

***China's Rising Sea Power: The PLA Navy's Submarine Challenge.* By Peter Howarth. London and New York: Routledge, 2006. Hardcover: 198pp.**

This book explores similarities between China's strategic outlook today and that of earlier continental powers whose submarine fleets challenged dominant maritime powers for regional hegemony. Using insights from classical naval strategic theory it examines China's strategic logic in making tactical submarines the keystone of its naval force structure, and investigates the influence of Soviet naval strategy and ancient Chinese military thought on the PLA Navy's strategic culture. It finally contends that China's increasingly capable submarine fleet could play a key role in its use of force to resolve the Taiwan issue.

The book investigates deeply into PLA naval expansion (especially its submarine fleet) with much rare, interesting and latest information. The conclusion, nevertheless, does not come as a surprise since it mainly reinforces the long-standing mainstream views in the West regarding the PLA Navy, which many will find familiar.

The author takes the view that the PLA Navy is no match for the next largest navy in the western Pacific, that of Japan's self-defence forces, let alone the U.S. Navy. China is only one of the five major nuclear powers which has yet to develop a truly effective sea-based nuclear deterrence capability (p. 34). The importance of its submarine arm in its overall force structure marks the PLA Navy as primarily an instrument of strategic defence. At the strategic level, geography in East Asia leaves China little choice but to adopt a defensive naval posture. The submarines, by their nature, are able only to deny the free use of the sea to others, but not command it for their own state's use. The PLA Navy with a focus on its submarine fleet, is meant for sea denial, that is, against U.S. intervention over China's use of force to settle the Taiwan issue.

The author notes that the Commander-in-Chief of the PLA Navy from 1982 until 1988, Liu Huaqing played a very important role in naval modernization. In the 1980s, when setting up the blueprints for PLA Navy's modernization, Liu determined that PLA Navy should aim to be capable of controlling the "first chain of islands" by the year 2000, the first phase of the strategy for PLA Navy's development, and the "second chain of islands" by 2020. The third phase of Liu's maritime strategy was to create a blue-water navy capable of exercising a global influence by 2050.

The author points out that Liu's vision of a blue-water navy for China was developed at a time (that is, mid-1980s) when the Taiwan

issue appeared less urgent and critical to the PRC leadership than it is today: “The re-emergence of the Taiwan issue as Beijing’s principal strategic concern in the mid-1990s deflected the PLA Navy from the course charted for it by Liu” (p. 44). The new priority accorded to Taiwan has prompted a switch in the PLA Navy’s general and more positive aim to the less ambitious and more negative aim of being able effectively to deny the control of these seas to hostile forces (U.S. aircraft battle groups). This shift of goals is reflected in the apparent loss of momentum in China’s interest in acquiring an aircraft carrier capability and its reinvigorated interest in acquiring the instruments of denial, such as its submarines. Aircraft carriers could be useful to China’s efforts to assert its sovereignty over the distant reefs and rocky outcrops of the South China Sea, but would have little advantage over land-based aircraft in conflict in the narrow seas surrounding Taiwan.

Hence, the author concludes that it seems probable that the primary focus of the PLA Navy’s development efforts is less to enable it to project power outside China’s immediate region than to strengthen its ability to dominate its immediate vicinity and deny access to any hostile powers to an area within some 200 nautical miles of the Chinese coast. Even with regard to future competition for maritime control of East Asian seas and beyond, the author takes the view that the command of the sea in the future unquestionably lies beneath rather than upon the surface. The deployment by China of its new Type-093 SSN around the end of this decade and the U.S. conversion in 2007 of its Ohio SSBNs into SSGNs armed with Tomahawk land-attack cruise missiles, could mark a transition from the surface to the sub-surface in the Sino-U.S. contest for control of the East Asian seas (p. 171).

While the author’s argument is forceful, and also concurs with that of many other observers, it is perhaps, in my view, premature to conclude that China will continue to focus overwhelmingly on sea denial capability (such as its massive submarine fleet) and because of geographical constraints and weak defence against attacks by U.S. naval fleets, it will not, at least in the near future, focus on its blue-water and power projection capability (that is, building aircraft carriers). The recent Chinese purchase of Russian SU-33s, which are especially designed for aircraft carriers and China’s proclaimed intention to build aircraft carriers (though “gradually”) is the evidence that argues otherwise (the Russian confirmation of the Chinese purchase and Chinese statement of the intention were made in November 2006 after the book was published).

The author appears to arrive at his conclusion largely because of his conviction that future China-U.S. relations would be primarily characterized by a contest for power, especially for the control of the seas — which the book is all about. This absolute conviction also applies to many China watchers, especially those in government and the military, and misleads them about China's real intentions.

The China-U.S. contest for power is only one probability in future, no matter how strong it is, and should not be taken as the sole and inevitable outcome in our analysis of the fluid international relations for the future. The China-U.S. relationship is so complicated that it argues against focusing on only one outcome, such as their inevitable contest of the seas as argued in this book. In PLA Navy-building, while the U.S. Navy and the Taiwan issue remain important considerations, they are not the only factors or motivation for the PLA Navy's future development. If we adopt this perspective, we could understand that while China is building its submarine deterrence against hostile naval forces around Taiwan, it also intends to build its naval force, that is, aircraft carriers, for other purposes, which may not come in direct and absolute military confrontation with the U.S. Navy. It also does not necessarily ensure a U.S. naval attack of the Chinese aircraft, especially when China does not use its aircraft carrier directly against U.S. interests. Though China's aircraft carrier may still be vulnerable to the U.S. naval fleet, it may not be in U.S. interests to sink it when its mission is not directed against American targets. The United States is also aware that any sinking of a Chinese aircraft carrier will not be interpreted by the Chinese as a mere naval incident or local naval conflict, but as a declaration of a war a total war, for which China may justifiably use other means to retaliate, including deploying its nuclear capability — both land-based and sea-based. In other words, if the United States cannot be certain of being immune to Chinese nuclear retaliation resulting from the sinking of a Chinese aircraft carrier, it will act more cautiously. In this sense, I am not as confident as the author of this book that China will not spend massively on its aircraft carrier building in the future.

This book is a policy-relevant analysis touching upon a topic of obvious interest, that is, China's rising sea power — the PLA Navy's submarine challenge. It is recommended reading for both China specialists and those who are interested in East Asian security and international relations in general.

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