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## The Naval Dimension of the Sino-Soviet Rivalry

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Kenneth G. Weiss

**D**espite recent efforts to improve relations, Moscow and Beijing's competition in Asia has continued with little letup since their proxy war in Indochina (1978-1979). Sino-Soviet talks held since 1982 have yielded an increase in trade and contacts between China and the Soviet Union, but have made little headway in normalizing relations. As a result, China continues to look to the United States for support in its relations vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. Indeed, Sino-American relations, which had been strained in the early years of the Reagan administration, improved dramatically after Secretary of Defense Weinberger's warm reception in China in September 1983, Premier Zhao Ziyang's visit to the United States in January 1984 and President Reagan's trip to China last April.<sup>1</sup>

How then do we account for the relative lack of change in relations among the United States, China, and the Soviet Union—despite significant leadership changes in all three countries since 1979? The reason is simple: strategic realities, as the Chinese like to put it, make a dramatic transformation in the triangular equation difficult. And as in the past, recent Sino-Soviet negotiations have been accompanied by a competition for political and military advantage in Asia. This rivalry has spread to the seas bordering China. It is from a maritime perspective that this essay will view current dynamics in the Sino-Soviet conflict. But before looking at the naval element in the Sino-Soviet rivalry, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the strategic realities.

Since World War II, the Soviet Union has sought to secure its borders by fostering "friendly regimes" in Eastern Europe, Mongolia, China, North Korea, and most recently Afghanistan. To the Soviets, a friendly regime is generally one that Moscow dominates through a ruling Communist Party. The Brezhnev Doctrine, in turn, justifies Soviet efforts to sustain a friendly Communist Party in power. While the restoration of a friendly regime in Beijing remains a long-term goal,<sup>2</sup> the Soviets have never dared to apply the Brezhnev Doctrine to China because their fear of the Chinese verges on the

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irrational and because they believe the United States would exploit a Sino-Soviet conflict.<sup>3</sup>

As a method of managing this problem, Moscow has placed an enormous number of Soviet military forces on China's border. Of the total Soviet ground forces consisting of approximately 191 divisions or about two million men, about a quarter, 52 divisions or 500,000 men are deployed on or near the Sino-Soviet border. Similar proportions apply to Soviet air, naval, and missile units in Asia. Indeed, since 1979, the Soviets have increased the number of divisions on China's border from 44 to 52, and the number of SS-20s in the Far East from less than 40 to 135. The VTOL carrier *Minsk* has been joined by its sister ship, the *Novorossiysk* and the number of Backfire bombers in the region has increased to 80.<sup>4</sup> The Chinese fear that the Kremlin might take limited action to shake the Zhongnanhai\* or launch a full-scale invasion to install a new government in Beijing—if Moscow thought a short war were possible.<sup>5</sup>

The United States has benefitted greatly from the Sino-Soviet dispute. The benefits are obvious: US forces in the Pacific are no longer tied down by a hostile China, and, as we have seen, a significant number of Soviet forces are deployed against China instead of the West.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Chinese forces are also countering Hanoi along the Sino-Vietnamese border, and Chinese arms are being used by the guerrillas against the Soviets in Afghanistan and against the Vietnamese in Kampuchea.<sup>7</sup>

This strategic reality makes fundamental changes in the triangular equation difficult, if not impossible. Neither China nor the United States can push bilateral differences to the breaking point for fear of giving the Soviet Union additional leverage in their ongoing rivalries. Nor can the Soviets seek rapprochement or even détente with China or with the United States, without changing their policies and behavior that give rise to that rivalry. It is for this reason that the Chinese insist the Soviets meet their demands concerning the Sino-Soviet border, Mongolia, Afghanistan, and Kampuchea. What the Chinese are asking for is nothing less than the elimination of the Soviet threat to China's security. Our concern here is, how does this impact on the naval dimension of the Sino-Soviet rivalry?

### Sino-Soviet Naval Rivalry

**The Naval Balance.** The Pacific Ocean fleet, the largest of the Soviet Navy's four fleets, is more powerful than the entire Chinese Navy. Soviet naval forces in the Pacific have grown steadily from about 50 principal surface combatants in the mid-1960s to almost 90 today. The addition to the fleet of such vessels as *Kiev*-class carriers, *Kara*-class missile cruisers, and *Krivak*-class missile destroyers represents a significant qualitative increase in Soviet naval capabilities in the Pacific. This quantitative and qualitative improvement can

also be seen in subsurface capabilities of the nuclear-powered submarines like the *Delta III*-class SSBN and *Victor III*-class SSN, and the new class of diesel-electric *Kilo* conventional attack submarines. The added Soviet warship strength in the region has been matched by an increase in the striking power of Soviet naval aviation. Since the midsixties the number of Soviet naval aircraft has increased over 50 percent to a current force of about 440 aircraft. Some 30 naval long-range Backfire B aircraft, deployed to the Far East since 1980—in addition to the Soviet Air Force Backfires in the area—can strike anywhere in China and in much of the Pacific as well. Moreover, an 8,000 man division based near Vladivostok constitutes the largest contingent of naval infantry in the Soviet Navy. As one analyst puts it, the Pacific fleet is “far superior [to the Chinese navy] in long-range submarines; major surface combatants; fleet support ships; ocean going missile-armed air, surface, and sub-surface platforms; and fixed-wing ASW (anti-submarine warfare) aircraft.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is not a negligible force. It boasts the third largest submarine force—100 mainly Romeos and Whiskeys form the backbone of the Chinese Navy. Although the submarines are of an old design, they are well suited to operations in the shallow waters along the China coast. The Chinese have also developed the *Han*-class SSN and the *Xia*-class SSBN. The recent successful testing of an SLBM in their one Golf-class SSB and the projected deployment of six *Xia*-class SSBNs will add the final leg to the Chinese triad of land and sea-based nuclear missiles and nuclear-armed bombers. At any one time, the Chinese can also deploy some 200 missile-equipped ships mounting some 500 SS-N-2s. The Navy has also developed a significant underway replenishment capability, effectively extending the range and endurance of its largest surface warships—the *Luda*-class destroyers and various frigate classes—and the naval air component has some 800 land-based aircraft.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these impressive numbers, the Chinese Navy is mainly a coastal defense force of poor sea-keeping qualities. Indeed, the British noted during their port visit to Shanghai in 1980 that the decks of the warships in the harbor were painted yellow—a protective coloring more suited for operations along the China coast than on the open sea. Chinese ships are generally based on Soviet designs of the 1940s and 1950s. However, Chinese destroyers and frigates armed with SS-N-2s and conventional weapons have a good antisurface warfare capability. But they are highly vulnerable to enemy submarines and aircraft because they lack modern sensors and weapons. They have little in the way of electronic warfare (EW) or electronic countermeasures (ECM) and, apparently, have yet to deploy an operational SAM system. Indeed, the *Luda* destroyer does not have a combat information center (CIC), so orders and decisions must come from the bridge. As a result, Chinese surface ships are not likely to operate

The PLA naval air force itself is largely composed of obsolete aircraft. Like the surface force, its large numbers are a fair threat to surface warships, but it is deficient in antisubmarine and antiair warfare capability. The bombs and torpedoes of the IL-28 Beagle provide the main threat to Soviet warships, but the Chinese can also use Mig-19 and Mig-21 fighters and the more capable TU-16 bomber. However, China's lack of sophisticated airborne sensors and seaborne helicopters would make it difficult for the Chinese to detect and kill Soviet submarines in wartime. The Navy's air defense is handicapped by a lack of all-weather fighters, air-to-air missiles, and air and shipborne-controlled intercept radars. Chinese naval aircraft, some 800 planes, also lack an aerial refueling capability. Thus, their combat radius is limited to 150 nautical miles offshore.<sup>11</sup>

The Chinese have a potent submarine force. Their Romeo and Whiskeys have the range and endurance to operate anywhere in the Pacific. However, they are slow, and noisy when they snorkel. On long-range patrols, they would be highly vulnerable to the Soviet Navy's more sophisticated ASW capability. In turn, they lack the modern sensors and weapons to conduct effective operations against enemy submarines. Thus, in wartime, they are likely to operate in the China seas where the shallow waters would offset their disadvantage in speed and where the coastal crevices would make their detection more difficult. (Indeed, the fact that the Soviet's new *Kilo* class of diesel submarines is built and deployed so far only in the Far East indicates that they may be designed to ferret out Chinese submarines hiding along the continental shelf—an area where Soviet SSNs would be at a disadvantage.) Chinese planning also may require submarine support for PLA ground operations. The British noted on their port visit to Shanghai that Chinese submarines were equipped with storage areas for infantry weapons. This indicates that submarines might be used to land small groups of soldiers to disrupt the enemy's rear.<sup>12</sup>

China's efforts to update its submarine force have met with mixed results. A new version of the Romeo, the *Ming*-class SS, has yet to go into serial production. The development of the *Han*-SSN and the *Xia*-SSBN was plagued with problems. Until recently, the Chinese have had a Golf SSB and then a *Xia* SSBN without a usable SLBM.<sup>13</sup>

Since its establishment, the PLA navy has been largely managed and organized like its imperial predecessor in the 18th and 19th centuries. For example, the Communists adopted a proposal first made in 1880 by organizing the Navy in three fleets: the North Sea Fleet based at Qingdao, the East Sea Fleet at Shanghai, and the South Sea Fleet at Zhanjiang.<sup>14</sup>

The imperial and Communist navies are similar in structure and organization because they have had a similar mission: coastal defense. That mission was a natural one for a land-oriented Chinese leadership that achieved victory in 1949 through guerrilla warfare. It was also compatible

with the Soviets "Young School" of naval strategy that influenced the Chinese Navy in the days of compatible Sino-Soviet relations. The Young School theorized that a "peace-loving" socialist country only needed a defensive navy deployed in coastal waters. Thus, the Chinese Navy was structured for submarines, fast patrol boats, shore based aircraft, missiles, and artillery. The Chinese called the doctrine "guerrilla warfare at sea." However, the Soviet Navy abandoned the teachings of the Young School long ago, and the growth of the Soviet Pacific fleet has forced the Chinese to reconsider guerrilla warfare at sea.<sup>15</sup>

**The Soviet Naval Threat.** There are indications that Beijing's perceptions of the Soviet naval threat mirror China's experiences with Western and Japanese naval power in the 19th and 20th centuries. Although the Chinese seem to think that the Soviet's main effort would be on the ground, the Soviet Navy might play an important role in a Sino-Soviet war. Conceivably, a Soviet amphibious assault would be preceded by an aerial bombardment, then a landing by naval infantry, perhaps supplemented by paratroops, immediately followed by a motorized infantry division. The Chinese would probably counterattack while the PLA Navy would no doubt concentrate on cutting off the SLOCs to the Soviet beachhead. The Chinese have hinted that the navy would set up four lines of resistance: 1) submarines operating 150-200 miles out to sea; 2) naval aviation, 100-150 miles; 3) surface ships, 50-100 miles; and 4) coastal artillery and missiles. (Presumably, the Chinese would also lay a protective barrier of mines since they have a considerable mining capability.) This strategy is similar to the one advocated by the Young School and even somewhat similar to Chinese operations in 1894-1895.<sup>16</sup>

Whether Moscow has the ability to undertake such landings or actions is debatable. Some argue that the Soviet Navy probably could mount a successful assault and inflict disproportionate losses on the Chinese Navy. If the Soviets did undertake naval operations against China proper, they would be more likely to make nuisance raids against Chinese ports or seize a Chinese coastal position bypassed in a Soviet ground offensive.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, the massive Soviet attack in Manchuria in 1945 so surprised the Japanese Army that hazardous operations like amphibious landings along the Korean coast and paradrops behind the Japanese lines at Harbin, the Liaodong Peninsula, were successful. As in 1945, the confusion caused by the ground offensive, coupled with the damage inflicted on Chinese defenses against sea attack, might make a major amphibious landing (and paradrop) possible. The Liaodong Peninsula is a likely candidate for such an operation because its seizure could help ease any Soviet logistic problems in occupying Manchuria.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever the case, the Kremlin has *not* been above encouraging Chinese fears of such military moves in crisis situations. As we will see, Soviet activity

in these crises indicates that, at the very least, the Soviet Navy would be deployed to isolate China from the sea, protect Soviet SLOCs in the Far East, engage the Chinese Navy, and warn the United States against intervention.<sup>19</sup>

***Soviet Naval Diplomacy.*** Since 1969, the Kremlin and the Zhongnanhai have moved away from direct confrontations to proxy conflicts. In that year, bloody clashes along the Ussuri river in March escalated to the brink of major conflict. Timely concessions by the Chinese (and the Nixon administration's support for China) probably prevented a Soviet attack. Since then Moscow and Beijing have confined their competition to the periphery while maintaining large forces along their borders. Politically, each nation has sought to encircle the other. The Soviets have gained the support of India, Vietnam and occupied Afghanistan. The Chinese have looked to the United States, Japan, Pakistan, ASEAN, and Nato among others. Indeed, the Sino-Vietnamese border war of 1979 was an outgrowth of intense Soviet and Chinese efforts to gain or deny support to each other. Militarily, the Soviets have used the buildup and modernization of their armed forces in the Far East to pressure the Chinese while the Chinese have maintained large forces in a determined effort to resist such pressure.<sup>20</sup>

Naval forces are a key component in this psychological warfare. The Soviet Pacific fleet is largely designed to protect the Navy's SSBN force in the bastion formed by the seas of Japan and Okhotsk, and secondarily to interdict US and Japanese sea lines of communications (SLOCs) in the Pacific in wartime. Even so, navies are flexible instruments of power—often designed for one purpose, used for another. The Soviets have used their naval forces to pressure the Chinese by increasing their sense of isolation and encirclement. Soviet units have been active in the seas near China since 1968. Ten years later 140 Soviet warships traversed the Tsushima Strait.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, in 1978, Moscow took advantage of tensions between China and Vietnam over Kampuchea to draw Hanoi into a military alliance. As a result of the ensuing border war between Beijing and Hanoi in early 1979 over Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea, the Soviets gained access to naval and air force facilities at Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam, and the Cambodian port of Kampong Saom.<sup>22</sup>

The Soviet presence in Vietnam not only demonstrates support for Hanoi in its continuing confrontation with Beijing but also constitutes the southern anchor in a virtual military encirclement of China. (Soviet military facilities in Indochina also represent a threat to Western and Japanese SLOCs to the Persian Gulf and the US military forces in the Philippines.) Some 20-25 Soviet warships are now stationed in the South China Sea including cruise missile submarines, major and minor surface combatants, and assorted auxiliaries. A submarine tender stationed at Cam Ranh Bay has allowed the Soviets to double their submarine days at sea. They have also constructed a pier and

shelter for nuclear submarines, underground fuel storage tanks, navigation aids, and an electronic monitoring station. In addition long-range naval Bear "D" reconnaissance and Bear "F" ASW aircraft operating out of Cam Ranh Bay give the Soviets the ability to cover the entire Chinese coastline, island possessions and claims. Even more ominously, about nine strike, tanker, and electronic combat versions of the TU-16 bomber have deployed to Cam Ranh Bay.<sup>23</sup>

Moscow has also begun to beef up the Vietnamese Navy. Since delivering two *Petya*-class frigates to Vietnam in late 1978, the Soviets have also provided eight *Osa* and three *Komar*-class fast missile-attack craft, 8 to 10 *Shershen*-class torpedo boats, and a squadron of 10 Ka-25 Hormone antisubmarine helicopters. Much of the Vietnamese Navy is concentrated at Da Nang where joint antisubmarine warfare exercises are conducted with the Soviet Navy. These exercises are no doubt aimed at improving the Vietnamese and Soviet ability to cope with the Chinese submarine threat in the South China Sea. Moreover, the Soviets and the Vietnamese recently practiced joint amphibious exercises in the vicinity of Cam Ranh Bay and Haiphong. In one exercise, some 500-1,000 Soviet "marines" waded ashore near Haiphong supported by eight Soviet warships, including the *Minsk* and the *Ivan Rogov*, and an assortment of Vietnamese vessels.<sup>24</sup>

Besides this ongoing presence, the Soviet Navy's "surge" capability in crisis situations has been used by the Kremlin to warn or pressure Beijing without violating Chinese territory or airspace. Although the Ussuri River crisis involved bloody military clashes along the border, the Soviets also used large-scale military exercises accompanied by extensive naval maneuvers to wage psychological warfare against the Chinese. Since then the Soviet Navy's importance in signaling the Chinese in crisis situations has increased as the focus of the rivalry has shifted away from the explosive border region to the periphery.<sup>25</sup>

In 1978-1979, for example, Moscow and Beijing limited their confrontation to Indochina—the Kremlin's response to the Chinese invasion of Vietnam was largely a naval one. To warn Beijing to limit its incursion, the Soviets deployed approximately 20 surface vessels and some submarines in an arc off the Chinese coast stretching from the Tsushima Strait to the East and South China Seas. On 25 February, the *Minsk* carrier task group began its initial deployment to the Pacific when it entered the Mediterranean from the Black Sea. This was just eight days after the invasion—the exact number of days the Turkish government requires for advance notification of the movement of Soviet warships through the Straits of the Dardanelles. Intentionally or not, this powerful task group, composed of the *Minsk*, two *Kara*-class cruisers, the largest Soviet amphibious ship (the *Ivan Rogov*) and an oiler, reminded the Chinese and other observers of Soviet ability to project power in the Pacific.<sup>26</sup>



Soviet port visits to Vietnam during the crisis further underlined Moscow's support for Hanoi. Intelligence ships also collected information and presumably passed it on to the Vietnamese. In addition, Soviet naval activities in the vicinity of Hainan and especially the Paracels were probably designed to underscore Chinese vulnerability to Soviet naval capabilities. During the crisis, the Kremlin also conducted naval air reconnaissance from the Soviet coastal area to the South China Sea—including the Paracel islands. In direct support of the Vietnamese, the Soviets initiated an air and sealift of military supplies to Vietnam while Soviet transport aircraft helped shuttle troops and supplies within Indochina. Although there were no direct clashes along the border during the crisis, the Soviets accompanied their extensive naval effort with one of the largest military exercises they ever held in the Far East. The Soviet Pacific Fleet then has been a key element in Moscow's efforts to pressure Beijing and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.<sup>27</sup>

**China's Response.** The Zhongnanhai has been concerned about Moscow's effort to dominate China's maritime flank. As *Peoples Daily* put it in 1977: "[The Soviet Union] intensifies expansion of its Pacific Fleet in a frenzied attempt to surround us from the sea . . . . Failing this kind of serious military provocation and war clamor, we are like opening the door to admit robbers and bringing a wolf into our house if we do not build a powerful navy and strengthen our coastal defense."<sup>28</sup>

In a sense, the Sino-Vietnamese border war marked China's first move in this effort. The Chinese believe that Southeast Asia figures importantly in the Soviet strategy to achieve naval domination and to threaten China from the seas. After Moscow backed Hanoi's invasion of Kampuchea in 1978, the Zhongnanhai openly challenged the Kremlin by invading Vietnam. When Soviet naval units deployed in reaction, the South Sea Fleet signaled Chinese determination by conducting task group exercises during the conflict. This was the first time the Chinese had undertaken task group operations, and it marked a move away from a coastal defense strategy.<sup>29</sup>

In response to the growth of the Soviet Pacific fleet, the Chinese began to change their force structure in the mid-1970s. The construction of missile patrol boats, primarily associated with the guerrilla warfare strategy, was curtailed. The Chinese stepped up their production of larger surface warships, particularly the *Luda*-class destroyer, and introduced a new class of frigates, the *Jianghu*. They also began production of the *Dajiang*-class multipurpose ocean auxiliary and the *Fuqing*-class underway replenishment oilers—ships necessary for extended operations. The Zhongnanhai also put more emphasis on the development of nuclear submarines. Professionalism was stressed over politics in the navy. These developments were fought by the radicals in the Chinese leadership. But the fall of the Gang of Four and the

second resurrection of Deng Xiaoping in 1977 spurred further transformation of the Chinese Navy.<sup>30</sup>

Naval combined arms replaced guerrilla warfare at sea as the navy's guiding doctrine. Although the Chinese intend to continue traditional coastal defense operations for the time being, they have begun to emphasize the mobile task force as the basic unit of naval combat operations. Presumably, combined arms task groups will consist of surface, submarine, and shore-based naval air elements—the three combat arms of the navy—with a primary emphasis on the surface force. Since 1979, frequent task group exercises have been conducted throughout the fleet areas. In 1980 a naval task force sailed to the South Pacific to observe and recover the missile used in China's first ICBM test. The lessons from these operations have been studied closely and have been incorporated into the navy's training programs.<sup>31</sup>

As in 1979, these task group operations have also allowed the Chinese at times to counter a Soviet naval presence in the Far East with one of their own. For example, in May 1981, a task group of three destroyers, a supply ship, and a fleet tug "displayed the flag" by sailing from North Fleet to waters off the southern coast of Japan, through the Philippine Sea to the South China Sea and the Tonkin Gulf—finally returning to Qingdao after sailing past Hong Kong and through the Taiwan Strait. Recently, in May 1983, a training squadron consisting of a 20,000-ton supply ship and a 2,000-ton transport vessel took a similar cruise in reverse—sailing from South Fleet waters, past the Spratly Islands, to the Philippine Sea, rounding Iwo Jima, and finally returning to homeport at Zhanjiang after steaming through the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.<sup>32</sup>

Although other nations no doubt took note, these cruises were largely aimed at Vietnam and its patron. Beijing has extensive island and maritime resource claims in the region, but the Chinese have been anxious to gain US, Japanese and ASEAN support against the Soviet Union as well as economic and technological aid for China's Four Modernizations.<sup>33</sup> So these voyages were probably meant to delineate China's defensive perimeter—in a symbolic effort to counter the Soviet naval threat to China's coastal waters. Furthermore, the Zhongnanhai was also using these naval transits to keep up the military and economic pressure on Vietnam, in effect, asserting China's claims to Vietnamese islands in the Spratlys and to Tonkin Gulf resources also claimed by Hanoi.<sup>34</sup>

Hanoi is apparently concerned about the threat China's navy poses to Vietnam. Both Hanoi and Beijing have accused the other of interfering with fishing and merchant vessels in the Gulf of Tonkin and off Hainan Island.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese Navy is also being used to protect off-shore oil exploration

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\*The Philippines and Taiwan also hold islands in the Spratlys. Malaysia has occupied a reef in the area. But, for reasons already mentioned, Manila, Kuala Lumpur and Taipei probably viewed Chinese naval transits in the vicinity with less alarm than the Vietnamese did.

activities in the South China Sea<sup>36</sup> and could be used to assert China's right to drill in waters also claimed by Hanoi. At the very least, China's naval presence inhibits oil-poor Hanoi from exploiting the potential resources of those waters; thereby maintaining military, economic, and political pressure on Vietnam.

Vietnam complains, "In 1981, a force of five warships, including three destroyers, of the North China Sea fleet was sent on a mission as far as the Gulf of Tonkin. This incident was a sign of concern for all of China's neighboring countries because it marked the emergence at sea of Chinese warships."<sup>37</sup> Further, "Our country's coastline is long. Our territorial seas are large and have a very important position in the political, economic, security, and national defense fields. Our country's sea areas are contiguous with those of China, and the Beijing expansionists and hegemonists are daily and hourly sending armed vessels to encroach on our territorial seas, conduct spying activities, hinder the normal work of our fishermen, and threaten our national security."<sup>38</sup>

### The US Naval Factor

The Chinese have based their security considerations on a strong Nato alliance and a powerful US presence in the Pacific. Ever since the Nixon administration supported China in the Ussuri crisis in 1969, Beijing has looked to Washington to counter Soviet power.<sup>39</sup> The Chinese have expressed their support for Nato and the US-Japanese security treaty. They have also approved US support for ASEAN as a check on Vietnamese expansionism. The Zhongnanhai's support for these various security arrangements is based on sound strategic principle: as long as the "polar bear" is preoccupied with the United States and its allies, the Soviets cannot concentrate their attention on China.<sup>40</sup>

So it is not surprising that Beijing sees the Soviet naval threat in a wider strategic context. As the Chinese Communist Party journal, *Hongqi* (Red Flag) puts it: "[The geographical situation of the USSR] makes it imperative for the Soviet hegemonists to establish for themselves a 'bow-shaped navigation line' in the east that links the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Southwest Pacific, the Sea of Japan, and the three continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa . . ."<sup>41</sup> The growth of the Soviet Navy weakens the Nato alliance by reducing the (real or perceived) ability of the US Navy to counter Soviet activities in the Mideast and Persian Gulf, thereby threatening the flow of oil to Europe and Japan. It also reduces the relative strength of US forces in the Pacific and their potential ability to aid China in a crisis. If the Soviets can dominate (or appear to dominate), the "bow-shaped navigation line," the United States will be pushed out of Europe and the Far East as the Europeans and Japanese scramble to make

amends with the Soviet Union. The United States will no longer pose a threat to the Soviet Union in a Sino-Soviet confrontation. China would be alone, isolated, vulnerable to Soviet attack or intimidation.

That the US naval and military presence in the Asian region figures strongly in Chinese calculation can be illustrated by a few examples.

- During the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971, the United States sent a carrier task group to the Indian Ocean to discourage New Delhi from attacking West Pakistan after its victory in the East. According to Henry Kissinger, Zhou Enlai later claimed that the United States had “saved” Pakistan.<sup>42</sup>

- As the dispute between Beijing and Hanoi over Kampuchea became more heated in the spring of 1978, Moscow conducted naval exercises near China in a show of support for Vietnam. In riposte, the Chinese improved their naval posture in the South China Sea and turned a chance visit to Hong Kong by the *Enterprise* into a show of US support. Representatives of the New China News Agency visited the carrier while in port—an unprecedented event. The Soviet and Vietnamese media denounced the incident as evidence of American and Chinese collusion.<sup>43</sup>

- During China’s invasion of Vietnam in early 1979, the United States deployed the *Constellation* carrier task group to the South China Sea. A *Tass* report complained: “It is not hard to guess in whose support this showing of the U.S. flag is being carried out.” Indeed, the Chinese may also have played further on Soviet sensitivity in this regard. The Hong Kong Communist press claimed approvingly that American SAC reconnaissance planes, C-135s, overflew Hong Kong on a surveillance mission of Soviet ships near the Paracels!<sup>44</sup>

- The day after the Chinese announced their withdrawal from Vietnam, the Carter administration announced that the *Constellation* was being deployed to the Indian Ocean in response to the Soviet-supported invasion of North Yemen by South Yemen. The Chinese noted the development approvingly; the Soviets condemned it and linked it with US collusion with China in the Indochina crisis. Perhaps to counter the *Constellation* and then *Midway* deployments to the Arabian Sea, the *Minsk* showed the flag in the Gulf of Aden in May 1979 before proceeding to the Pacific in June.<sup>45</sup>

- Whenever Vietnam seriously encroaches on Thailand’s territory in its antiguerrilla offensives in Kampuchea, a kind of Kabuki drama is played out among China, the United States, and the Soviet Union. In events similar to June 1980, Hanoi violated Thai territory and airspace in its spring offensive in 1983. The Chinese responded by shelling Vietnamese territory bordering China while the United States supported Bangkok’s security, quickened arms deliveries, and announced joint US-Thai military exercises. The Soviet Union expressed its support for Vietnam by

deploying the *Minsk* to the region, but timed the deployment so as not to be associated with the violation of Thailand's sovereignty. (In 1983, the *Minsk* deployment occurred before the Vietnamese offensive. In 1980, it came some time afterwards.)<sup>46</sup>

So the Chinese take a keen interest in US efforts to counter Soviet military strength in the Pacific. Recently, the Chinese press noted approvingly US Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's support for a "strong, secure, and independent China" and his call for "greater Japanese self defense efforts."<sup>47</sup> Beijing also paid close attention to the press conference held in Bangkok by the Commander in Chief of US Pacific Command, Admiral Crowe, in December 1983: "It is necessary to deter Soviet aggression in this part of the world. In the past three years we have seen continued improvement of our strength and modernization of the naval and air forces in these regions."<sup>48</sup>

The Chinese have credited the Reagan administration for increasing US military strength in the Pacific: "The Reagan administration has reinforced the U.S. Seventh Fleet with 15 Los Angeles-type submarines, equipped the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier 'Carl Vinson' and the refurbished battleship the 'New Jersey,' has plans to increase the number of ships of the Seventh Fleet to 100 from the current 80, and is preparing to equip their submarines and ships with guided cruise missiles which can carry nuclear warheads. Meanwhile, the United States has stepped up the renewal of its air force in the Asian-Pacific region, equipping 72 new-type F-15 and 3 early warning aircraft on the Kadena Air Force base at Okinawa, and substituting F-16s for F-4s on some bases in South Korea. It is also planning to deploy two squadrons of F-16s on the Misawa Base of Aomori, Japan. In addition, in recent years there has been an obvious increase in the number of U.S. troops stationed in this region. The coming back to Asia of U.S. military strength is to a certain extent a change in U.S. policy concerning the Asian-Pacific region that has attracted attention."<sup>49</sup>

The Zhongnanhai is no doubt relieved at Washington's efforts to reverse the decline of its military strength in the region. As one official put it during President Reagan's trip: "There was no question in the private meetings about the Chinese concern for what the Soviets are doing . . . and they did not object in any way to our arms buildup."<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, the Chinese seem to have associated the United States with China's coastal defense. To protect their oil rigs from attack, the Chinese withdrew them from the Gulf of Tonkin during the Sino-Vietnamese border war.<sup>51</sup> Since then, Western oil companies, including US ones, have become involved in China's considerable effort to develop its offshore oil reserves.<sup>52</sup> As a result, many Westerners, including Americans, may eventually become involved in developing China's coastal reserves.<sup>53</sup> This will give the United States a

considerable stake in China's coastal defense. Indeed, China and the United States have already begun to tacitly cooperate in overseeing the welfare of the offshore rigs. A severe storm, in the fall of 1983, sank the Glomar Java Sea oil drilling ship in the South China Sea.<sup>54</sup> Chinese naval vessels cooperated with US air patrols in the search for survivors.<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, Beijing is still looking to the West, and the United States in particular, for the technology and technical expertise to strengthen China's economy and military capabilities. It was, after all, Defense Secretary Weinberger's visit to Beijing in September 1983 and the US agreement to loosen controls on technology with military applications that further eased Sino-US relations.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the Chinese continue to flirt with the idea of purchasing some US arms. They are hesitant because they lack sufficient foreign exchange for large arms purchases and because they fear becoming dependent on the United States for military equipment. Even so, the Chinese remain enamored with the idea. For example, Premier Zhao Ziyang said in January 1984: "If the United States is willing to sell to China some weapons which we need and can afford, then we will purchase them. But specific items are now still being discussed."<sup>58</sup>

A recent report claimed that a delegation led by Zhang Pin, the son of China's defense minister Zhang Aiping, visited Washington to pave the way for closer Sino-American military ties and Chinese arms purchases.<sup>59</sup> And during President Reagan's trip to China, it was announced that Zhang Aiping himself would visit the United States in June. Moreover, Beijing indicated its interest in US aid for the PLA navy when Xinhua cited Secretary Weinberger's comments during his visit to the Chinese naval base at Shanghai: "Weinberger told his Chinese hosts that the naval men did very well in keeping the vessels in good shape. He expressed the hope that the discussions in Beijing on military exchanges would continue so that good results would be brought about to benefit the modernization of both Chinese and U.S. navies."<sup>60</sup>

**T**he Sino-Soviet rivalry, viewed through a maritime prism, seems intractable. Indeed, both China and the Soviet Union have used their navies to indicate as much. During their renewed discussions with Moscow in October 1982, the Chinese signaled that they had not gone soft on the Soviets by successfully testing their first submarine-launched ballistic missile<sup>61</sup>—a development of considerable concern to the Kremlin.<sup>62</sup> The Soviets, in turn, demonstrated their support for Vietnam by deploying the *Minsk* to the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean from October 1982 to February 1983, roughly

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\*Curiously, in a gesture perhaps aimed at both the United States and China, Vietnamese naval vessels also participated in the rescue mission.<sup>56</sup> Whatever Hanoi's motives in doing so, Vietnam's participation represented tacit recognition of the political and military importance of Western involvement in China's offshore drilling efforts.

the period between the first and second sessions of the talks.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, the Chinese met with the Soviets in a third session only after hosting Secretary Weinberger in Beijing.<sup>64</sup> And as we have seen, the Zhongnanhai was careful to hold out the possibility of Sino-US naval cooperation. The Soviets, in riposte, deployed TU-16 bombers to Cam Ranh Bay for the first time in the fall of 1983.<sup>65</sup> It is interesting to note that the next meeting of the Sino-Soviet talks held in March 1984 was preceded by Premier Zhao Ziyang's visit to the United States in January and his favorable statement regarding Chinese purchases of US arms. On the other hand, the Soviets deployed an additional *Kiev*-class carrier *Novorossiysk* to the Pacific in February. After the meeting, Hanoi's April offensive in Kampuchea again encroached on Thai territory provoking Sino-Vietnamese clashes along the northern Vietnamese border.<sup>66</sup> (The United States again expressed its support for Bangkok and promised tank and aircraft deliveries to Thailand.)<sup>67</sup> And as President Reagan's trip to China approached, Moscow stepped-up its support for Hanoi by conducting joint amphibious exercises with Vietnam near Cam Ranh Bay and Haiphong.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore the Soviets deployed TU-16 bombers near the Afghan border to support a major offensive against Afghan guerrillas in the Panjshir Valley.<sup>69</sup> The Chinese in turn conducted naval exercises near the Spratlys.<sup>70</sup> The Sino-Soviet talks have changed little of substance—trade and contacts may increase, military tensions could even decline, but the rivalry will continue. It may even increase as China's growth in economic and military power poses an ever greater threat to the Soviets in Asia. And as Zhao Ziyang points out, both China and the United States are Pacific nations and are responsible for the peace and stability of the region.<sup>71</sup>

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