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The Dragon Goes to Sea

Captain E.D. Smith, Jr., U.S. Navy

THE IDEA of China as a major maritime power has never really caught on with Western naval analysts. Some point to the lack of a naval or even a continuing seagoing tradition—others to a military history in which ships have merely been adjuncts to ground force operations. Driven by economic necessity in the 1980s, self-imposed cuts in military spending by the People's Republic of China slowed modernization of the Chinese Navy, or as the current Mandarins call it, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).

Some recent reports, however, should reawaken our interest in China's navy. The importance of a visit to Thailand by the 5,500-ton Chinese training ship, *Zheng He,* was underscored in a Beijing newspaper article last December. The article was explicit regarding the purpose of this and similar recent visits, including one by the same ship to Hawaii in March 1989: "The Chinese naval vessels' visits to other countries have given foreign countries a better idea of the Chinese Navy, expanded our military's influence in the world and exalted our Navy's image. . . . These visits have also tempered the officers and men of the navy, broadened their thinking, and contributed to the navy's modernization drive."[1]

This short article described other long-distance deployments by the People's Navy since 1984, including the Indian Ocean deployment in 1985 which included calls at ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. It does not mention the U.S.-Chinese "Passing Exercise" that took place in the South China Sea in December 1985 as these ships returned to China.

A week later the Associated Press, reporting from Hong King, told of an article in a May 1990 publication of the PLA, entitled "Military Economic Research," which calls for a "250% increase in defense spending over the next decade." Indicating that distribution of this publication is generally restricted to the Army and the Communist Party, the AP's article states that: "Over the last

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two years, China's military has fundamentally revised its force doctrine, called 'people's war,' from a defensive to an offensive one, following improved ties with . . . the Soviet Union."[2]

These two articles suggest both that China has rediscovered the utility of sea power and that we may soon see the end to the budgetary restraints on Chinese military development. Earlier press reports support these conclusions, including one indicating China's interest in building an aircraft carrier.[3] Another is a fascinating interview with PLAN Admiral Lin Zhiye, commandant of the Dalian Naval Academy, published in the November 1989 issue of *Naval and Merchant Ships*, a magazine of the Chinese Institute of Naval Engineering in Beijing.[4]

Admiral Lin described a two-phased approach to Chinese naval developments. The first stage, carrying us to the year 2000, would include the development of a strike force consisting of land-based aircraft, diesel-driven attack submarines and surface combatants capable of helicopter operations. The second stage, extending to 2050, would include the development of strike forces centering around aircraft carriers. Each of the three Chinese fleets would have such a force, stated the admiral, with the South Sea Fleet being the first to get one. Such forces would be capable of engaging any enemy with a "decisive seaward blow."

Indicating that China was most likely to encounter economic and political conflict with other nations in the seas bordering China, he defined these as those waters located inside the "first island chain" of Japan, Okinawa, Taiwan and the Philippines. Admiral Lin's comments provide a useful background to understanding contemporary Chinese naval activities and developments.

China's interest in maritime affairs merits our scrutiny for several reasons, not least of which are the concerns of China's neighbors, especially those to the south, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore and the Philippines, all of whom have good historical reasons to fear Chinese hegemony.

The name of the training ship—the *Zheng He*—is itself a reminder of China's biggest attempt to spread her influence into the South China Sea and Indian Ocean. A Muslim eunuch who had distinguished himself in the imperial army, Zheng He was Emperor Yungli's chosen instrument in 1405 to "establish suzerainty over the peripheral southern ocean states."[5] As the senior admiral of the rapidly developing fleet during the period 1405-1433, Zheng He led seven large expeditions to distant waters through the South China Sea and into the Indian Ocean, reaching as far west as the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the east coast of Africa. These voyages were massive undertakings, often involving several hundred ships. The first expedition, for example, included 27,000 men aboard an estimated 317 ships.[6]

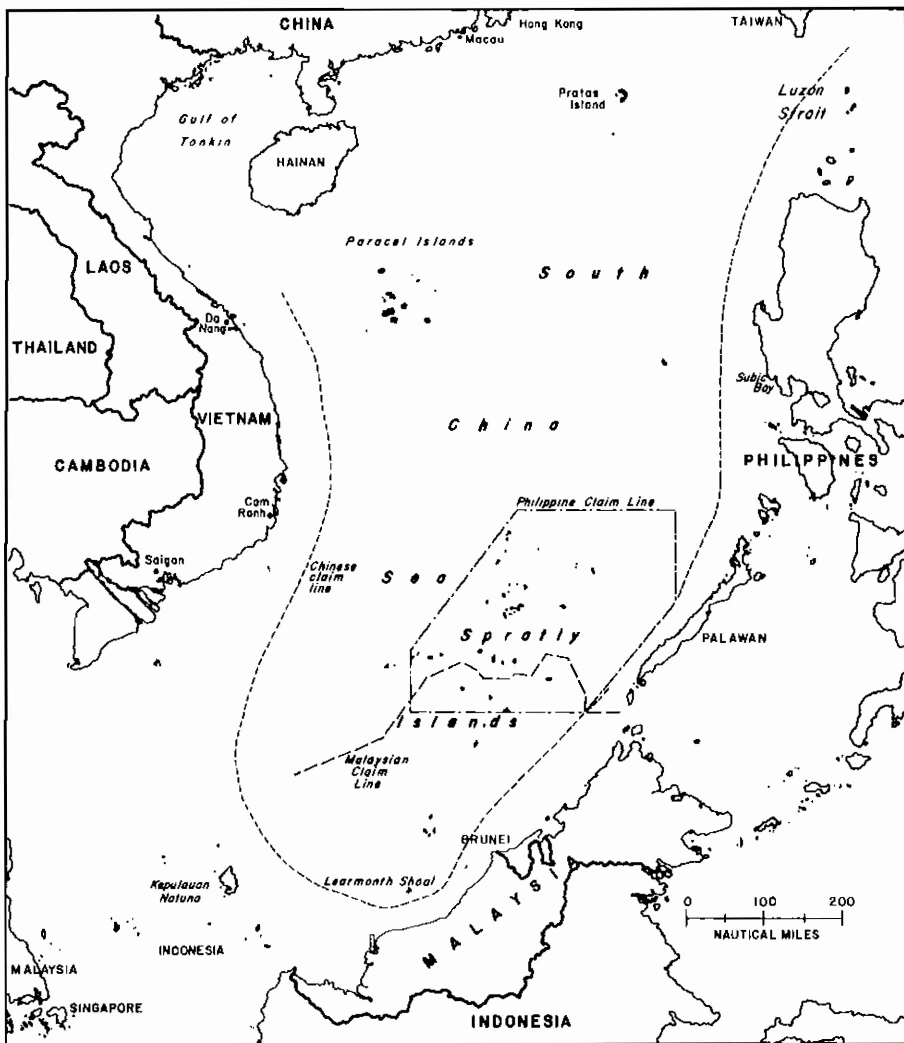
Zheng He's mission was not just that of his current namesake, to "show the flag." Zheng He was also to establish, by force if necessary, tributary relationships with the coastal states along his route. He was to ensure that those states

acknowledged their subordination to the emperor of China. Among his accomplishments on these voyages, Zheng He reportedly surveyed the Paracel and Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Artifacts dating from his voyages and found on the Spratlys form part of the basis of China's modern territorial claims for the disputed archipelago.

On the death of Emperor Yungli, the navy declined rapidly, principally because of the reemergence of a major land threat from the Mongols. But this period of Chinese history demonstrated an understanding of the utility of sea power in pursuit of political objectives that appears to be resurgent today. China was a great maritime power in the past; it has the potential for becoming one in the future. An Asian naval analyst, Vice Admiral Ko Tunhwa of the Republic of China (or Taiwanese) Navy, has concluded that mainland China possesses all the classic elements of sea power described by Mahan, requiring only a decision by the leadership to develop it.[7] Recent events suggest that this decision may have already been made.

In assessing the meaning of a Chinese naval resurgence, it is important to understand that through the use of repressive force the People's Republic of China is still controlled by a communist party dictatorship. The revolutionary changes sweeping Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have not been allowed to "infect" China, where a small clique of powerful party chieftains continues to decide the fate of the most populous country in the world. The waves of "democratization" which swept over the former Soviet bloc countries were reflected in China by the student-led "Democracy Movement" which the rest of the world saw decisively squelched by the army in June 1989. On the Leninist theory that history is mutable and can be changed to meet the needs of the Party, the Chinese response to Western censure was to deny that military repression occurred. They blamed mysterious "outside influences" for the "student rebellion."

Such a government, whose leaders continually reaffirm their commitment to the "Four Cardinal Principles" that include the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and adherence to the doctrines of Mao, Marx and Lenin, would not hesitate to create a "foreign threat" and use their military to remove it, if it would help them to maintain internal control. This is a government whose ideology is unchanged by contemporary events, one which still believes that a dastardly Western strategy of "Peaceful Evolution" is really an "imperialist plot" to undermine their regime. Their distrust of the West is held in check only because they see that Chinese economic and other interests will be served by joining the international community. When Chinese interests conflict with international interests—as in the case of arms and military technology sales to such dangerous states as Libya and Iran—other countries' complaints are disregarded as "interference in Chinese internal affairs."



China's Claims in the South China Sea

In assessing the meaning of Chinese maritime developments it is important to understand that China faces no threat which would require a naval expansion. The principal military threat to China has traditionally come from "outside the wall"—in recent times, from Soviet troops along their 3,000-kilometer common border. The "threat" is being negotiated away at Soviet initiative, and without a Soviet land threat the Soviet Pacific Fleet can hardly be viewed as a danger to China proper.

China has consistently supported an American naval presence in the western Pacific as a counter to any latent Japanese "militarism" which would seem to be

the most obvious potential maritime threat to China. Japan, in the meantime, while quietly developing one of the most modern navies in the world, has publicly downplayed the idea of any expansionist goals. But the idea of a renewal of Japanese imperialism in the Asian region cannot be summarily dismissed by the Chinese, whose view of history reaches farther back than our own. Even if a military threat to China by the Japanese were considered realistic, however, adequate air and ground defenses would mitigate such a threat, without the need for a large and modern naval force. If the Japanese threat were considered to be more economic than territorial, however, a navy capable of securing China's commercial sea-lanes and protecting offshore resources would be a logical aspiration.

It is true that the history of economic exploitation of China by Western imperialist powers over the past two centuries had a strong maritime component. Those powers—England, France, Germany, Portugal and the United States—came, and eventually departed, by sea. While this argument may have made sense in 1945, contemporary alignments of military and economic power in the region make it difficult to conceive of any realistic threat from the sea that would justify the high costs of naval expansion.

Perhaps a more realistic reason for a Chinese naval resurgence was suggested in a recent article in the *PLA Daily News* which called for more awareness of China's maritime "rights," stating that "Economics is the driving force behind maritime rights, ocean territory is that which maritime rights depend upon, and maritime defense is the way in which a nation protects these rights."[8] Assessing China's traditional "defensive" maritime doctrine as "unsuitable," the article concludes that a strong navy, capable of carrying out offensive operations to gain sea control, is necessary to protect China's rightful "sea territory."

While this article discusses the need for maritime power throughout China's claimed territorial waters, whose northern boundary is in the Yellow Sea, it is to the south that the Chinese Navy seems to be focusing its attention, just as it was to the south that Zheng He voyaged to spread Chinese hegemony in the 15th century. China claims sovereignty over most of the islands in the South China Sea. Its official "Declaration on the Territorial Sea" issued in 1958 "extended China's territorial waters to the 12-mile limit and further stipulated the use of the straight baseline method to delimit the boundary . . . [this] method, if applied to connect the archipelagos, would in turn effectively enclose the entire core of the South China Sea within China's territorial sea."[9]

In 1974 China used military force to oust a small South Vietnamese garrison from the Paracel Islands, about 250 miles east-northeast of Da Nang. After North Vietnam's victory in 1975, China held on to the islands. It has, in fact, increased its military presence on the seven islands that comprise the Paracels and has constructed an airfield on Woody Island, the occupiers' administrative center for the archipelago.

Vietnam has also felt the wrath of China's maritime strength nearly 500 miles further south, in the disputed Spratly Islands, which lie just to the west of Palawan. In the spring of 1988, Chinese naval gunners sank three Vietnamese navy ships resupplying their island garrisons in the Spratlys. A contemporary Chinese comment on this event stressed China's developing "bluewater" capabilities: "The military strength of the Chinese Navy has grown rapidly since the beginning of the 1980s when the Navy became sea-going . . . the Chinese Navy has gradually revised the war principles of 'naval base,' 'guerrilla warfare,' and 'coastal actions' summed up and borrowed from past land war, and has been making exploration and preparations for offshore actions.

"The Chinese Navy paid special attention to the British experience in the battle over the Falkland Islands . . . characterized by the long-distant sail of the British Navy to the destination, and the success of the United States in attacking Libya."[10]

A recent article in a Beijing magazine describes a new "PLA Quick Reaction Unit" that has been formed to take such lessons into account. It indicates that "[i]n keeping with the development of the world political and military situation, China's relevant policy-making departments decided several years ago to build up similar [to the British SAS] quick-reaction units to tackle possible local wars and contingencies, and shoulder special duties such as kidnapping, antiterrorism, and antiviolence duties."[11]

The development of this elite ground force has been paralleled by the formation of "Rapid Combat Groups" in all three fleets of the Chinese navy: ". . . composed mainly of large and medium-sized surface vessels, so as to meet the needs of future sea battles beyond the mainland's coastal waters. The South China Sea Fleet already has a marine brigade and both the East China Sea and North China Sea fleets will also establish such a brigade in order to beef up their amphibious combat strength."[12] With the Soviet navy pulling out of Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay and the likely drawdown of U.S. naval forces at Subic Bay, the increasing strength of China's South Sea Fleet should be cause for concern. At stake here is the security of the major sea-lanes that connect the Pacific and Indian Oceans. This point was recognized in a summer 1990 article in the *Economist* that concluded: "If the Russians and the Americans do leave a vacuum in the South China Sea, China has the will and the means to fill. . . . That could raise a ticklish problem for Japan, which has long taken for granted the openness of the sea lanes through the South China Sea. What action would it take if it looked as though they were becoming less open?"[13]

Since the naval clash with Vietnam in 1988, China has been gradually strengthening its military capabilities in the South China Sea, improving the airfield on Woody Island in the Paracel Islands (to allow for its use by high-performance military aircraft?), developing an air-to-air refueling capability

for its fighter aircraft (to be able to operate in the Spratly area?), and expanding the number and capabilities of their own island outposts in the Spratlys.

A glance at a chart shows what Chinese control of the Spratly Islands would mean to the maritime interests of the United States and our Asian friends. Naval bases capable of supporting submarines and surface combatants in the Spratlys would provide China with a capability to monitor and potentially to interdict shipping of any nationality transiting the South China Sea. Chinese maps show claims to almost the entire South China Sea. It is not only the Japanese who should be concerned about such claims, but any nation whose trade moves by ship through the region, including, for example, Taiwan.

That China is intent on eventually enforcing her territorial claims to these islands (along with concomitant exclusive economic rights to the exploitation of resources in this widespread area) seems self-evident. The Chinese navy has repeatedly demonstrated an ability to send superior forces to the area on short notice and the South Sea Fleet alone has over 600 ships, craft, and submarines. These forces are more than a match for the naval capabilities of any of the other claimants to these islands, such as Vietnam or the Philippines. The key question is when China will begin to enforce these claims. Beijing appears to be biding its time, perhaps until it has developed a long-range air capability to support its surface ship operations in the area.

Other claimants to various parts of the Spratlys, most recently Indonesia, have proposed multilateral talks on territorial disputes in the South China Sea. While China has refused to participate in any discussions which address the sovereignty issue, diplomatic efforts at finding ways to resolve these disputes peacefully are likely to increase as many countries' economic desires to exploit potential offshore resources in the Spratly area grow. China may accede to joint development ventures, but is unlikely to change its territorial claims. At any rate, the only rival claimant to the archipelago that China takes seriously appears to be Vietnam. China's sensitivity to the continued Vietnamese presence in the islands was underscored by a statement by a Foreign Ministry official on 27 December 1990 which concluded that "The Vietnamese must withdraw from the islands and reefs of China's Nansha [Spratlys] Islands which it has illegally occupied."[14]

While economic problems may limit Chinese naval development in the next few years, it appears clear that China's long-range goals include an expansion of influence and control into the South China Sea. As one analyst put it: ". . . the meaning of the contest for the South China Sea is most fundamentally an issue centered on the changing role of China as a Coastal State and maritime power in Asia."[15] A continued withdrawal of both Soviet and American naval forces from this area will invite Chinese regional hegemony enforced by a resurgent navy.

The voyages of Zheng He show that China was a major maritime power in the past; current trends indicate that it aspires to become one again. Such a

resurgence should be of concern to any nation which relies on Asian sea lines of communication.

Notes

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5. Bruce Swanson, *Eighth Voyage of the Dragon: A History of China's Quest for Seapower* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1982), p. 33.
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9. Marwyn S. Samuels, *Contest for the South China Sea* (New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 86.
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13. "Fishing for Trouble in the Spratlys," *Economist*, 7 July 1990, p. 36.
14. Michael Vatikiotis and Tai Ming Cheung, "Maritime Hegemony: Indonesia Proposes Talks on South China Sea," *Far East Economic Review*, 10 January 1991, p. 11.
15. Samuels, p. xii.

Ψ

The interests of nations in the sea are almost wholly interests of trade—of carriage. The productions of the sea, though valuable, are trifling in amount as compared with those of the land. Its great value to mankind is that it furnishes the most copious means of communication and traffic between peoples; often the only means.

Naval Strategy
A. T. Mahan
Little, Brown (1918), p. 303