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# Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### THE IMPORTANCE OF SEA POWER

Holmes, James R., and Toshi Yoshihara. *Chinese Naval Strategy in the 21st Century: The Turn to Mahan*. New York: Routledge, 2008. 167pp. \$140

Although China's sudden quest to dominate its littoral waters with an ever-expanding fleet and deliberately innovative weapons continues to be well-publicized, the theoretical impetus for this radical reorientation remains murky. As their book's subtitle indicates, Holmes and Yoshihara attribute the major thrust to the conscious study and explicit adoption (and adaptation) of Mahan's apparently timeless discussion on the essential nature of sea power.

In eight concise but informative chapters based upon extensive research using primary sources, *Chinese Naval Strategy* examines how this intensifying, sea-oriented aggressiveness and underlying strategic vision have managed to evolve over the past decade within the persistent countercurrent of such heritage concepts as Mao's land-based "aggressive defense"; reprises current analyses in the light of Mahan's assertions on the necessity of commanding the commons and his historical analysis of the American situation; describes Liu Huaqing's formative influence in shifting the direction and concept of naval

affairs; dissects recent evaluations, taking exception to those that dismiss the naval abilities of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as outmoded; and examines efforts to overcome operational constraints imposed by the extended "first island chain." The perceived threats posed by the contiguous powers of Japan and South Korea are also noted, and the danger of possible confrontation with American "hegemonic" power is summarily explored before the book is brought to an end with an incisive overview of possibilities and projections.

Holmes and Yoshihara deliberately focus upon littoral waters, resulting in a sustained examination of the relevant strategic issues that necessarily excludes any contemplation of potential PRC clashes with Southeast Asian countries or India (with whom the PRC is already embroiled in an arms race despite a conspicuous "charm offensive"). They succinctly analyze the Taiwan question in terms of the island's strategic significance as an intolerable constraint when exploited by enemy forces but a formidable bastion for future PRC power

projection. Moreover, while avoiding the entanglements of hard force specifications, they note the growing arsenal of land-based intermediate-range ballistic missiles and cruise missiles that might be employed in an integrated sea-denial effort, with possibly dire consequences.

Before receiving his PhD in international law and diplomacy, James Holmes had a lengthy career as a naval engineering officer, studied at the Naval War College, and pursued crucial oceanic issues. Toshi Yoshihara, who has competence in both Chinese and Japanese, has focused on Chinese strategic questions since earning his doctorate from the Fletcher School. Amid the highly balkanized world of contemporary Chinese security studies, the ongoing dialogue of these two Naval War College professors has produced a perceptive, balanced analysis that remains sensitive to operational constraints and escapes the narrow perspective often characterizing works by single authors.

Apart from issues explicitly raised, the book prompts numerous questions for contemplation. For example, what are the implications of “command of the commons” in peacetime? (Can the PRC exclude other nations from its littoral waters simply by threat and coercion, thereby achieving Sunzi’s ideal, or will assertions of localized superiority inevitably spawn conflict?) How will Mahan’s thrust be realized in the South China Sea, through land bases or vulnerable naval assets? Thus, despite the lamentable lack of maps and inevitable source constraints, *Chinese Naval Strategy* should be deemed critical reading for anyone concerned with PRC strategy and intentions.

RALPH D. SAWYER  
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Erickson, Andrew S., Lyle J. Goldstein, William S. Murray, and Andrew R. Wilson, eds. *China’s Future Nuclear Submarine Force*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2007. 412pp. \$45

From the title, readers might expect this book to focus solely and closely on the People’s Republic of China’s aspirations to develop nuclear submarines as a means to enhance the reach of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). However, the seventeen chapters in this volume range well beyond submarines, considering more broadly what may be inferred from evolving naval capacities about the PRC’s grand strategic objectives. Contributors to this book sift evidence—much of it from Chinese sources—for insight about what, specifically, Beijing is developing the capacity to do and what it is likely to do with it. Therefore, this work is likely to appeal not only to the submarine enthusiast but to any reader who is curious about the role of naval development in the PRC’s quest to expand its military power.

The book, an outgrowth of a conference sponsored in 2005 by the China Maritime Studies Institute at the U.S. Naval War College, features contributions by some of America’s most prominent (and promising) analysts of PRC naval affairs. It offers readers an incomparably thorough view from open sources of an emerging phenomenon and of the debate among analysts about the significance of this development. As with many edited volumes, this book offers in variety and breadth of topics what it may lack in cohesion and focus. Yet it does provide persuasive evidence that the PLAN is substantially expanding its submarine force—apparently making