

China's naval display points to deepening global rivalries

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China held an unprecedented display of its growing naval power this week to mark the 60th anniversary of the navy's establishment. The parade of vessels off the coastal Qingdao city involved 25 Chinese warships, led by nuclear submarines, with 31 naval aircraft flying overhead. President Hu Jintao then reviewed another 21 warships from 14 other countries, including the US, Russia, France, India, Canada, South Korea and Australia. In all, 29 countries sent delegates to the event.

Beijing invited foreign navies in the name of creating a "harmonious ocean" and showing transparency in its military build-up, but tensions were not far from the surface. Japan, which China regards as a regional rival, was not invited. To justify its large military expenditure, Beijing frequently recalls China's past humiliation at the hands of the major powers, particularly Japan's invasion of the country and the atrocities of the Japanese militarist regime in the 1930s.

Building China as a "sea power" and "going deep blue" have become common phrases in the state media, and investors have rushed to buy shipbuilding stocks as the naval expansion has continued. This week China showcased its advanced air defence destroyers, stealth frigates, amphibious assault ship and fighter-bombers. The newest Chinese submarines, however—the subject of keen interest in the US in particular—did not take part.

The Pentagon's intelligence gathering on China's naval expansion has already provoked tensions. In March, several small Chinese maritime patrol boats confronted the US spy ship *Impeccable* in the South China Sea near Hainan Island, where a new submarine base has been built. Washington is clearly concerned about China's future ability to challenge American dominance in the

Pacific.

For decades, the Chinese navy consisted of relatively small craft to protect the coastline. Now, it is developing a large blue water fleet. Last December, China sent two destroyers and a supply ship to the Gulf of Aden near Somalia. The operation—the navy's first long-distance operation—was nominally to protect Chinese vessels from pirates, but clearly designed to flex China's naval muscle.

Despite speculation that he would do so, President Hu did not announce that China would start building its first aircraft carriers. Following US criticism of the program, China's naval head Wu Shengli told reporters that Beijing would announce the plan in other ways. A major shipbuilding company has publicly confirmed that it has received a navy order to construct carriers. Beijing obviously felt that making such an announcement during the naval display would only fuel further tensions.

Head of the US Navy, Admiral Gary Roughead, told reporters in Beijing that while China's naval development was understandable, "I think it is important however that as we create a naval capability, indeed any military capability, that there should be clear communications with regards to what the intentions of that capability are." Roughead specifically raised the aircraft carrier program, saying: "The real issue is: how are those aircraft carriers used, and what is the intent of that capability?"

The answer is no mystery. Like the US and its allies, China is building its navy to protect its economic and strategic interests around the globe. An aircraft carrier would allow the Chinese regime to quickly place a major naval group, with aircraft and troops, anywhere in the world—as Washington regularly does to threaten and exert pressure. In the immediate region, such a capacity would

enhance Beijing's ability to exert its influence in its maritime territorial disputes with Japan, Vietnam and the Philippines as well as over Taiwan.

Over the past decade, the Chinese navy has expanded significantly. The combined tonnage of large warships (such as frigates and destroyers) is now five times greater than in the 1980s. China now has 77 large surface warships, 56 submarines, 84 amphibious landing ships, 31 mine warfare vessels and 387 small attack crafts. The navy's airborne component has 800 aircraft and the marines have 56,000 troops. The greatest expansion has been in the submarine fleet. In the period 1995-2007, 38 vessels were added and the total is expected to reach 85 in eight years, including nuclear-powered attack and ballistic missile submarines.

In the discussion in US strategic circles about China's growing naval threat, the rhetoric is inflated. Although quantitatively the Chinese navy is the world's second largest after the US, Chinese naval technology is decades behind the US and other major naval powers. China's newest Shang class nuclear-powered attack submarine is believed to be equivalent to the US navy's Los Angeles class, which built from the 1970s to the 1990s. While China is planning to build an aircraft carrier, the US has 11 nuclear-powered carriers with a total tonnage equal to the entire Chinese navy. According to the Pentagon's 2009 report, only 20 percent of the weapon systems in China's warplanes, 40 percent of its submarines and 30 percent of its surface warships are up to Western standards.

The Pentagon warned that China was "closing gaps in the creation of a precision-strike capability" against ships operating in the western Pacific. Even though China had become a regional naval power a decade earlier than expected, Toshi Yoshihara, a professor at the US Naval War College told *South China Morning Post* on April 21 that China still had a "long, long way to go" to catch up to the US. Although not yet a blue-water navy, he said, "that does not mean that the Chinese navy is incapable of posing problems to regional navies, and the US Navy operating within or near the seas around China".

China's military build-up is clearly aimed at countering the overwhelming military predominance of the US, particularly in the Pacific. The Pentagon's massive defence spending is over nine times that of China.

Moreover, Washington has been building a series of alliances and basing agreements, stretching from Japan and South Korea to Australia, India and into Central Asia, which amounts to a strategy of encircling China. US naval strategy has been based on securing the control of key "choke points" such as the Malacca Strait.

China's first priority in building its navy is to protect its supply lines, particularly the huge imports of energy and raw materials on which its manufacturing industry depends. In 2008, China surpassed Japan as the world's second largest importer of oil after the US, with 46 percent of its imported oil coming from the Middle East and 32 percent from Africa. More than 80 percent of these supplies pass through the Malacca and Lombok/Makassar Straits.

As well as building up its naval fleet, China is establishing a string of port facilities in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Burma along the sea lanes to the Middle East. This strategy inevitably collides not only with Washington's determination to retain its global military and naval dominance to defend its own economic interests, but also with India's and Japan's strategic and economic ambitions in the Asian region.

Far from opening a new era of "harmonious oceans," the naval parade in Qingdao is a symptom of a dangerous new period of intensifying rivalries, which is being fuelled by the deepening global economic crisis.



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