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## Assessing China's Naval Power

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is a great institutional danger, especially in the military profession, where free thinking, combined with robust debate, is the essential prerequisite for not being outthought and outfought by future foes.

Almost as dangerous as intellectual thuggery is willful ignorance of “unpleasant truths” or empirical evidence. This was illustrated most notoriously by Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus’s recent a priori policy decision, made in the fashion of *Alice in Wonderland’s* Red Queen (“Sentence first, verdict afterwards!”), to open all ground combat positions to women regardless of any data that might result subsequently from the Marine Corps’s rigorous yearlong study regarding the performance of mixed-gender units. That sort of thing corrosively undermines the institutional trust essential to the success of any military organization.

*Pussycats* doubtless is controversial. However, van Creveld’s arguments are coherent and intellectually substantive, even if one may disagree with some of the assumptions he makes to support them. Because they explicitly address the most fundamental criterion for assessing military forces—their *combat effectiveness*—they are very worth pondering by serving military officers and civilian policy makers, especially those more senior. Certainly the question of why Western military might, in conjunction with the other elements of state power, has not been more effective during the past half-century is a crucial one, given the multiple dangerous challenges the West confronts both today and over the longer term.

JAN VAN TOL



*Assessing China’s Naval Power: Technological Innovation, Economic Constraints, and Strategic Implications*, by Sarah Kirchberger. Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2015. 318 pages. \$129.

Few recent works on the Chinese navy have arrived with a more intriguing pedigree than this volume. It is unusual to find any in-depth work on the Chinese military being done by European researchers. *Assessing China’s Naval Power*, the product of a German academic and released by a respected European publisher, is essentially unique in the field. Further, the author comes at the problem with a diverse résumé, having applied her academic training in East Asian politics as an analyst with the German shipbuilder Blohm + Voss. Despite these selling points, the work fails to deliver an original or compelling view of the fast-changing Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).

Dr. Kirchberger sets out to create an objective and largely materialist yardstick by which to measure Chinese naval development. While dealing briefly with issues of policy and strategy, she notes that matériel “defines the upper limit of what is achievable through naval strategy.” As she seeks objective comparisons, Kirchberger uses other Asian and the so-called BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) navies as the benchmark for “normal” naval development. While interesting, this effort to quantify the analysis results in a strained attempt to extract meaning from what is quantifiable from available sources.

As an example, in one vignette Kirchberger compares Asian naval forces with the total areas of the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) their nations

claim. The result suggests that China has an average level of patrol-capable vessels, but that the PLAN submarine force, at one submarine per 35,716.75 square kilometers of EEZ, is comparatively large. It is tempting to critique such an approach on the details: the figure used for China's EEZ is smaller than the scope of its expansive maritime claims; and administration of maritime claims in China is a function of its rapidly growing coast guard and maritime militia (not explicitly included), whereas for many of the other nations analyzed the navy performs law-enforcement functions. More significant is the irrelevance of the figures themselves. By that yardstick, the U.S. Navy (not included in this analysis) defends one of the world's largest EEZs with a paltry one submarine per 210,000 square kilometers of EEZ. Navies are developed for strategic purposes, which vary from case to case.

Additionally, the focus on comparing the PLAN with developing nations' navies ignores the fact that one of the driving combat tasks for the PLAN is countering USN presence in Asia. Taking the U.S. Navy as a yardstick for Chinese naval development matters because it is the yardstick the Chinese themselves have set. That does not mean the PLAN needs or desires to emulate USN force structure in detail, but considering both sides of a two-sided interaction is critical to understanding.

More interesting is Kirchberger's analysis of China's shipbuilding capabilities. Drawing on her experience in the shipbuilding industry, Kirchberger assesses that the Chinese civil shipbuilding industry, though massive, offers few advantages in the production of naval combatants. In the critical maritime

electronic sector, the book argues that the European arms embargo and centralized Chinese state control have stymied most meaningful innovation. Chinese combatants are presented as collections of imported and copied systems, with the assumption that the systems-integration problems such a model implies significantly hamper their combat performance. The Chinese decision to purchase the Russian-made *Sovremenny*-class destroyer and Kilo-class submarine in the middle of the previous decade is seen as a tacit admission of systemic deficiencies in Chinese maritime systems development. However, Kirchberger arguably underestimates China's success at both systems integration and adaptation of foreign technologies. For example, China received limited numbers of Russian-manufactured MINERAL ME radars and reverse engineered them with enough success that they now are deployed on every Jiangkai II frigate produced. Kirchberger dismisses these systems as poor copies.

While an earnest effort, at its heart this volume fails on its sources. Dependent on other secondary, primarily English-language, works, it contains few if any references to Chinese-language sources. As the volume was published in 2015, most of these sources are from 2013 and prior. For example, Kirchberger's most consequential conclusions about the PLAN submarine force hinge on a 2007 analysis of PLAN patrol activity during the prior decade. The result is a view of the Chinese navy that arguably is accurate as of about 2010, but that does not account for the rapid changes in the scope and complexity of PLAN platforms, capabilities, and operations in the intervening years.

Given the relatively small number of academics doing serious analysis of the PLAN, the introduction of a new point of view is always to be welcomed. In this case, however, naval professionals interested in Chinese naval development would be served better by going directly to the sources behind this volume.

DALE C. RIELAGE



*Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991*, by Xiaoming Zhang. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2015. 296 pages. \$34.95 (e-book \$33.99).

This book will be welcomed equally by historians, political scientists, and international relations specialists. It is a worthy addition to existing literature and belongs on any bookshelf dedicated to understanding modern China and Southeast Asia. Xiaoming Zhang, an associate professor in the Department of Strategy at the Air War College, has provided valuable additional information and analysis concerning the People's Republic of China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979. The Chinese invasion was planned deliberately and analytically, then for nearly a month the People's Liberation Army (PLA) fought fiercely against China's neighbor and former ally. At the end of this period, the two countries settled into a continuing active and deadly border dispute that lasted a decade. Taking advantage of recently declassified Chinese documents and an impressive number of interviews, Dr. Zhang has advanced significantly our understanding of why the Chinese chose to initiate the somewhat Orwellian-sounding "counterattack in self-defense

against Vietnam," how the war was conducted, and why the subsequent conflict along the Vietnamese-Chinese border lasted so long.

As the history of the conflict unfolds, Deng Xiaoping becomes more and more the central figure and key Chinese decision maker. By the conclusion of the book, Dr. Zhang presents a convincing case that the war of 1979 was indeed Deng's war—a war into which he entered as much to preserve and promote his plans for economic modernization as to affect the balance of power in the international political system, while simultaneously aiming to rehabilitate and start the process of modernizing the PLA.

The book explains how the recent North Vietnamese victory over the Americans and the South Vietnamese had a surprisingly deleterious effect on Vietnam's previously amiable and long-term alliance with China. Flushed with victory and boasting a hardened and well-equipped army, the Vietnamese became, to Chinese eyes, increasingly arrogant and unfriendly. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and its deepening friendship with the Soviet Union led Deng to see China's position as potentially imperiled, threatened by the USSR to the north and the Vietnamese to the south. In particular, the invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 was viewed as proof of Hanoi's ambition to make Vietnam a hegemonic power in Southeast Asia, and added significantly to Deng's concerns.

Deng, who already had determined that economic and industrial modernization was the way ahead for China, arrived at an apparently counterintuitive conclusion. Significant combat operations conducted against Vietnam, the Soviet Union's most important regional ally, would signal to the United States