China against the vague notion of 'imperialist aggression.' This initial task in furthering the revolution was concerned primarily with defending China from raids

by nationalist Guomindang forces in exile on Taiwan. Ironically enough, the creation of the PLAN was rooted in the destruction of the GMD forces, as the majority of initial PLAN sailors and ships came from ships deserting the losing nationalist navy. The navy was officially established as a separate entity from the PLA in May 1950, with General Xiao Jingguang in command. Xiao was a revolutionary officer of the Army, and had no prior naval experience (a trend which would continue until well into the modern period of PLAN existence): his forces consisted primarily of small vessels, and were subject to a host of problems such as a lack of training, a lack of amphibious ships capable of conducting joint operations with the Army, and a very low budgetary priority. These problems effectively stopped the PLAN from becoming a major force for the first ten years of its existence, as it was relegated to the role of ground support and coastal defense in most of its operations (Cole, 2010, 7-10).

Throughout the course of the 1960s, affairs went from bad to worse for the PLA Navy. The Sino-Soviet split resulted in the withdrawal of Soviet advisers from China in 1960, as well as a drastic reduction of military technological and economic support for further development (Cole, 2010, 12). Shortly thereafter, Mao, fearful of losing political support after the failure of the Great Leap Forward, declared the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution. The GPCR was far from "great" – it resulted in an estimated two decade setback in modernization for the PLA navy. Mao's cult of personality and insistence on the value of "red" over "expert" essentially decapitated the officer corps of the PLAN, and "seriously hampered the technological development in general; even the relatively sacrosanct missile, submarine, and nuclear weapons programs were affected" (Cole, 2010, 13). Ideology was valued over technology, and 'Red' triumphed as Mao reigned supreme.

### *Post-Cultural Revolution*

By the middle of the 1970s, as the Cultural Revolution waned, China began to once again recognize the need for experts rather than politically minded party members in their Navy. As the reality of Soviet enmity sunk in, Communist Party leadership realized they had two major concerns of a naval nature: first, and primary concern, was of a Soviet amphibious invasion from the northeast and the severing of sea lines of communication by the Soviet navy. A secondary concern was Japan: beginning to rise again under the protection of the United States, China saw her histori-

cal enemy as an ever present threat just off the coast (Cole, 2010, 13-14). However, major problems still limited the growth of the PLAN, such as lingering disorder from the GPCR. Without an effective, growing economy it was difficult for Mao to pay for the expensive task of modernizing the navy. Most of the limited funding was for the army, which was preparing against the possibility of a land-based Soviet invasion. Also a stumbling block for naval development was ideological insistence on the navy as a coastal force limited to support of the army. Deng Xiaoping, then a member of the 'Gang of Four,' stated: "Our navy should conduct coastal operations. It is a defensive force. Everything in the construction of the navy must accord with this guiding principle" (Cole, 2010, 14).

By the time Deng Xiaoping emerged as the sole leader of China in the 1980s, China finally began to undertake extensive campaigns to truly modernize the PLA Navy. For the first time, Chinese built ships formed the bulk of the fleet, and Chinese developed classes of ships were on pace to exceed the performance of those foreign ships still in the PLAN. Deng Xiaoping also recognized the need for reform within the command structure of the fleet, stating already in 1975 that the Chinese military was "overstaffed, lazy, arrogant, ill-equipped, and ill-prepared to conduct modern warfare" (Cole, 2010, 16). In addition to changes in personnel and equipment, strategic changes on the global scale also began to affect China under Deng. In 1985, Beijing decided that the Soviet Union no longer presented a major threat to China in the form of a land invasion or even in the realm of global nuclear war. This freed up huge amounts of resources that could be devoted to naval modernization, but also fundamentally changed the types of wars that China expected to fight. For the first time, Beijing had to focus on smaller conflicts on the border of the nation instead of large continental wars: exactly those kinds of conflicts that required a swift and modern fleet. Lastly, the 1980s presented China with the beginning of their remarkable economic performance that continues to this day. That economy-driven development allowed China the extra resources needed to focus on modernizing the PLAN through indigenous construction, foreign purchases, and reverse engineering (Cole, 2010, 15-17).

### ***Looking Towards the Modern Era***

The end of the cold war presented China with still more new challenges and opportunities. The modern era finds the Chinese government looking more towards economic performance and nationalism as

sources of legitimacy, rather than ideology, and a modern navy represents both of these aspects. Although China hasn't had any significant naval conflicts since the late 1980s, many territorial disputes provide ample excuse for nationalistic posturing by this ever-developing force. In the 1990s, China expanded to fill the vacuum left by the Soviet Union's collapse and oppose the US in East Asia, and also began to stress the development of high-the weapons specifically to counter the US advantage in ship construction and overall tonnage. The PLA has used this relative calm of the 90s and early 2000s to articulate new military goals for its navy. Instead of being a limited coastal defense force, the PLAN stated goals are to have a navy that is "confident of winning small scale wars, capable of fighting medium wars, and acquiring the basic ability to fight a major war" (Huang, 2003, 249).

Through the course of its modernization, the PLA navy has seen two pervasive themes develop: one, a challenge to overcome, and the other, a strategic debate started by Mao. The first consistency is a continental mindset that pervaded the early leadership of the PLAN. This resulted in the diversion of funds to the army, as opposed to the navy, and was a barrier to developing significant naval advantages. The continental focus has been a part of the Chinese military throughout history, and in the 20th century was manifested in fears of a large, Soviet land invasion from the north. This emphasis also manifested itself in the leaders of the PLA Navy: until 1988, the head of the PLAN was an army officer rather than a naval officer. In addition to this, the CCP Central Military Commission (the headquarters of Chinese military control) has been consistently an army dominated body. PLAN seats have never risen above 15.56% (7 seats, as opposed to the PLA receiving 45 seats in 1992), with older incarnations of the CMC showing less than 10% naval membership (Huang, 2003, 267). This will be one traditionally ingrained part of the Chinese military that must be changed if China is to be successful as it looks to naval power.

### ***"The People's War at Sea" and PLAN Strategy***

Another factor present in Chinese naval development is the idea of the "people's war at sea." The strategic principles of a traditional revolutionary fighting force essentially embody this strategy, with deception and surprise, force concentration and local superiority, and mobile forces being the three key tenants of the "people's war." Even today observers see this emphasis in the PLA Navy, with large numbers of quick,



highly maneuverable, smaller missile boats forming the backbone of the fleet (Huang, 2003, 264). Of course, there are both strategic advantages and disadvantages to this philosophy. While it could prove effective for small scale battles with a superior force over a very limited area, as were many conflicts early in the history of the PRC, the “People’s War” concept would need significant philosophical changes to guide the PLAN to success as a regional hegemon. Many critics of the idea say that the “People’s War” is now dead; the mission of the PLAN has so radically and fundamentally changed that communist ideology is no longer relevant. The navy no longer operates within the ‘comfort zone’ of coastal missions for which the “People’s War” strategy was designed, and with a larger fleet and better technology typical guerrilla tactics such as night movement, hiding vessels to avoid radar, and other deceptions simply are no longer possible (Huang, 2003, 265).

Despite these drawbacks, the “People’s War” is an alluring concept that is still at the core of Chinese naval theory. A defensive mindset and local operations (even though operations in the East and South China Seas are farther to sea than the traditional, coastal role of the navy, they are still well within China’s area of operation in any conflict China might face) are still vital in the PRC’s stated naval goals (Huang, 2003, 266). In 2004, President Hu Jintao articulated a series of four strategic imperatives to guide China’s naval development and modernization:

1. Consolidate the ruling status of the Communist Party
2. Help ensure China’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, and domestic security in order to continue national development
3. Safeguard China’s expanding national interests
4. Help maintain world peace (Cooper, 2009, 3)

Essentially, these four goals correspond to China’s desire to control its own regional waters (the East and South China Sea) as well as finally settle the Taiwan issue.

This strategy platform also illustrates the strong influence of the oft-cited western naval historian, Alfred Thayer Mahan. According to Mahan, “the necessity of a navy, in the restricted sense of the word, springs, therefore, from the existence of a peaceful shipping, and disappears with it, except in the case of a nation which has aggressive tendencies and keeps up a navy merely as a branch of the military establishment” (Ma-

han, 1916, 26). China, as Hu Jintao would portray, has both of these necessities: they are the second largest economic power in the world, and the development and protection of Chinese “national interests” is the protection of this economic power. China also is asserting territorial claims in many island disputes throughout East Asia, and the nationalistic pride that fuels these conflicts also fuels Mahan’s “aggressive tendencies.” The PLA Navy is currently at a crossroads of these two strategic purposes. Which one will they choose to follow – ultimately defensive protection of economic interests (as many in power in China profess), or offensive, Mahan-style naval expansion? History offers two especially relevant examples that can be helpful in determining China’s strategic course.

### HISTORICAL COMPARISON: THE QING NAVY

Through the course of its history, China has had many powerful dynasties. These states were at the cutting edge of technology, had the most powerful militaries in the world, and were among the richest nations on the planet. However, the late Qing dynasty in the 19th century was not one of these dynasties. In fact, the latter half of the 19th century forms the first half of the so-called “century of humiliation” in Chinese history, which provides nationalistic motivation against foreigners to this day. The Qing navy was particularly ineffective, as evidenced by a series of brutal defeats against foreign powers during the course of the 19th century. There are three primary reasons for the decline of Chinese naval forces leading up to these defeats: a continuous continental focus, ethnic rivalries within China, and a defensive focus with trading restrictions (Elleman, 2009, 294). Each of these remains relevant in China today, and provides valuable lessons for modern Chinese strategists.

#### *Qing Naval Weaknesses*

When the Manchu-led Qing dynasty first conquered China, they did so through the use of land forces, not naval technology. Additionally, as China entered the 19th century numerous territorial disputes with continental powers and rebellious groups drew attention away from the sea. Russia began to assert territorial claims along the northern border, and revived disputes that had been dormant for a century. Mongolian tribes, Tibetans, and Turkic Muslims in the west also endangered the Qing from the interior. In general, the dynasty considered these continental threats far more important than the development of the navy (Elleman,

2009, 291-293). Exacerbating this problem was the ethnic makeup of China at this time. The ruling dynasty was of Manchu origin, and not of Han Chinese (the dominant ethnicity in the rich coastal regions of China). The military forces in general were ethnically fractured and hereditary, which limited their effectiveness as a fighting force. The navy was actually an exception, but it was made up almost exclusively of Han Chinese. The Manchus in power feared an uprising by troops in coastal regions, so did all they could to limit the resources given to the navy. Naturally, this led to purposefully divided and weak fleets with limited technology, limited ships, and limited overall effectiveness. Moreover, naval officers were given their positions not for experience or knowledge of naval affairs, but rather for good performance on the civil academic exams. The Qing navy was without experienced leadership, without money, and without unity: a recipe for disaster (Elleman, 2009, 293-294).

On top of even these mighty stumbling blocks lay yet another problem for the Qing navy: strategic emphasis on inadequate defenses. Prevailing naval theory at the time held that China could defeat any invading force, if it could simply lure them far enough inland. Thus, tactics often used by the under-supplied navy included blocking off strategic harbors with chains and log booms, fortifying rivers with strings of ships chained together, and retreating inland under the protection of heavily fortified, supposedly impregnable island defenses. Additionally, the government would cut off trade and expel any outsiders: foreign trade could only be conducted in the southern city of Canton, so removing foreign ships from this city would serve to isolate any foreign navy. Eventually, it was hoped, the invaders would simply give up and go home (Elleman, 2009, 294). In general, these strategic principles proved to be utterly ineffective against modern navies, and resulted in complete defeat at the hand of the British, French, and Japanese in a series of four wars over the course of the century.

### ***The Qing are Tested: The Opium Wars and Subsequent Reform Efforts***

In 1839, the Qing dynasty attempted to throw out British opium merchants in China in order to halt an outpouring of silver. The British refused to go quietly: thus began the first Opium War, and with it the 'century of humiliation' for China. By June 1842, Shanghai had

fallen to the invading British troops, with the Yangzi River and Grand Canal falling shortly thereafter. This led the Qing Dynasty to sign the Treaty of Nanjing on August 29, 1842 (Elleman, 2009, 295-301). Fourteen years later, in 1856, China again ended up in a war over trading rights with western powers. The Second Opium War, also known as the Arrow War, came as the Qing dynasty was attempting to fend off a massive internal revolt, the Taiping Rebellion. Due to these internal problems, opportunistic expansions by Russia into northwest China, and the ethnic divides within the military, governmental officials did not learn applicable lessons of the First Opium War. It showed: by 1859, the western powers had captured and burned the Qing summer palace of Yuanmingyuan, just outside of Beijing. In 1860, China concluded this unfortunate war with another peace treaty, ceding yet more trading rights and privileges to the British and French (Elleman, 2009, 301-303).

By now, the Qing government recognized the need for drastic naval reform. Even during the middle of the first Opium War, High Commissioner Lin Zexu had proposed the creation of a modern navy capable of attacking and defeating the enemy on the open sea. Set forth in 1840, his navy would be built on the principles of "good weapons," "skill and experience," "courage and strength," and the ability to "work with one mind" (Elleman, 2009, 299). Lin supported the creation of "highly coordinated defensive, rather than offensive, naval strategies" (Elleman, 2009, 302). Essentially, he was suggesting a navy capable of defending China through offensive firepower, destroying any attacking navy but not itself becoming vulnerable. However, he was largely ignored by the government until after the second Opium War. By the end of China's second crushing defeat in 20 years, the Qing government was ready to implement changes. In 1866, Zuo Zongtang founded the Fuzhou dockyards and worked with French experts to develop a domestic shipbuilding capacity. These ships constructed were of the western model, and were Lin Zexu's required "good weapons." However, officer training was less successful and many ships were launched undermanned and without experienced crewmembers (Elleman, 2009, 304).

Li Hongzhang, governor-general of the Zhili province, advocated the next major step in naval development: an overhaul in the organization of the navy. He advocated splitting the navy into four fleets: the Beiyang fleet, based in Port Arthur and Weihaiwei; the Guangdong fleet, in the south at Canton; the Nanyang

fleet, on the Yangzi river; and the Fuzhou fleet, at the Fuzhou naval yard. By 1882, these fleets consisted of approximately 50 modern steamships, but each fleet was administratively separate. This was one compromise that ultimately compromised the effectiveness of the fleet as a whole: because the Qing dynasty was afraid of a powerful, ethnically Han fleet that could turn against them, they built in barriers to fleet communication and coordination. These barriers proved to be the ruin of the fleet in the Sino-French war (1883-1885), as the northern fleets could not, or would not, come to the aid of the embattled south (Elleman, 2009, 306-312).

### ***Reform Failure: The Sino-Japanese War***

A mere nine years after a crushing defeat to France, the Qing navy was once again thrown into war, this time against Japan. Since the Meiji restoration in 1868, Japan had industrialized and modernized their army and navy at a ferocious pace, and with remarkable effectiveness. During the short Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) all of the Chinese attempts at naval modernization over the previous 50 years came to naught. On September 17, 1894, the Japanese fleet defeated the entire Beiyang fleet without losing a single ship of its own in the Battle of the Yellow Sea (also known as the Battle of the Yalu). This was followed by a Chinese defeat on November 21, 1894, at the fleet's home port of Port Arthur, and the final complete destruction of the fleet in February 1895 at its other refuge in Weihaiwei. Finally, the self-interested intervention of western powers to prevent the utter collapse of the Qing dynasty resulted in the Treaty of Shimonoseki in April 1895. This treaty ceded Taiwan and other islands to Japan, made Korea effectively a Japanese protectorate, and laid the groundwork for an Asia in which Japan was the dominant military power (Elleman, 2009, 312-313).

Why did the Qing navy collapse so completely after such a long period of strengthening and modernization? Bruce Elleman, a scholar at the US Naval War College, has an answer: "The Battle of the Yalu demonstrated that modern naval equipment can be useless without the Westernized training that allows forces to coordinate together as a unit" (Elleman, 2009, 312). Lin Zexu would have agreed with Elleman, had he lived to see the defeats that followed the first Opium war. Instead of modernizing rapidly and completely, as Lin had initially suggested, Qing efforts were fraught with the kind of continental mindset, ethnic rivalries, and defensive focus that failed them from the start. There were no developments in naval strategy to cor-

respond with developments in weaponry, there was too little training to effectively use the new weapons, and overall efforts were marked by disjointed and uncoordinated displays of naval inadequacy (Elleman, 2009, 313-314).

### ***Strategic Lessons of the Qing Failure***

To the modern PLA observer, these displays of inadequacy can offer some interesting strategic insights into the process of naval development. To begin with, China needs to modernize, and modernize fast. This lesson was most clearly needed coming out of the Cultural Revolution, as China lagged so far behind the rest of the world: the 19th century taught historians and strategists the dangers of attempting modernizations halfheartedly. Weapons without training, ships without experience, and modern navies without modern strategies will all come to an unfortunate end. The present-day PRC must have looked at these experiences and realized that accepting modern technology means accepting western strategy to go along with the technology; thus, the shift in recent years away from the "people's war" of Mao and back towards western ideas of naval power in Mahan's seminal work. A second strategic lesson that China can take from the examples of the Qing Empire is that dividing resources works to the detriment of all. During the Arrow war, the Chinese government was faced with threats of internal rebellion, continental war (with Russia) and naval aggression from Britain and France. Ultimately, by attempting to divide resources among all three they lost the strategically important naval contest. If modern day China is to effectively develop the PLA Navy to a point of competing on the world scale, it must seek to stabilize internal affairs and concerns with continental neighbors in order to focus resources on expensive technological development.

Lastly, the major strategic fallacy of the Qing navies was the assumption that defensive strategy trumps offensive force. The reforms sought throughout the 19th century all assumed a defensive mindset and sought to deter rather than to destroy enemy fleets. An effective 21st century Chinese fleet needs to eschew these traditional viewpoints and seek offensive firepower equal to any navy in the world. If China had focused resources on creating a technologically competent fleet capable of defeating an enemy fleet of comparable size on the open ocean, rather than simply trying to close off ports and rivers with outdated technology, they might very well have had some success. With its development of modern weapons platforms (such as the Houbei class



missile boats) capable of firing devastating anti-ship cruise missiles accurate over long distances, China has shown the ability and willingness to take the fight to the (as of yet, hypothetical) enemy. China's stated goals thus far are defensive, but to achieve them they will continue developing the offensive might necessary to avoid inward looking defensive policies.

## HISTORICAL COMPARISON: IMPERIAL GERMANY

### *Basis for Comparison*

To determine what results of PLAN development may be, it is helpful to look at a historical analogy; as Mark Twain said in his short story *The Jumping Frog*, "A favorite theory of mine—to wit, that no occurrence is sole and solitary, but is merely a repetition of a thing which has happened before, and perhaps often" (Twain, 1903). This idea has merit: Imperial Germany in the late 19th century was in a very similar situation to modern China. Both were relatively new nations on the international scene at the time of their ascent to power (the PRC was founded in 1949, the German Empire in 1871), both are traditionally continental, land-based powers, and both find themselves in a difficult strategic situation, confronting a world superpower and surrounded by a host of hostile states. Both states also underwent a time of very rapid industrial/economic growth to cement their status as a world power. Germany in 1871 was a divided, agrarian state. Recently unified by the political genius of Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the German people were only just beginning to think of themselves as "Germans." Germany in 1871 was, however, riding a rising tide of military power. Led by the disciplined and technologically powerful Prussian army, the unified German forces had dealt a resounding blow to their traditional enemy, France, in the Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871). Bismarck, in his "Bad Kissingen Memorandum" of 1877, then identified what he saw as the new empire's greatest strategic interests (Herwig, 2009, 172).

Bismarck quickly identified the specter of World War One in defeated France; he saw that the French would not take their defeat in 1871 lightly, nor would they accept the loss of Alsace and Lorraine (valuable industrial and economic regions in Northern France) without protest. Thus, he singled out France as Germany's most likely enemy over the coming decades. Germany, with its position in the center of Europe, was vulnerable to the so-called "nightmare of coalitions:" any combination of France, Britain, Austria-Hungary, and Russia could easily surround Germany and force the

newest of the five powers to fight a disastrous two-front war (Herwig, 2009, 173). To avoid this, he declared Germany a 'sated' empire that would not seek any further expansion or aggressive wars. He also rejected the attempts at securing a colonial empire for Germany: this would only anger the traditional colonial empires of France and Britain, and force them into an alliance against Germany. It would also entail the expansion of the German navy, which would alienate Britain and make them into an enemy. Lastly, Bismarck sought alliances: he secured commitments from Austria-Hungary in 1879 and Russia in 1887. These three tactics – denial of expansionism, avoiding colonialism, and building alliances – formed the major points of Bismarck's realpolitik power brokering to keep Europe peaceful (Herwig, 2009, 173-174).

### *World War One*

By the 1890s, Bismarck had fallen out of power, and his ideas had fallen out of favor with him. Germany was rapidly changing; the empire had realized its vast potential for economic power, and was industrializing into a European powerhouse. German banking and industry showed remarkable growth in overseas business: oceangoing shipping in 1914 was 5.1 million tons, second only to Britain. In light of this, Bismarck's warning against naval expansion was forgotten. His realpolitik power brokering was undone: the treaty with Russia was allowed to lapse, and the aggressive Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz was given the power to expand the navy. Tirpitz had but one goal for his new navy: "to annihilate British sea power if London proved unwilling to accord Germany its newly defined 'place in the sun'" (Herwig, 2009, 176). Tirpitz forsook continental defense and concentrated on building a large, Mahan style 'capital ship' fleet for the purpose of winning big battles at sea. He sought public support for the fleet by spreading the works of Alfred Thayer Mahan, and gained monetary support by taxing the new German economic engine. All in all, his goal was to have a fleet of 41 battleship and 20 battle cruisers, in addition to smaller support vessels and U-boats, by the mid-1920s. As tensions with Britain and the rest of European powers rose through the early 1900s, Tirpitz described the fleet as a Risikoflotte: a 'risk fleet' powerful enough to deter Britain from interfering with German affairs, but not aggressive. The Risikoflotte, risky to Germany as well as to Britain, remained a symbol for national industrial progress and world power; the new Germany had scientific and engineering skill to match and sur-

pass any other power in the world (Herwig, 2009, 176-179).

However powerful and impressive the fleet of Tirpitz was, it did not save them from ultimate defeat in World War One. In fact, it barely even fought in the war; the single major naval battle between the Royal Navy and the High Seas Fleet was the Battle of Jutland in 1916, an indecisive conflict off the coast of Denmark. At the beginning of the war in 1914, the fleet was already bankrupt and the country as a whole was rapidly facing economic catastrophe. During the course of the war, the British did not descend into the Baltic and give battle to the High Fleet, but rather chose to blockade German trade from strategic choke points of the Strait of Dover and the North Sea; this resulted in further economic catastrophe for Germany and a major famine during the winter of 1917/1918. Due to this economic form of warfare, the Kriegsmarine (German Navy) looked increasingly to U-boats to destroy shipping lifelines of the British as the world's second most powerful surface fleet languished in port (Herwig, 2009, 181-193). By the end of the war, the fleet faced mutiny in 1917, revolution in 1918, and the ultimate naval disgrace in 1919: scuttling the fleet in accordance with the Treaty of Versailles.

### ***German Failures as they Relate to China***

#### *Arms races.*

Why did the powerful German surface fleet created by Admiral Tirpitz come to such ruin without having engaged the British Navy fully? Three main problems led to the downfall of German naval ambitions in World War One: a technological arms race that bankrupted the navy, poor geographical position, and major strategic fallacies. Each of these offers comparisons to the position of modern China, as well. The first warning for Germany came in 1905, with the launching of the HMS Dreadnought. This ship was the world's largest, most powerful and most modern battleship, and ushered in a strategic arms race between Britain and Germany. The Germans were forced to drastically alter their shipbuilding technique, and needed to expand naval docks, widen canals, spend money on research and development: altogether more spending than the German government could afford. The British, with their head start in terms of naval technology, forced the German navy to play catch-up. Tirpitz was unable to keep pace (Herwig, 2009, 185). However, the final death knell for Germany was not the number of newly constructed ships, but rather the ability of the Royal Navy

to recall ships from abroad. Strategic plans for the High Seas fleet assumed that British colonial interests would leave a large number of ships unable to concentrate in Britain's home waters. However, clever diplomatic efforts with the US and Japan allowed Britain to withdraw many of its naval forces in the Americas and East Asian regions, and sent those ships steaming home to defeat the Germans (Holmes and Yoshihara, 2010, 50).

In the context of China, these could be important strategic insights; the United States is in an analogous position to Britain. Germany made the mistake of allowing the British time to draw all their ships home; if China is to succeed in a possible conflict against the United States, they must establish regional superiority before the far-flung US ships can concentrate. However, the threat China poses to US interests in East Asia is very different from the "sharp knife, held gleaming and ready only a few inches away from the jugular vein of Germany's most likely enemy" (Paul Kennedy in Herwig, 2009, 176). China is not directly threatening US home soil, but rather economic and geopolitical interests far away from the American people. Thus, it is likely that the US fleet will not concentrate all of its assets in the East Asian theater, no matter how important it becomes. Thus, China need not fall into the trap that Germany did, in allowing itself to compete ship for ship with Great Britain. China could not win an arms race in naval technology with the United States, but they do not need to bankrupt themselves trying as long as they can maintain regional superiority (Holmes and Yoshihara, 2010, "Measure Strength").

#### *Geography.*

The second problem for the German fleet was geographic: not only were they surrounded on all sides by enemies, but they were afforded no direct outlets to the Atlantic Ocean. In order to release their High Seas Fleet onto the high seas, Berlin had three options. To begin with, they could not challenge the British and content themselves with control of the Baltic and Scandinavian resources. However, this would forfeit Germany's colonies, and cut Germany off from foreign trade. Understandably, this was not an attractive option (though it was the one into which they were reluctantly forced). The second choice was for the German army to complement naval strategy and force open a path to the Atlantic in the western coast of France. While this would have led to the Navy being able to make use of French ports, this relied on the assumption that the German army would be able to handily defeat the French



forces; as history has shown, this did not happen. Lastly, the German Navy could seek an outlet in the north. This would involve domination of Denmark and Norway, followed by campaigns to gain control of the Shetland Islands, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland. While strategically sound, this would rely on the ability of the navy to hold off the inevitable British counter-attack. All three of these options involved risking the fleet to battle, and that was one risk that Tirpitz was apparently unwilling to make (Holmes and Yoshihara, 2010, 48-50).

Although its coastline is significantly longer, China faces a similar geographic quandary. Just as Germany had to overcome enemy forces in the Strait of Dover and North Sea, China has its own chokeholds in two chains of islands scattered off its coast. Senior Colonel Feng Liang and Lt. Colonel Duan Tingzhi of China's Naval Command College describe these island barriers quite graphically, stating that "these islands obstruct China's reach to the sea... The partially sealed-off nature of China's maritime region has clearly brought about negative effects in China's maritime security... because of the nature of geography, China can be easily blockaded and cut off from the sea, and Chinese defense forces are difficult to concentrate" (Feng Liang and Duan Tingzhi in Holmes and Yoshihara, 2010,

51). Similarly, Gong Li (director of the Central Party School's institute of international strategy) describes China's problem as "having seas but not the ocean" (Gong Li in Holmes and Yoshihara, 2010, 51). Anyone who has studied recent Chinese history will have their eyes drawn quickly to the center of the first island chain: Taiwan. Although some critics may say that China's focus on asserting territorial sovereignty over Taiwan is a holdover from the Cold War, and that such a drive may hold them back from becoming a global superpower, Chinese strategists see Taiwan as the linchpin holding the first island chain together.

If China can accomplish their goal of unification with Taiwan, then the first island chain will no longer be a barrier holding them back from the ocean, but rather a springboard from which to control naval affairs in the entire western Pacific Ocean (Holmes and Yoshihara, 2010, 50-54).

*Grand Strategic Errors.*

For Germany, errors in grand strategy made by the leaders of the Kriegsmarine complicated their geographic problems. As expressed by General Wilhelm Groener shortly after the end of the war, "We struggled unconsciously for world dominion before we had secured our continental position... anyone who looks at



China's two strategic island chains (Maritime Security Challenges Conference, 2012)

the issue relatively clearly and historically cannot remain doubtful of it” (Wilhelm Groener in Herwig, 2009, 171). Germany could well have won World War One without a navy; in choosing to build one and make a desperate grab for world power, they compromised their strategic, continental position and ended up collapsing. In fact, Admiral Tirpitz did not have much of a tactical naval strategy either, beyond ‘sit and wait.’ “When Fleet Chief Friedrich von Ingenohl queried Tirpitz during fleet maneuvers in May 1914, “What will you do if they [the British] do not come?” the state secretary had no response” (Herwig, 2009, 184). China cannot afford to make these mistakes, and thus far they appear to be avoiding them. In developing their Navy, Chinese leaders have articulated overall strategic goals for the PLAN, including operational goals such as recovering Taiwan and controlling the island chains. China’s contest for power does not rely on enticing the US Navy into a fight, but rather in gaining control of area waters by pushing the US out. Therefore, PLAN leaders are encouraged to think about strategic objectives in an offensive term and avoid major mistakes made by the Qing Empire in addition to the German Empire.

### STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF THE MODERN PLAN

Sunzi, the earliest Chinese grand strategist, said in his Art of War that “Warfare is the greatest affair of state, the basis of life and death, the Way to survival or extinction. It must be thoroughly pondered and analyzed” (Sunzi, 1993, 157). These words have surfaced and resurfaced throughout history, and once again the great master of strategy has proved himself worth reading; for the PRC as it enters the 21st century, naval warfare is the ‘greatest affair of state.’ Specifically, grand strategy is important: though individual goals or actions of the PLAN may sometimes seem at odds with each other, the striking progress that they have made over the past 30 years is evidence of a centralized, robust, and effective grand strategy. But what is “grand strategy?” Carl von Clausewitz described strategy as “the use of engagements for the object of the war,” but that seems limited in scope to military strategy (Clausewitz in Kane, 2002, 2). Plato compared the art of governing to the “art of weaving separate threads into a whole piece of cloth,” but that analogy is also flawed, for it ignores the element of uncertainty inherent in any military related action (Kane, 2002, 2). Thomas M. Kane, in his book *Chinese Grand Strategy and Maritime Power* defines ‘grand strategy’ as something a bit more all-encompassing: “the use of political, economic, and

military actions to achieve the objectives of the regime” (Kane, 2002, 4). This is a definition of strategy that aligns closely with the ancient Chinese masters, with Bismarck-style realpolitik, and with modern Chinese thought: military power is a tool that can be used, like any other, to achieve the political ends of the regime.

Although China has successfully applied grand strategy over the course of its recent naval development, there remain but few clues to determine exactly how the PRC will respond in any given crisis. It is clear that China’s leaders seek power for their country; they have applied the principles of western naval strategy and traditional Chinese military thought to task of developing their navy to the point where they can credibly project their power over long distances in East Asia. It is also clear that Beijing seeks to become a regional hegemon in East Asia. However, this brings about a paradox in Chinese thinking: they profess a desire to rise peacefully within the existing geopolitical situation, yet any attempt by China to obtain regional dominance will conflict directly with the existing American world dominance. There is no such thing as peacefully coexisting hegemonies of any type; this is prohibited almost by definition of the word hegemon. If China continues to develop naval capacity with the current goal of dominating waters and trade in the East Asian region, there will be a clash between the United States and China.

### *Alfred Thayer Mahan as a Basis for Comparison*

A return to the writings of Alfred Thayer Mahan allows quite an effective method of comparison between the two countries in terms of naval power. Mahan chooses to evaluate the sea power of nations using six factors: Geographical position, physical conformation (by which he means resources and climate), extent of territory, number of population, character of the people (by which he refers to the type of naval experience undertaken) and character of the government (Mahan, 1916, 28-29). In terms of geography, China holds the obvious advantage. While the United States commands many forward bases in the region, most notably in allies Taiwan and Japan, any naval action would be concentrated in the East and South China Seas. This gives China the shorter supply lines, easier concentration of forces, and more reason to fight. In Mahan’s words, it has the “further strategic advantage of a central position and a good base for hostile operations against its probable enemies” (Mahan, 1916, 30). The category of physical conformation also must go to China. The country’s numerous large rivers and natural harbors

can easily facilitate trade and sea travel within the land boundaries of the country itself, and they are one of the sole producers of such valuable resources as rare earth minerals (key components of modern computer technology). The last physical category of Mahan's is territorial extent – here, he means not just “the total number of square miles which a country contains, but the length of its coast-line and the character of its harbors” (Mahan, 1916, 43). This category must go to the United States – with one of the longest coastlines in the world, it has many more harbors than does China, and when including strategically valuable bases in US territories in the Pacific, many of these harbors come quite close to the theater in which a war would be fought.

Mahan's fourth category of comparison is population. Naturally, China has the overwhelming edge in this category. Included here are not just total numbers of people, but also specific comparisons of “the number following the sea or at least readily available for employment on ship-board and for the creation of naval material” (Mahan, 1916, 45). However, despite China's edge in people, the United States has an undeniable edge in technology to blunt the sheer numbers of people, ships, and resources that China can bring to the battlefield. As for “character of the people,” this somewhat strange category refers to the reason that a country first went to sea. “If sea power be really based upon a peaceful and extensive commerce, aptitude for commercial pursuits must be a distinguishing feature of the nations that have at one time or another been great upon the sea” (Mahan, 1916, 50). Here, the United States would triumph over China. While the countries are currently first and second in overall economic output, the United States has a GDP of nearly double that of China (\$7.318 trillion for China compared to \$15.09 trillion for the United States) and has been an economic superpower for longer than China has been a country (World Bank, 2012).

Lastly, Mahan cites ‘character of the government’ as his final category for determining sea power. “A government in full accord with the natural bias of its people would most successfully advance its growth in every respect; and, in the matter of sea power, the most brilliant successes have followed where there has been intelligent direction by a government fully imbued with the spirit of the people” (Mahan, 1916, 58). So, clearly a government that is legitimate, maintains a consistently good grand strategy, and is in accord with the desires of the people will have the most success in developing naval power. While the natural inclination is to give

this category to the United States (due to its democratic government), many in China might argue with that: the Chinese government, while autocratic, has provided the people with an unparalleled time of prosperity, growth, and national prestige. Thus in looking at Mahan's six categories to determine sea power, China and the United States are locked in a tie: two clearly for China, two clearly for the US, and two too close to call. A naval clash between the titans will not be as straightforward a victory for the United States as strategists in this country sometimes assume.

## CONCLUSION

The PLA Navy defines command of the sea as:

“Employing sea forces to gain control of a particular maritime area for a particular period of time... to eliminate potential threats to the friendly side in a particular area, gain freedom of action on the sea for the friendly side, and enable the friendly side to effectively utilize the ocean to undertake political, military, and economic action; and when necessary, to strip the enemy's command of the sea, and stop him from using the ocean (or) cause his maritime activities to be limited” (Cole, 2010, 170).

With this all-encompassing definition of sea power, and with China's stated desire to be a regional hegemon and dominate affairs in East Asia, there will be a conflict between the US and China if neither nation alters its strategic course. Over the course of its development, the PLA Navy has exhibited remarkable foresight and long term planning; its leaders have learned from historical examples of failed naval development and have constructed their grand strategy accordingly. Gone is the focus on traditional defensive-minded techniques of the late imperial era, non-existent is the over-ambitious, grasping attempt at world power of Imperial Germany – the PRC's grand strategy and tactical goals are in accordance with each other, and lead directly to the long term geopolitical aim of dominating affairs in Asia.

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