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CHINA'S NAVAL DIPLOMACY IN THE BALTIC SEA AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

A Lost Window of Opportunity

Tobias Kollakowski

The Baltic Sea returned to the stage of great-power competition in the second decade of the twenty-first century.¹ A marginal sea whose littoral states included NATO and European Union (EU) member states, Russia, and non-NATO members Sweden and Finland alike, the Baltic Sea witnessed a series of controversial naval exercises, exertions of political influence, and economic projects involving both littoral and extraregional actors.

One of those actors was the People's Republic of China (PRC). China's rise as a world power coincided with an unprecedented rise of its profile in the Baltic Sea region, a rise that covered the entire spectrum of human interactions, including the economic, political, and cultural domains.² Sparked by China's global geoeconomic development project the Belt and Road Initiative, concern has been growing about China's rising overseas influence and expanding force posture vis-à-vis Europe.³ Arguing for a stronger emphasis on the normative dimension of NATO, political science scholars Zinaida Bechná and Bradley Thayer highlight the potential threats posed by a rising China to NATO cohesion, as European capitals, in general, seek to stay on positive terms with Beijing despite deteriorating U.S.-China relations. In this context, China might utilize its economic might to fracture the transatlantic alliance through diplomatic and economic means. China's expanding activities in Europe thus have been the object of extensive examination recently, with particular emphasis on their economic dimension.⁴

This article contributes to the debate over Chinese interactions with the Baltic Sea region by discussing the presence of China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in Baltic waters as well as the PRC's use of naval diplomacy to develop relations

with regional stakeholders. It departs from existing scholarship on Chinese naval activities in northern European waters by focusing on the ends, means, and ways of Chinese naval diplomacy rather than providing a threat analysis from a Western or NATO perspective.

Just as different perceptions exist of the PRC as a foreign policy stakeholder, there are conflicting frameworks for interpreting PLAN activities, including in the Baltic Sea. Two extremes of the debate are particularly noteworthy. One perspective—often held by U.S. authors—emphasizes PRC ambitions to dominate different regions of the world, and elaborates on an assertive and aggressive PRC and views the PLAN as a force on track to carry out operations that “will include activities designed to coerce, intimidate, and ultimately even defeat at sea the United States, our allies, and our friends.”⁵ Another discourse—mostly of Chinese origin—stresses China’s positive attitude toward an open and inclusive security architecture as well as Beijing’s support for international security, peace-keeping, and stability and interprets PLAN overseas deployments as essential to acting as a responsible great power and promoting world peace.⁶

According to the pessimistic analysts, cooperative rhetoric from an autocratic China should have fallen on deaf ears and prevented constructive interaction between the PLAN and the militaries of the European states; European states should have perceived China’s naval presence expanding to the Baltic Sea as competitive and confrontational. According to the optimistic analysts, China’s ostensible commitment to peace, security, and stability should have been more credible to European states and led to opportunities for deeper military-to-military cooperation to promote common interests on a global level.⁷ Consequently, strong cooperation between European militaries and the PLAN should have developed.

Unsurprisingly, both of these extreme positions in the debate only partly explain the complex and contradictory interests that shaped the Baltic littoral states in their interaction with China and the PLAN. To address this problem, this article examines the evolving patterns of naval relations between China and selected Baltic littoral states and explores their underlying motivators. This approach suggests that interregional naval dynamics were shaped by a major dissonance: the tension between the cooperative *ways* in which naval relations were applied as diplomatic means and ultimate policy *aims* that guided them but were highly competitive.

A proper appreciation of the naval dynamics in the Baltic Sea during the 2010s draws attention to the potential that existed for the development of Sino-European relations, including in the security field. This article argues that Chinese naval diplomacy in the Baltic Sea during the 2010s was distinctively *cooperative* in character. Furthermore, it shows that military leadership of various European states demonstrated open-mindedness toward utilizing this potential

to develop security relations. However, the direction of the PRC's foreign and domestic policy and its ambitions to shape the global order, which were decisively *competitive* and in conflict with Western norms and values, precluded prosperous relations, despite Beijing's best diplomatic efforts.

Evidence to support these claims is drawn from a broad range of U.S., Chinese, German, Russian, and Finnish sources, and from interviews with politicians, military leaders, and diplomats from Baltic littoral and European states that observed and guided the developing relations with their Chinese counterparts from a naval or military perspective. The article first introduces authoritative concepts about naval diplomacy that are commonly included in naval theory. These concepts provide the theoretical framework for the examination of the PLAN's presence in the Baltic Sea. The next section briefly establishes the nature of PLAN deployments to the Baltic, the composition of naval forces involved, and the impressions the Chinese warships conveyed.

Subsequently, the article examines how China carried out its naval diplomacy and shows that while competitive signals likely have targeted the United States and NATO as an organization, the *ways* that China applied naval diplomacy bilaterally vis-à-vis the Baltic littoral countries were collaborative in nature. This section carries out a more detailed examination of the cases of Finland, Latvia, Russia, and Germany. These four countries represent the spectrum of political affiliations that were present in the Baltic Sea region during the period under consideration: Germany and Latvia were both NATO and EU member states, Finland was an EU member state, and Russia was a member of neither NATO nor the EU.⁸ Chinese naval vessels repeatedly called at ports of three of these states—Germany, Russia, and Finland—which demonstrated a level of commitment by the PLAN at the time.

But subsequent to this spurt, beginning in the 2020s, relations between Europe and China became more strained than they had been for decades. If Beijing was sincerely interested in fostering relations, why were its efforts in cooperative diplomacy not more successful? The last sections address this question. Having elaborated on the use of naval diplomacy by China to develop relations with Baltic littoral countries, the article goes on to show how, except for Russia, these countries' relations with the PRC significantly deteriorated, including in the naval domain. It concludes by arguing that despite astute diplomacy and grand ambitions, the Communist Party of China (CPC) under General Secretary Xi Jinping ultimately obstructed the development of relations.

While the research focus of this article is on the naval domain, it is important to note that Beijing's naval diplomacy did not occur in isolation but was only one component of a much broader effort. Thus, to contextualize China's naval

diplomacy in the Baltic Sea properly, this article also considers Sino-European relations and the bilateral relations between the PRC and the respective Baltic littoral countries of interest. Also important are policy issues relevant to understanding the international situation during the period under examination and the CPC's ambitions to shape the global order. The research design leaves little space to present any of these subtopics in depth, and they are addressed only as far as necessary to understand the context in which naval diplomacy took place. To preserve focus, this article does not examine nondiplomatic objectives of the PLAN presence in European waters, such as intelligence gathering. While a comparison between PLAN naval diplomacy in the Baltic Sea and PLAN diplomatic efforts elsewhere would be of great academic interest, such a comparative approach is beyond the scope here.⁹ Similarly, China's commercial maritime activities, which often also involve ways in which the Chinese party-state safeguards its political interests that have been the subject of academic debate, largely will be left undiscussed.¹⁰

NAVAL DIPLOMACY

Naval diplomacy is an essential component of the modern academic discourse on sea power theory because of the important role that navies have always played as diplomatic instruments in backing a state's policy with hard power during times of peace and of war and in between.¹¹ The ability to deploy naval forces for prolonged time periods in proximity to the territory of another state without producing a political commitment, the need to infringe on the territorial sovereignty of another state, or dependence on some host nation's support makes navies especially useful diplomatic tools.¹² While serving the policy objectives of navies' respective states, naval diplomacy can take more-competitive (often called "gunboat diplomacy") or more-cooperative forms, with varying shades of gray.¹³ During the second half of the twentieth century, hard-power competition between the Western and Communist blocs, including on the oceans, was fierce. However, as Geoffrey Till points out, given the absence of high-intensity warfare between the blocs, classical works on naval war and strategy proved insufficient to provide an explanatory framework for the then-ongoing naval contest.¹⁴ In fact, the objectives of naval forces during this period were, in the words of Soviet navy chief Sergey Gorshkov, to "achieve political ends without resorting to armed struggle, merely by putting on pressure with one's own potential might and threatening to start military operations."¹⁵ These dynamics motivated several important conceptual contributions to naval diplomacy during the Cold War.

James Cable's seminal monograph, *Gunboat Diplomacy 1919–1979: Political Applications of Limited Naval Force*, provides a theoretical categorization of the ways that naval force is utilized to achieve political goals. Cable distinguishes

among definitive (aimed at achieving a *fait accompli*), purposeful (aimed at changing another nation's policy), catalytic (aimed at shaping events), and expressive (aimed at emphasizing attitudes) uses of naval force.¹⁶ Given that Chinese stakes in the Baltic Sea—unlike in the East or South China Sea—were not high, as, for example, the territorial integrity of China (as perceived by Beijing) was not in question, Cable's more conflict-laden categories, which are often associated with tense political circumstances, are not applicable to the arguments in this article.¹⁷

On the more cooperative side of the diplomatic spectrum, Till draws attention to collaborative naval diplomacy, which he defines as “a range of activity expressly

Chinese naval diplomacy in the Baltic Sea during the 2010s was distinctively cooperative in character. . . . However, the direction of the PRC's foreign and domestic policy and its ambitions to shape the global order, which were decisively competitive and in conflict with Western norms and values, precluded prosperous relations, despite Beijing's best diplomatic efforts.

intended to secure foreign policy objectives not by threatening potential adversaries but by influencing the behaviour of allies and potentially friendly bystanders.”¹⁸

This article adopts Till's definition of cooperative naval diplomacy, adding the condition that any influence on the behavior of other states and

decision makers is achieved through efforts “done . . . together with other” stakeholders and not against their will, following one of the *Cambridge Dictionary's* definitions of “cooperative.”¹⁹ For the central argument presented in this article, it is important to note that collaborative naval diplomacy, as it is understood here, is characterized by cooperative *ways*. This does not necessarily presuppose that policy *ends* overlap, and it implies that, though cooperative in nature and means, cooperative naval diplomacy “does not require that states confront no conflicts of interest,” thus reflecting a realist understanding of this particular term as outlined in *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*.²⁰ In this sense “working together . . . for a common purpose or goal” is not a prerequisite for the concept of cooperative naval diplomacy as it is applied here.²¹

Cooperative naval diplomacy in its most advanced form—naval coalition building—may involve complex bi- and multinational exercises and institutional integration, as is the case with NATO.²² Beijing's wariness of becoming entangled in formal alliances, however, limits naval coalition building with the PLAN.²³ The PRC's relationship with Pakistan, Beijing's “all-weather” strategic partner, may be interpreted as the exception that proves the rule, given its decades-long nature and the deep level of support provided by a wide range of state institutions.²⁴ Subsequently, fairly complex Sino-Pakistani exercises, such as the 2020 SEA GUARDIANS

naval exercise, might qualify as naval coalition building.²⁵ Still, the contrast with formal alliances such as NATO or the U.S.-Japan alliance is significant.

Ken Booth elaborates on the intricate relationship between foreign policy and naval diplomacy and introduces a wide range of concepts that relate to the “thinkable uses of modern naval power” in a field of study heavily focused on the “unthinkable use of the most destructive weapons we have.” He goes on to detail the many practical functions naval diplomacy can fulfill. Functions that are particularly relevant for this article include the use of naval diplomacy to reassure and strengthen relationships and “establish rights and interests in near or distant regions, impress onlookers with the country’s technical competence or diplomatic skill, bolster the strength and confidence of allies . . . or third parties[,] . . . encourage or dissuade states in relation to particular policies, signal intentions or expectations, . . . create a different politico-military environment[,] . . . gain access to new countries.”²⁶

Ultimately, as Cable argues, one needs to be cautious not to overinterpret port visits, as “most naval visits do not convey any specific message, let alone imply any exercise of pressure.”²⁷ This assessment provides another explanation why this article refrained from examining isolated cases of Chinese visits to port cities such as Copenhagen or Gdynia that occurred during the 2010s.

CHINESE NAVAL PRESENCE IN NORTHERN EUROPEAN WATERS

China’s rise as a naval power has attracted considerable academic attention.²⁸ For an interpretation of Chinese naval presence in the Baltic Sea at the beginning of the twenty-first century this context is particularly relevant. The PLAN could carry out naval activities in a marginal sea as geographically remote from East Asia as the Baltic Sea only after acquiring a sufficiently capable blue-water naval force. Following a significant buildup of surface combatants and major replenishment vessels at the beginning of the twenty-first century, warships have since been carrying the Chinese naval ensign to ever-more-distant maritime regions.

Northern Europe is one of these new PLAN deployment destinations. Having sailed through northern European waters in 2001—crossing the North Sea and making port stops in England and in the German port of Wilhelmshaven—Chinese warships entered the Baltic Sea for the first time in 2007, when the Luyang I-class destroyer *Guangzhou* (168) and the Fuchi-class replenishment ship *Weishan Hu* (887) sailed to Saint Petersburg.²⁹ While in transit, the PLAN warships took part in maneuvers with several Western navies, including the Spanish, French, and British, although none of these exercises took place in the Baltic Sea. The activities largely were of low complexity, such as search-and-rescue drills, formation steaming, flight (helicopter) operations, communication drills, and an air-defense map exercise.³⁰

The first Chinese naval vessels arrived in northern European waters as the PLAN was gaining valuable experience with overseas deployments and other blue-water activities. Port calls in various European ports and exercises and interactions with different European navies (and other service branches)—both east and west—also reflected a Chinese foreign policy under the Hu-Wen administration (2002–13) that, despite taking a more active role in international affairs, still exercised restraint, continued the PRC’s tradition of low-profile policies, and corresponded well with Hu Jintao’s “China’s peaceful development” policy slogan that aimed to reassure the world that China was not an aggressive, expansionist great power on the rise.³¹

Over the following decade, China’s naval presence in the Baltic Sea increased significantly (see table). There are several intriguing aspects to these PLAN peacetime deployments. One concerns time; as shown in the illustration, from 2015 to 2019, the PLAN deployed warships annually to the Baltic Sea. Thus, while falling short of a permanent naval presence, for a period, Chinese naval deployments to the Baltic Sea were routine. Given the enormous distances to the Chinese fleets’ home bases, this by itself was an astonishing achievement that only a few navies in the world were capable of sustaining.

Theory also places emphasis on the composition of the naval forces deployed for diplomatic purposes. The spectrum between a sailing-training vessel and a carrier strike group is wide. The size, age, and capabilities of the force affect

CHINESE NAVAL PRESENCE IN PORTS OF BALTIC LITTORAL STATES, 2015–19

Year	Naval Vessels	Activities
2015	Yuzhao-class amphibious transport dock <i>Changbai Shan</i> (989); Jiangkai II-class guided-missile frigate <i>Yuncheng</i> (571); Fuchi-class replenishment ship <i>Chao Hu</i> (890)	Port visit to Hamburg
2015	Luyang II-class guided-missile destroyer <i>Jinan</i> (152); Jiangkai II-class guided-missile frigate <i>Yiyang</i> (548); Fuchi-class replenishment ship <i>Qiandao Hu</i> (886)	Port visits to Copenhagen, Helsinki, Stockholm
2016	Jiangkai II-class guided-missile frigate <i>Xiangtan</i> (531)	Participation in the Kiel Week
2017	Luyang III-class guided-missile destroyer <i>Hefei</i> (174); Jiangkai II-class guided-missile frigate <i>Yuncheng</i> (571); Fuchi-class replenishment ship <i>Luoma Hu</i> (964)	Participation in JOINT SEA 2017; participation in Russian Navy Day parade (Saint Petersburg); port visits to Helsinki, Riga
2018	Jiangkai II-class guided-missile frigate <i>Binzhou</i> (515)	Participation in the Kiel Week; port visit to Gdynia
2019	Luyang II-class guided-missile destroyer <i>Xi'an</i> (153)	Participation in the Russian Navy Day parade (Saint Petersburg)

nuances of the diplomatic messages a state wishes to convey. Display of relational power matters in naval diplomacy; as Till points out, “International politics is about perception, of how strong and resolute you seem in the eyes of others.”³² Even more significant, as Booth argues, demonstrations of unimpressive naval force can be counterproductive to the reputation of the state deploying the respective naval assets.³³

Applying these theoretical notions to the case of Chinese naval diplomacy in the Baltic Sea, however, provides results that are ambiguous. On the one hand, the forces the PLAN deployed to the Baltic Sea were significant, particularly taking the limited naval force postures of regional littoral states into consideration. In 2019, the biggest western Baltic littoral state navy, the German navy, operated no more than eleven frigates in total, while the PLAN task groups visiting the region included three guided-missile destroyers and five guided-missile frigates.³⁴

On the other hand, the PLAN's deployment of several task groups should not be overemphasized. When sailing that far from home waters and, where applicable, far from sea zones adjacent to partner territory, deploying task-group-sized formations is a standard practice. Such deployments benefit from the cohesion of the task group and generally consist of at least one replenishment vessel, which significantly simplifies logistical support. It is not a way of operating that a third party would primarily interpret in political terms.³⁵ Furthermore, given that the PLAN's task forces operating off the Horn of Africa regularly detached individual warships to the Baltic Sea or sailed there as a complete force following mission handover, the composition of China's naval presence in the Baltic was determined by the size and composition of the PLAN's antipiracy contingents.³⁶

Another aspect of Booth's functions of naval diplomacy, however—to “impress onlookers with the country's technical competence”—undeniably was fulfilled. After decades during which Chinese industrial products often had a reputation for low quality, the port visit of the Yuzhao-class amphibious transport dock *Changbai Shan* to Hamburg, in particular, left a positive, lasting impression on observers that Chinese naval shipbuilding had made significant improvements and that the PLAN was operating state-of-the-art warships.³⁷ Thus, PLAN visits to the Baltic Sea were definitely also enhancing China's prestige overseas.

CHINESE NAVAL DIPLOMACY TOWARD EUROPE AND THE BALTIC SEA REGION

Having established *what* China's naval presence in the Baltic Sea looked like, now *how* and *for which purposes* China utilized naval diplomacy in the Baltic Sea as an instrument of its foreign policy are examined.

The ways that China utilized naval forces for diplomatic purposes in the Baltic Sea were distinctive to the region and differed from Beijing's approach to other

maritime theaters, such as the South China Sea. As China's actions in maritime Southeast Asia have been the object of thorough research over the past decade, Chinese use of conventional and unconventional armed force in that region to intimidate, coerce, compel, and deter has been well publicized.³⁸ In Southeast Asia the competitive character of naval diplomacy was the outcome of high-politics policy issues deemed nonnegotiable—for example, the preservation of territorial integrity. According to the 2019 Chinese white paper, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, to safeguard this objective, Chinese state agencies made “no promise to renounce the use of force, and reserve the option of taking all necessary measures.”³⁹

China's objectives with respect to Europe, on the other hand, were more about cultivating support for Chinese positions, which incentivized cooperative naval diplomacy for the deployments.⁴⁰ There is a possible competitive exception to this cooperative interpretation vis-à-vis the U.S. Navy. Sebastian Bruns argues that the participation in 2015 of the *San Antonio*-class amphibious transport dock *San Antonio* in addition to two *Ticonderoga*-class cruisers at BALTOPS, a multinational regional exercise, represented a major shift in U.S. naval presence toward northern Europe.⁴¹ By deploying an amphibious transport dock in addition to regular deployments of task groups composed of major surface combatants of its own, China demonstrated the capability and willingness to match the U.S. Navy in this far-distant marginal sea on a near-equal footing. Several other authors also have interpreted China's motivations for sending its warships into NATO's backyard and participating in the Sino-Russian joint naval exercise JOINT SEA 2017 as counterreactions to U.S. and certain NATO member states' freedom of navigation deployments to the South China Sea.⁴²

But in general, from the middle of the first decade of the century onward various Chinese scholars (including, supposedly, some within the People's Liberation Army [PLA]) displayed a positive assessment of Europe and the potential for Sino-European relations, and Beijing awarded Sino-European relations a high priority.⁴³ As Luo Zheng argues:

Since the founding of New China, particularly since the 18th CPC National Congress [in 2012], following Xi Jinping's call for a new development of international military exchanges, the Chinese [military] has comprehensively managed relations and made efforts to create a favorable external environment. . . . China is also actively developing military relations with European countries, striving to build a China-European partnership of peace, growth, reform and civilization.⁴⁴

This assessment was equally applicable to the naval dimension in Europe. In the 2010s, many European political and military leaders were open-minded about engagement with China and particularly open to interaction in the naval domain. In this context, some European warships that were deployed to the Horn of Africa

as part of international efforts to counter piracy conducted low-level exercises with PLAN warships.⁴⁵ Italian scholar Andrea Ghiselli has studied China's naval participation in peacekeeping and confidence- and trust-building measures and changes in Chinese official documents. Ghiselli goes as far as to argue that "the PLAN is en route to becoming what Till has called a 'post-modern' navy."⁴⁶ According to Till, a "post-modern" navy, among others, has a focus "on international rather than national security" and gives emphasis to "protection of good order at sea."⁴⁷

Given China's buildup of power projection capabilities (e.g., the PLAN aircraft carrier and amphibious warship programs), gunboat diplomacy in the South China Sea, and amphibious assault exercises carried out to exercise significant pressure on Taiwan—all characteristics of a "modern" rather than a "post-modern navy" as Till defines them—Ghiselli's conceptualization does not appear convincing for understanding the PLAN. However, while his thesis of the "post-modern" navy is controversial, Ghiselli does make important observations: outside East and Southeast Asian sea zones over which the PRC claims sovereignty, the argument that Beijing primarily used naval deployments as cooperative means in the 2010s cannot be easily discarded. Examples include the escort of Syrian chemical weapons in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions in the Mediterranean, antipiracy efforts at the Horn of Africa, and humanitarian deployments of the Chinese Anwei-class hospital ship *Daishan Dao*. Furthermore, as a former deputy commander of EU Naval Force (NAVFOR) Somalia points out, around the turn of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Chinese representatives to SHADE (Shared Awareness and Deconfliction—a Combined Maritime Forces [CMF]-initiated platform for exchange of information and coordination) signaled that China had an interest in joining the multinational operational command formats at the Horn of Africa (which were CMF and thus, to a large degree, Western dominated) on the condition that China was to receive one leadership function within the existing command-and-control structure.⁴⁸ Similarly, leadership personnel of EU NAVFOR Somalia were interested in improving coordination and cooperation with China's naval escort task groups operating at the Horn of Africa.⁴⁹

Equally important, European leaders appeared receptive to these overtures at the time. As Geoffrey Gresh argues: "Most European or NATO allies do not view China the same way that they view Russia. In fact, during JOINT SEA 2017, Italy hosted the PLAN in its own joint exercise in the Tyrrhenian Sea. . . . Many of the European officers I spoke with view China's regional and naval rise as an encouraging opportunity for cooperation, and one that can be shaped and influenced in a positive direction, which cannot be said for Russia, as most pointed out. They also see positive trade benefits to be gained."⁵⁰ These observations were true not only for European officers stationed in Italy: even as late as 2018, Allied Maritime Command, NATO's maritime component command at Northwood (U.K.), had developed an idea for a low-level exercise involving one of NATO's standing

NATO maritime groups and the PLAN's Jiangkai II-class frigate *Binzhou*, which was in transit to the Baltic Sea. Owing to the complexity of carrying out exercise serials between multinational NATO units and a non-NATO vessel, both on a political and on a practical level, time constraints prevented these plans from being realized.⁵¹

But China was more interested in fostering bilateral relations with individual states than in engaging with supranational organizations such as NATO or the EU.⁵² With its naval diplomacy vis-à-vis Finland, Latvia, Russia, and Germany, China deliberately engaged stakeholders that demonstrated open-mindedness and made intelligent use of naval diplomacy and cooperative activities with the goal of promoting closer bilateral relations.

Finland

Chinese task groups visited Helsinki in 2015 and in 2017. On the latter occasion, the 174th PLAN task group—consisting of the Luyang III-class destroyer *Hefei* (174), the Fuchi-class replenishment ship *Luoma Hu*, and the Jiangkai II-class frigate *Yuncheng*—arrived in Helsinki on 1 August 2017 for a port visit that lasted several days. There can be little doubt that the arrival date—PLA Day—was not a coincidence, as it provided an occasion to host a significant reception to celebrate the ninetieth anniversary of the PLA's founding with more than two hundred guests, including Rear Admiral Yu Manjiang, commander of the task group; Finnish minister of defense Jussi Niinistö; the deputy chief of staff of the Finnish Defense Forces; the chief of its naval staff; and the mayor of Helsinki.⁵³ In addition to sections of the event that dealt with domestic PLA developments—for example, China's military modernization and “political army building” (*zhengzhi jian jun*)—bilateral topics also were addressed. Niinistö, who had hosted a visit by Chinese minister of defense Chang Wanquan in 2015—about two months before the arrival of the first Chinese task group to Helsinki—and had visited China in 2016, stressed the importance of deepening professional exchanges and cooperation between the two militaries in the future.⁵⁴

Particularly noteworthy for the argument presented here were the naval-related messages that China aimed to convey. Before the 174th PLAN task group had arrived, a reception was organized by the Chinese embassy in Helsinki. There, Chinese representatives gave presentations to locally based diplomats on China's recent fleet buildup and Beijing's blue-water ambitions. The key messages that Beijing had aimed to transmit were that China desires to make the world a better place, that the PRC contributes to global advance through mutual cooperation, and that all Baltic littoral states possess a common interest in cooperation with China. At the end of the reception the military attaché staffs in Helsinki then were invited to the PLA Day reception hosted by the soon-to-visit task group. At this reception, too, presentations about Chinese naval expansion were given and

Chinese representatives emphasized that the ultimate purpose of China's actions were to foster peaceful cooperation on the oceans.⁵⁵

Apart from high-level diplomatic exchanges, China also made ample use of the resources—warships, sailors, and expatriates—available in port. Both in 2015 and

In Southeast Asia the competitive character of naval diplomacy was the outcome of high-politics policy issues deemed nonnegotiable—for example, the preservation of territorial integrity. . . . China's objectives with respect to Europe, on the other hand, were more about cultivating support for Chinese positions, which incentivized cooperative naval diplomacy for the deployments.

in 2017, large crowds of Chinese expatriates saluted the arrival of the Chinese warships, while the port visit demonstrated the well-organized interplay among PLA military personnel, embassy staff, and pro-Beijing organizations, such as the Finland Association for Peaceful Reunification of China and the Chinese

Friendship Association.⁵⁶ The Chinese task group held deck receptions and a ship's open day and performed a grand flag-raising ceremony to celebrate PLA Day.⁵⁷

On the Finnish side, the naval academy—Merisotakoulu—and coastal defense forces engaged with the visiting PLAN forces military to military, Finnish liaison officers received a temporary office on board the flagship, *Hefei*, a cultural program was offered, and Chinese sailors and Finnish troops played a soccer game.⁵⁸ According to Admiral Yu, the days of interaction were intended to “carry out exchanges with the Finnish military in various forms and rich in content, hoping to expand the areas of exchanges between the navies of the two countries and promote the development of exchanges and cooperation between the two countries to a higher level.”⁵⁹

Chinese military and political leaders possibly were optimistic about the prospects for expanding the relationship with Helsinki because they may have perceived that Finland, as a non-NATO member state at the time, was comparatively open to Chinese courtesies. Xi Jinping visited Finland less than four months before the 174th task group arrived; he praised the “enduring friendship” between Helsinki and Beijing and the two countries released a joint declaration, “Establishing and Promoting the Future-Oriented New-Type Cooperative Partnership.”⁶⁰ As Matti Puranen, senior researcher at the Finnish National Defense University, and Jukka Aukia, senior analyst at the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki, point out, Sino-Finnish relations throughout the post-Cold War era had been characterized by “pragmatic positivity”—somewhat in contrast with the Chinese relationship with Finland's neighbor Sweden.⁶¹ Considering this political background, theory on naval diplomacy can provide further valuable interpretations.

Certainly, periodic port visits by individual Chinese warships or even task forces were irrelevant to the regional military balance of power. But it would be a mistake to dismiss their value as political leverage entirely. Referring to the USSR's warships in far-distant regions during the Cold War that would have been vulnerable to NATO's naval superiority during conflict escalation, Booth argues that influence should not be assessed from a Western perspective but from the point of view of the local state and that "even small naval presence might have enormous influence potential," because nonaligned states could be predisposed to influence for political, historical, or economic reasons and thus to see a visiting Soviet warship as "a token of support, as a symbol of a changing power balance, or as a promise of an alternative source of security."⁶²

In application of Booth's argument to China's naval presence in the Baltic Sea, Chinese potential influence should not be calculated against NATO's relative military strength in the region but rather interpreted from the perspective of the littoral states. The case of Finland, a state that shares similarities with Booth's example of a Cold War-era nonaligned state, demonstrates this point. Finland's increasingly strained relationship with Russia is one of the reasons that Finland pursued closer defense cooperation with Sweden and Norway.⁶³ Nevertheless, in terms of great-power competition, the deterrence value even of both countries' combined militaries was limited, because they remain relatively small and are nonnuclear powers. Furthermore, during the 2010s, NATO membership was not yet a viable option for Finland. Consequently, as a small, neutral state that pursued "small state realism," Finland was particularly predisposed to China's repeated port visits to Helsinki and the Asian great power's naval presence in the Baltic Sea.⁶⁴ Finland's reaction to the Sino-Russian exercise JOINT SEA 2017 supports this interpretation. As David Scott points out, while other EU member states, including Estonia, Lithuania, and Poland, expressed strong concerns about the exercise, Finland stayed noticeably silent.⁶⁵ Similarly, Gresh recapitulates:

China's PLAN deployments signal its growing geoeconomic interests and maritime investments, as well as the [Belt and Road Initiative's] extensive reach into the far western edge of Eurasia. Much of the Baltic region appears to have welcomed China's growing investments with open arms. For many of the smaller states, China's involvement has helped balance against an increasingly imposing Russia. In April 2017, Finland was pleased to host President Xi Jinping, marking the hundred-year anniversary of its independence [from Russia].⁶⁶

Latvia

Latvia fits Booth's function of "encourag[ing] . . . states in relation to particular policies" particularly well. As Bartosz Kowalski points out, during the 2010s matters of political compliance with China on (what Beijing considered to be)

internal affairs severely impacted the relations between the Baltic States and the PRC.⁶⁷

On the one hand, Estonia and Lithuania were faced with worsening political and foreign economic relations with China after the two states' governments welcomed the Dalai Lama in 2011 and 2013, respectively. Latvia, on the other hand, had decided to take the issue of human rights off the bilateral agenda. Furthermore, Latvia had demonstrated pragmatic policies toward various economic projects. In November 2016, Altum, a Latvian state-owned financial institution, and the Industrial Commercial Bank of China signed a memorandum of intent to launch an investment fund to finance infrastructure projects, and in 2017, a cooperation memorandum was signed between the ports of Riga and Lianyungang. China rewarded Latvia's decision by promoting cooperation with Riga in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative and fostering political relations. For example, Latvia was chosen to host the 2016 16 + 1 summit, one of China's most important initiatives in Sino-European relations.⁶⁸ This approach fell in line with Beijing's style of utilizing the format as an instrument to engage states sympathetic to Beijing's agenda.⁶⁹

It was against this political background that the 174th task group visited Riga on 5 August 2017, the first visit by Chinese warships to Latvia ever.⁷⁰ The program looked very similar to what the PLAN did in Helsinki. Again, PLA personnel, diplomats, and representatives of Chinese-funded institutions and overseas Chinese worked closely together, and Admiral Yu underscored that the visit aimed to consolidate Sino-Latvian military-to-military relations. Chinese warships held receptions, offered cultural events (including a performance of Peking opera), and welcomed Latvian soldiers on board the vessels. PLA sailors interacted with the Latvian military on formal, cultural, and athletic levels.⁷¹ As in Helsinki, the timing of the port visit in the aftermath of developments considered positive by Beijing appears intended to reinforce and reward the improving Sino-Latvian relations.

More generally, it demonstrated the benefits of closer cooperation with China and adherence to Chinese principles in conducting international relations. As in the case of Finland, there were also certain aspects that made Latvia particularly amenable to Chinese influence. In addition to economic incentives such as provision of infrastructure for Chinese trade, Riga was interested in diversifying international cooperation as relations with Moscow grew continuously more tense, as Latvian authors Otto Tabuns and Marta Mitko point out.⁷² Against this background, Latvian foreign minister Edgars Rinkevics stated that "regardless of differences in the European and Chinese mindset, we have found common touchpoints or common denominators on the issues such as climate change, Iran, North Korea, and Afghanistan," and went on to assert that "this is not about

China being a threat or an opportunity, a competitor or an ally. We cannot afford a black-and-white perspective of this kind. We must find the real balance in the relationship with China.”⁷³

Russia

China’s cooperative naval diplomatic ties with the Russian Federation were unquestionably the most advanced in the region. PLAN interaction with the Russian navy was not limited to the Baltic Sea; the two navies carried out JOINT SEA exercises in several marginal seas adjacent to the shores of Eurasia throughout the 2010s. On the policy level, the 2015 edition of Russia’s maritime doctrine declared that “an important component of the national maritime policy in the Pacific region is the development of friendly relations with China.”⁷⁴ Against this background, it was consequential that the PLAN’s interaction with the Russian navy was more developed in comparison with that with other European navies in both quantitative and qualitative terms. In contrast with the port visits, cultural exchanges, and diplomatic activities that had characterized engagement with the other Baltic littoral countries, the Sino-Russian exercise JOINT SEA 2017 in which the 174th task group participated involved high-intensity combat scenarios including three-dimensional warfare.⁷⁵

From a diplomatic viewpoint, the ability to conduct highly complex and demanding bilateral exercise scenarios—a feature rarely found outside a formal alliance whose members constantly train on common procedures and interoperability—proved to be a powerful asset. Demonstrating the navy’s war-fighting capabilities provided substance to China’s credibility as a global great power and underpinned the PLAN’s collaborative value. In combination with a constant political rapprochement between Putin’s Russia and Xi’s China, Sino-Russian naval interaction during this period might even qualify for “naval coalition building,” if the limitations outlined in the introductory section are taken into consideration.

In addition to the cooperative value Sino-Russian naval activities in the Baltic Sea brought to the bilateral relationship, JOINT SEA 2017 also has attracted attention for the signals it conveyed toward third parties, especially NATO. As both JOINT SEA 2017 and the concurrent dispatch of a second Chinese naval task force to Istanbul were taking place simultaneously with or shortly after NATO naval exercises in the same region, Sebastian Bruns and Sarah Kirchberger interpret these Chinese-Russian activities principally as a signal to NATO.⁷⁶ Although all the Chinese regional engagement discussed here occurred in European waters, the interpretation of the PRC’s activities with Russia differed from that of its Latvian and Finnish engagement because these signals were set against different political backgrounds. Chinese and Russian foreign policy interests overlap in their opposition to U.S. hegemony and the dominance of the Western-led international order.⁷⁷ The use of naval force under these circumstances corresponds

to Cable's concept of "expressive force." Referring to the dispatch of the battleship USS *Missouri* to Istanbul in 1946 as a way of demonstrating U.S. political support for Turkey at a moment when the USSR was demanding territorial concessions, Cable's category of "expressive force" involves using warships to support and accentuate political attitudes and statements.⁷⁸ Under this interpretation, the deployment of two naval task forces to sea zones adjacent to Russia and coincidental with NATO exercises communicated China's political support for Russia at a moment when Moscow was under pressure from NATO. In terms of Booth's logic, Beijing bolstered Moscow's strength and confidence at a moment when Western leaders such as Barack Obama and Angela Merkel claimed that Russia was politically isolated following its annexation of Crimea and its warring against Ukraine in the Donbas.⁷⁹

While this demonstration of PRC expressive force once again fits very well with the concept of cooperative naval diplomacy as far as relations with Moscow were concerned, it created a problematic dichotomy with the European states. How could PLAN deployments simultaneously signal support for Russia in its struggle against NATO and interest in developing naval relations with NATO member states? How could China use naval means in activities that could be interpreted as supporting a serious challenge to the Western-led international order and at the same time convincingly convey the intention of developing closer relations with EU member states? China ultimately was unable to solve this contradiction.

Germany

A particularly noteworthy case of Chinese naval diplomacy was the German navy and its longstanding chief, Vice Admiral Andreas Krause (October 2014–March 2021). When a Chinese task group (see table) spent a five-day-long port visit in Hamburg in 2015, Rear Admiral Zhang Chuanshu, commander of the task group, underscored the close political relationship between Beijing and Berlin. The year before, when Xi visited Berlin, Germany and China had agreed to establish a "comprehensive strategic partnership" that "aimed for regular consultations on regional and global political and security issues."⁸⁰ Similarly, Captain Michael Setzer, head of the Bundeswehr's (German military's) regional command for Hamburg, stated: "The visit will foster mutual cultivation of friendly relations and international understanding." During the weeklong stay Chinese soldiers visited Bundeswehr facilities and held talks with the German navy about training and experience in counterpiracy operations. Both sides also took advantage of this occasion to carry out meetings with representatives from the business, political, cultural, and society sectors, both in Hamburg's town hall and on board the Chinese flagship. As Setzer remarked, there were "many opportunities for

civil-military dialogue.⁸¹ The previous chief of the German navy, Vice Admiral Axel Schimpf (2010–14), however, had not prioritized relations with the PLAN, and the meeting that had been arranged between the chiefs of the navies for 2015 had been canceled.⁸²

During the subsequent years, China made wise use of naval diplomacy to rekindle bilateral navy-to-navy relationships. When the Jiangkai II-class frigate *Xiangtan* called in Kiel for the 2016 Kiel Week, Krause, the new navy chief, was asked to deliver a welcome speech on board the Chinese warship. When the German navy declined this invitation, because it conflicted with the chief's own reception, the Chinese rescheduled their reception on board *Xiangtan* and again approached the German navy headquarters with the request that Krause open the event, which this time was accepted. On board *Xiangtan*, Admiral Krause was received by the PRC's top diplomatic echelon. Shortly after the end of the Kiel Week, Krause received an invitation to China, marking the beginning of a comparatively intensive personal relationship between him and the political and military leadership of the PLAN for the remainder of the decade.⁸³ For example, following Krause's trip to Qingdao to take part in the celebrations for the seventieth anniversary of the foundation of the PLAN in 2019, Admiral Qin Shengxiang, the political commissar of the PLAN (2017–22), traveled to Germany. There, Qin visited naval facilities in Wilhelmshaven and Flensburg, where his objective was to learn about training programs that the PLAN might adapt or adopt to improve the PLAN's operational capability.⁸⁴

Although particularly successful in establishing and maintaining a relationship with Krause, China's approach was not unique to Germany. As Wuthnow and Baughman show, there was a general preference in the PRC's military and naval diplomacy to carry out senior-leader exchanges with major navies—including European ones—aimed at developing relationships of strategic importance.⁸⁵

The German navy chief's relationship with China also was not an isolated case within the Bundeswehr. At the time, the German military carried out a range of cooperative measures with the PLA, including medical training cooperation, education programs, and combined security-policy seminars for prospective leadership personnel of the Bundeswehr and the PLA.⁸⁶ As far as Chinese naval deployments to the Baltic Sea were concerned, Krause elaborated:

I consider the Chinese Navy's regular voyages to the Baltic Sea to be completely normal for a global trading power. . . . The Chinese have the right to visit us, just as we have the right to visit them. . . . Germany and China maintain a large number of global relationships. Against this background, military exchanges also make sense. . . . I consider it [the Chinese naval presence in the Baltic Sea] to be completely legitimate, I think it's appropriate, I think it's basically a positive sign. . . . We see an improvement in relations but starting from a low level. . . . As long as China adheres

to the rules-based order, there is no reason to change the relationship with China. . . . China's behavior in East Asia and in Europe are two very different animals. . . . We need them [China], among other things, economically. . . . Accordingly, military superiors must observe the political goals.⁸⁷

In sum, during the second half of the 2010s, the Chinese made ample use of naval diplomacy to foster relations with Germany, a NATO member state that (at the time) was comparatively amenable to developing military-to-military relations with China. However, the Jiangkai II-class frigate *Binzhou*, visiting Kiel in 2018, would be the last Chinese warship to call on a German port. While it is true that restrictions on port calls, which were implemented when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, affected all navies (including the PLAN), pandemic-related decisions were only part of the explanation.⁸⁸

A MARITIME ROAD TO SUCCESS? THE LIMITS OF BEIJING'S DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS

As the decade ended, attitudes in the West toward China had decisively shifted. In 2022, NATO's strategic concept mentioned China for the first time, underlining that Beijing's "ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values."⁸⁹ During his 2023 visit to Korea, NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg pointed out that China was not an "adversary," but also stated that China, among others, did not share the alliance's values and was challenging NATO's interests by applying coercion and trying to gain control of critical infrastructure.⁹⁰ Similarly to NATO, the EU also adopted a more critical stance toward the PRC; its 2019 communiqué "EU-China—a Strategic Outlook," recognized the PRC simultaneously as a "cooperation partner," a "negotiating partner," an "economic competitor," and a "systemic rival."⁹¹ While the relationship and position of the Anglosphere (especially the United States and United Kingdom) toward China had long been deteriorating and critical, as Jagannath Panda argues, by the end of the 2010s, relations between Europe and China increasingly diverged.⁹²

Except for the Sino-Russian relationship, which continued to develop (including intensive use of naval diplomacy) and reached a level of "friendship" that "has no limits" in 2022, this negative shift also was apparent in the other Baltic states.⁹³ At the turn of the twenty-first century's third decade, Latvian security services increasingly warned about threats of Chinese origin; Beijing's close relationship with Moscow was perceived much more critically; and, in August 2022, Latvia left China's 16 + 1 summit.⁹⁴ Contrary to expectations, Sino-Finnish defense cooperation also failed to grow, remaining static for the last years of the 2010s.⁹⁵ In more recent years, reports by Finnish authorities have become much more critical of China, and Finland has adopted the EU's categorizations of China as an

“economic competitor and a systemic rival,” and suspended its extradition agreement with Hong Kong in 2020. These developments led Puranen and Aukia to question whether the Sino-Finnish “exemplary model relationship” would stand

As the political perception of China was undergoing a decisive shift and China’s ambitions to challenge the existing rules-based international order (e.g., with regard to the law of the sea) became a source of growing concern, bilateral relations with the European Baltic littoral states and the EU and NATO also deteriorated significantly, and mutual interest in security cooperation faded.

the test of Xi’s “new era” of assertive foreign policy.⁹⁶ On 4 April 2023, Finland acceded to full membership in NATO, radically changing the country’s geopolitical reality and diminishing the salience of its previous strategic culture of “small state realism.” And as a member of an alliance that since 2021 has defined

Chinese behavior as a challenge to “the rules-based international order and to areas relevant to Alliance security,” Finland’s susceptibility to Chinese cooperative diplomatic efforts likely also has been reduced.⁹⁷

Even in Germany, which had been characterized by a particularly positive attitude toward the PRC among European states, the previous political and policy affinity began to change by the turn of the century’s third decade. Nowhere was this reversal more visible than in the navy-to-navy relationship. Already by the late 2010s, contact between Bundeswehr representatives, including German embassy personnel, and the PLA was significantly reduced; German military attaché staff no longer participated in attaché excursions, visits to military units, or observations of maneuvers, and there was no more discussion of expanding navy-to-navy cooperation on diplomatic channels.⁹⁸ In 2020, the German government adopted *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific*, which, among others, established a policy framework for German naval and military activities in the Indo-Pacific region, including the *Brandenburg*-class frigate *Bayern*’s Indo-Pacific deployment in 2021–22.⁹⁹ The policy declared Germany’s commitment to promoting human rights and the rule of law, dedication to strengthening fair and sustainable trade relations, and decisive opposition to hegemonic tendencies.¹⁰⁰ Though not all these issues specifically targeted the PRC, most were directly or indirectly related to China and its increasingly worrisome behavior.

The same year, Vice Admiral Kay-Achim Schönbach (2021–22) succeeded Vice Admiral Krause as chief of the German navy. In his first keynote address, Schönbach cited China’s arms buildup as one of the reasons why the German navy had to expand its capabilities. According to Schönbach, the PRC obviously was concerned not only about “trade routes or making a visible contribution to conflict management, but above all about power projection.”¹⁰¹ After 2020,

cooperative activity between the Bundeswehr and the PLA was drastically scaled back, and in 2021 Germany's request for a port visit of *Bayern* to Shanghai was denied.¹⁰²

In January 2022, Germany's navy chief made a very disputed statement when he suggested that China was a greater threat than Russia, and that the latter might even be a sort of partner against the former. In a controversial comment at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses in India, one that subsequently cost Schönbach his position, he elaborated: "Is Russia really interested in having a small, tiny strip of Ukrainian soil to integrate into [its] country? No, this is nonsense. . . . It is easy to even give [Putin] the respect he really demands and probably also deserves. Russia is an old country. Russia is an important country. Even we, India [and] Germany, we need Russia. Because we need Russia against China."¹⁰³

Schönbach's remarks contradicted Berlin's positions on both China and Russia, but it illuminated the drastic turn in Sino-German naval relations. Undoubtedly, Schönbach's comments were detached from reality—most obviously with regard to Russia's interests vis-à-vis Ukraine just a month before Putin's full-scale invasion. However, arguing for a political rapprochement with the Kremlin to deal with an alleged threat posed by Beijing demonstrates the complete turnaround that had occurred in the admiralty building in Rostock over the course of less than two years.

How and why did this change occur? Why had Chinese naval diplomacy failed to foster relations with European Baltic littoral states (though not only with them) and to contribute to a lasting improvement in the relationship between the PLA and the respective states and their navies? To answer this question requires a look beyond the level of practical diplomacy and examination of the larger policy aims that Chinese leadership was trying to achieve.

THE POLICY DIMENSION: COOPERATIVE PRACTICES BUT CONFLICTING AIMS

Booth argues that "ship visits are supportive of a general foreign policy posture, rather than being independently effective."¹⁰⁴ Thus, Chinese naval diplomacy in a European sea needs to be interpreted in the context of Beijing's policy aims vis-à-vis Europe.

There is broad academic consensus that, following China's rapid economic development and increasing international influence, a key feature of its foreign policy was to win acceptance for China's rise as a world power and to portray the country as a responsible global stakeholder.¹⁰⁵ From this perspective, Europe, after many decades of being a "distant neighborhood," played a significant role in China's strategic calculation.¹⁰⁶ Scholars also have pointed out that strengthening

the relationship with European countries and the EU is a function of the Chinese government's efforts to oppose U.S. unilateralism and of Beijing's desire to create a more multipolar global order.¹⁰⁷

In a manner consistent with the realist school of international relations, China's aspiration to diminish relative U.S. influence incentivized it to pursue collaborative naval diplomacy vis-à-vis the European states. In contrast to the cooperative manner in which China utilized its naval diplomacy and the collaborative spirit in which Chinese naval leaders communicated their intentions, the ultimate goals of this diplomacy were decisively competitive.

As one of its strategic objectives, the CPC aims to expand China's global influence and to construct "a community with a shared future for mankind [人类命运共同体] and advance the reform of the global governance system," as Xi stated at the Nineteenth National Congress of the CPC.¹⁰⁸ One of the central features of this Sino-centric community that Beijing has been attempting to promote through economic and political influence is that it opposes and resists liberal norms and values shared by the global West and like-minded countries.¹⁰⁹ This "world safe for autocracy" created significant policy overlap with other authoritarian countries, such as Iran or Russia.¹¹⁰ Against this backdrop, the 2022 Sino-Russian joint statement detailed that "Russia and China stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions, intend to counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries," and "call for the establishment of a new kind of relationships [*sic*] between world powers on the basis of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence and mutually beneficial cooperation."¹¹¹

This developing strategic condominium between Beijing and Moscow, as Jessica Larsen argues, was a grave concern for the Baltic States, including Latvia.¹¹² Even in the absence of the Moscow factor, there would have been little space for the interests of small countries such as Finland in the type of global community the PRC was advocating. This was particularly true with respect to China's "core interests," as Puranen and Aukia argue.¹¹³

Important aspects of Chinese foreign policy interests vis-à-vis Europe also (or really) were about safeguarding China's interests as they related to the country's domestic affairs. This included, for example, policies aimed at diplomatically isolating Taiwan, excluding the Dalai Lama from public discourse, and preventing the intrusion of (what the CPC considered to be) destabilizing influences or "false ideological trends" as outlined in the leaked CPC's 2013 Document no. 9.¹¹⁴ Europe, or the EU respectively, was of special Chinese concern in this regard because of the EU's role as a civilian or normative power committed to, and promoting, ideals such as democracy, the rule of law, institution building, and universal human rights.¹¹⁵

While it is true that these differences over norms and values already existed at the beginning of the cooperative period under examination here, following the mid-2010s China pursued its interests increasingly assertively. China's oppression of its Uighur population, the suppression of democratic rights and freedoms in Hong Kong (especially after the introduction of the Hong Kong national security law in 2020), Beijing's unwillingness to compromise on one-sided trading and investment conditions, interference in internal affairs of Western states as far as China's core interests or dissident voices were concerned, economic blackmail, and its so-called wolf warrior diplomacy against states and politicians that, for example, critically questioned the human rights situation in Xinjiang or the origins of the COVID-19 virus or matters of digital security were just some of the issues that decisively damaged Beijing's relations with Europe.¹¹⁶ As Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, German minister of defense (2019–21), argues, "I describe the inhuman treatment of the Uighurs in China as a violation of elementary human rights. . . . And China clearly has the ambition to shape the world order in its own way and to coerce the weaker to comply with a certain behavior."¹¹⁷ This, of course, was the opposite of the image of a globally active but peaceful and responsible great power that China's political narratives, which had accompanied the PLAN's deployments to the Baltic Sea (see subsection on Finland), intended to convey.

China's policy choices also had a direct impact on German naval leadership's perspective on Sino-German defense relations. Like his predecessor, Schönbach was worried about illegal Chinese activities in the maritime domain and was concerned that if they were left unopposed, they could become customary international law. Unlike Krause, however, Schönbach did not differentiate between Chinese behavior in Asia and Europe. Since his appointment as deputy head of the Directorate-General for Strategy and Operations within the German Ministry of Defense, Schönbach had traveled several times to Asia. Through personal interaction with representatives from countries as diverse as the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Japan, he had been able to develop a firsthand view on China's increasing pressure on the region.¹¹⁸

As the political perception of China was undergoing a decisive shift and China's ambitions to challenge the existing rules-based international order (e.g., with regard to the law of the sea) became a source of growing concern, bilateral relations with the European Baltic littoral states and the EU and NATO also deteriorated significantly, and mutual interest in security cooperation faded. Taking the argument even further: even if there still had been potential for collaboration between the navies, no (naval) diplomacy—no matter how good—ever could have bridged these contradictions.¹¹⁹ Cooperative diplomacy, after all, only is a tool of statecraft, and the chance for success—interpreted in this article as China succeeding in strengthening its international defense relations—is limited by the

policy aims and the attitude toward the international system of the respective governments. As Henry Kissinger points out: “For in a revolutionary international order, each power will seem to its opponent to lack precisely these qualities [good faith and willingness to come to an agreement]. Diplomats can still meet but they cannot persuade, for they have ceased to speak the same language.”¹²⁰

As a consequence of China’s rise as an economic and military great power, Chinese policy interests have expanded to areas as remote as the Baltic Sea region. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, numerous PLAN deployments to the region have demonstrated to the Baltic’s littoral states and China’s main competitor, the United States, that the PLAN is capable and willing to deploy (considering the local distribution of power) forces of a respectable quantity and of state-of-the-art technology to far seas.

Often, these deployments went beyond the simple purpose of “showing the flag,” and were carried out in support of specific Chinese defense policy objectives. China utilized cooperative naval diplomacy to influence European states to develop bilateral relations, while at the same time to support China’s strategic partner Russia against U.S. and NATO pressure. In these deployments, as demonstrated by the 174th PLAN task group, China also took full advantage of the multifaceted functions of a naval presence, which allows “the same maritime force” to “find itself engaged in more than one sort of activity simultaneously.”¹²¹ Consequently, during the second decade of the twenty-first century, Beijing’s ambassadors in blue quickly evolved to become a significant instrument of China’s diplomatic tool kit in its relations with the Baltic Sea region.

Simultaneously, China’s ultimate policy aims were decisively competitive and conflicted with European and Western norms and values, and ultimately undermined the success of China’s naval diplomatic efforts outside the Russian Federation. The end of the decade saw not only an end of PLAN deployments to the Baltic Sea but also the deterioration of bilateral relations with Beijing, particularly in the security domain. There is a certain tragedy inherent in this development. Interviews with protagonists cited in this article and government declarations show that, for a short period, there was a sincere interest on both sides to deepen cooperation, including in the naval domain, and, more generally, concerning security issues. Successfully expanding on that cooperation (which would have required a different political environment) would have been beneficial for China, because a strong relationship with Europe would have strengthened the position of the PRC as a responsible world power on an equal footing with the United States. If China’s leadership had chosen a different policy path and willingness to cooperate had continued, it would have been advantageous for Europe as well, because a robust relationship with China would have benefited the European

states with regard to stability and security and, not least, might even have had a moderating influence on Moscow's policies.

Ultimately, genuine cooperation would have been beneficial for humankind as a whole. Naval task groups of a PRC exercising restraint in its foreign policy and a NATO alliance consisting of the United States and its allies that had engaged in naval diplomacy and had conducted (low level) exercises together would have sent out a promising signal that falling into "Thucydides's Trap" was far from inevitable.¹²² This window of opportunity has closed for the foreseeable future, even if the naval ensign of the PLAN were to return to the Baltic Sea, and nothing short of a complete reversal of Beijing's foreign and domestic policy could open it again.

NOTES

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