

China Takes to the Sea by Loro Horta

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China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has made great strides in recent years as it seeks to come of age. As it seeks to demonstrate greater clout, it also seems to recognize the need to reassure others that the intentions behind its modernization program are peaceful. Accordingly, Beijing claims that its policy of the "harmonious seas" is based on respect for equal access and freedom of navigation for all humanity. However, many remain worried. Conscious of the apprehension its military modernization program is generating, Beijing has decided to counter it with a sophisticated military and defense diplomacy strategy; its naval diplomacy in particular has grown substantially in recent years, and now spans the seven seas.

The PLAN has since 2000 become the priority of China's military modernization program, acquiring 30 submarines and 22 surface ships in the past decade in addition to substantial numbers of maritime aviation assets and naval missilery. Beijing feels the need to reassure its neighbors and the world by portraying its naval and military expansion as benign and a natural result of its economic growth. Naval diplomacy is a major element of this effort.

In recent years, the PLAN has conducted a growing number of visits to foreign harbors and conducted joint exercises with other navies. In 2007 alone, Chinese warships visited 11 countries, with some of the trips as far as the North Atlantic. In 2007, the PLAN carried out joint exercises with the navies of France, Spain, Britain, and Russia. While these exercises were taking place in European waters, two other Chinese vessels were conducting visits to Australia and New Zealand. At about the same time, two other PLAN ships were visiting Pakistan.

The fact that 8 Chinese warships were simultaneously deployed in foreign waters near three different continents illustrates the growing importance of naval diplomacy to Beijing. It also illustrates the PLAN's growing ability to conduct small-scale operations far from its traditional area of operations. In 2008, Chinese warships visited 8 countries in Asia and Europe, while PLAN delegations visited 17 countries in Asia, Europe, South America, and Africa.

Earlier this year, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) celebrated its 60th anniversary. At Qingdao naval base

in east China, the PLAN showed its power to the world, but also it opened its doors to it. Warships representing navies from 14 countries including the U.S. and Australia attended the naval parade and got to see some of the PLAN's most advanced and secretive equipment, such as its nuclear submarines. The message seems to be "we are getting stronger, but more transparent and we are peaceful."

Educational exchanges are another growing component of China's naval diplomacy. In 2008, 97 foreign officers from 40 countries graduated from PLAN academies and institutes. The main academies providing education for foreign officers are PLAN Command and Staff College in Nanjing, the Navy Technical University, and the Dalian Naval School, with courses in English as well as French and Spanish. The National Defense University of the People's Liberation Army (PLANDU), while not a naval school, has received large numbers of navy officers from around the world.

The PLAN and the Chinese military in general are sending increasingly large numbers of its officers to foreign military academies. In 2006, 23 PLAN officers attended courses overseas, ranging from short operationally-oriented courses to longer courses at Command and Staff Colleges. Chinese naval officers also attend courses in foreign civilian universities, with a dozen or so PLAN officers graduating from post-graduate programs at Singaporean, Australian, and European universities in 2007.

The donation of naval equipment and other material is used by China to win goodwill. In 2007, following the visit of the Bolivian Chief of Defense Force to China, Beijing donated 6 12-meter patrol boats to the Bolivian Navy. Medium and small vessels have been donated to Mauritania, Tanzania, Burma, Cambodia, and Sierra Leone. China has also repaired or built naval bases, constructed barracks, storage facilities, and military hospitals, and donated communication equipment, diving equipment, and cartographic materials to 34 countries around the world.

On October 2008, the Chinese Navy took delivery of its most modern hospital ship, *Hospital ship 866*. The 10,000 ton vessel is, according to the *People's Daily*, the largest hospital ship ever built by any country. It will be based in Qingdao and could become a major tool in Chinese diplomacy. Following the example of the U.S. Navy hospital ship *USNS Mercy*, which has conducted several humanitarian missions, the PLAN hopes to use its ship to conduct humanitarian operations.

Anti-piracy operations and escort of merchant shipping have since the beginning of this year emerged as another important element of Chinese naval diplomacy. Since January PLAN destroyers have escorted dozens of vessels off the coast of Somalia including Taiwanese, Japanese, and UN World Food Program cargo-carrying ships.

Several factors account for China's growing naval diplomacy. First and foremost China is eager to portray its military expansion and modernization as peaceful and in the interest of regional stability.

With the discrediting of Marxism-Leninism, the Chinese Communist Party has been relying increasingly on economic growth and nationalism as a source of legitimacy. It is no coincidence that missions such as the anti-piracy missions were given wide coverage in the Chinese media. The objective was clearly to construct an image of China as a great naval power to an ever-growing nationalist public. These missions contribute to patriotic fervor and help maintain the CCP in power. Naval diplomacy also offers China prestige as a great power on the world stage.

Greater interaction with the outside world and foreign navies also allows the PLAN exposure to the latest developments in naval doctrine and technology. In September 2007, the PLAN conducted for the first time an exercise with an aircraft carrier when two of its ships joined a British carrier for maneuvers in the North Atlantic. Given China's publicly stated intention to acquire an aircraft carrier before 2020, such exercises are of great value to the PLAN.

These exercises and visits also allow the PLAN to practice valuable skills such as global navigation, re-supply at sea, long-range communications while giving its sailors and officers the opportunity to grow accustomed to long periods of operations in the high seas. In 2002, the PLAN conducted its first circumnavigation of the globe, with two of its ships staying at sea for 132 days. In 2008, two Chinese vessels spent 87 days at sea in European and Asian waters. The PLAN's efforts to strengthen its long-range operational capability are in line with its ambitions to become a blue-water navy.

China's growing naval diplomacy and the rapid modernization of its naval forces are an illustration of its growing ambitions as a naval power – ambitions that it is eager to assure others are beneficial to the world and Asia in particular. In this effort its naval diplomacy and its military diplomacy in general are crucial to its overall strategy as a great power. However, Beijing's naval diplomacy and its military diplomacy send mixed messages. On the one hand, the PLAN is becoming more open and transparent, increasing its contact with foreign navies. On the other, it is expanding its arsenal and feeling more confident in showing it to the world. Is it a case of a more cooperative China at sea or a more confident and potentially assertive one? Only time will tell.