

Chinese Naval Modernisation: A Change in National Security Strategy?

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/02/02/chinese-naval-modernisation-a-change-in-national-security-strategy/>

BRADLEY WILLIS, FEB 2 2013

Since the 1980s many international relations analysts have noted that China has been undergoing a steady rise in not only economic but also military power, this has led to some of them to refer to the trend as the 'peaceful rise of China'. This trend of a peaceful rise has been in process since 1980 with her GDP rising an unprecedented 10% annually between 1980 and 2010[1]; in addition to this in 2003 her maritime economy first breached an annual value of 1 trillion Yuan to the Chinese economy[2]. Such is the rate of Chinese economic expansion that in 2002 50% of her GDP was as a result of foreign trade compared to the mere 13% in 1980[3]. In order to protect such expanding economic interests as well as make use of astronomically increasing wealth the Chinese government has undergone a policy of rapid and relatively comprehensive naval modernisation, which has seen the purchase of 4 Russian destroyers, and exhaustive development of over 24 submarines since 1992 including the development of 'quiet' hard to detect submarines[4]. Many scholars are now stating that the rapid naval modernisation is symbolic of expansionist and aggressive intentions of the Chinese government and representative of a fundamental shift in the country's national security strategy.

This essay will argue that despite a brief self-identity crisis as to what the Chinese National Security Strategy should be in the years 2009 and 2010 the strategy has on the whole remained the same. However, now with a stronger emphasis on access denial in order to deter US influence within the South China Sea. Although there has been an explosion of calls particularly within the PLA Navy to develop a 'blue water' power projection force, starting with several aircraft carriers, this rhetoric is purely nationalistic and non-expansionist in form and does not represent the will of the Chinese policy makers.

To understand if Chinese naval modernisation is symptomatic of a change in her national security strategy we must first understand what her current national security strategy over the past few years has been. Dr Qin Yaqing in his article '*China's Security Strategy with a Special Focus in East Asia*' essentially argues that China since the 1980s has adopted a policy of 'cooperative internationalism'[5]. This strategy seeks to do what it can in order to maintain international order by acting as a peaceful as well as responsible member of the international society she aims to achieve this by pursuing to be a full member of the international community as well as seeking to cooperate where possible[6]. If we delve in to China's actions both in the international as well as regional community we can see how this has been the case. First and foremost China is a member of the United Nations Security Council as well as a key component of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Furthermore between 1980 and 2002 China has agreed to a respectable 220 multilateral conventions enough to rival the number of conventions states such as India, Japan and the United States have agreed to[7], this is a vast improvement and noticeable reach outward since the Maoist era as well as the years following his death in which China joined a mere 34 conventions[8], the increase in commitment to such conventions, norms and rules clearly shows further a Chinese identification with international society. Thus one can conclude that the Chinese security strategy pre naval modernisation is one of 'cooperative internationalism'.

In addition to this we should also address the Chinese Naval policy of 2006 in order to clearly see if there has been any form of radical change in her navy policy which may also hint at a change in national security strategy. The 2006 white papers stipulated 3 major tasks for the PLA Navy; safeguarding the unification of China (a direct reference to

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Taiwan), protecting Chinese maritime interests, and protecting China's oceanic transport lines[9]. Chinese naval policy is currently one of 'proactive engagement' with which China promotes a peaceful security situation with the use of maritime power in order to enhance its domestic development[10]. To achieve these China has steadily increased her naval participation in international security, whilst also promoting confidence in her intentions by trying to deploy her navy in as many situations as possible, such as international peace keeping operations, disaster relief and counter piracy.[11]

We can first see how China is sticking to this national security strategy when we look at their policy of access denial. Access denial is simply that, it is a policy the Chinese has developed in recent years in order to maintain their economic interests as well as limit and deter the extent in which the United States can operate in regionalised waters, and is the primary reason for Chinese naval modernisation[12]. When one actually looks at the nature of the Chinese Naval modernisation its abundantly clear that the majority of the munitions developed or purchased have been for defensive purposes and does not indicate a fundamental shift in the Chinese national security strategy. The main focus of the Chinese naval modernisation has been attack submarines, at least 24 have been developed by China since 1992 and it is predicted that China will have a larger Submarine fleet than the USA which currently has 75 submarines in commission by 2015[13]. At least 12 of these Chinese submarines are 'kilo class' which are able to operate with sparse chance for detection, such capabilities now makes the US surface fleet vulnerable in the West Pacific Ocean, thus limiting their influence in the area and their capabilities to operate near Taiwan[14]. Furthermore both these and the new Chinese Song Class subs can operate as far as the Ryukyu Islands some 200 miles from the Chinese coast[15]. In addition to the rapid expansion of the Chinese submarine fleet China has greatly developed its air defences by purchasing over 2500 surface to air missiles as well as Russian Su27 and Su-30 Fourth Generation fighter jets. However, Robert Ross brings the point to head when he states that despite these advanced capabilities, they are not war winning, and for the most part limit Chinese naval capabilities to the defensive rather than any form of power projection[16].

Overall this evidence suggests how the Chinese naval modernisation has been a development of its access denial capabilities. The Chinese policy of access denial simply shows a desire to defend Chinese interests as well as deter unwanted US involvement within or nearby the South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS) regions, as opposed to developing any form of aggressive force as shown by the nature of the weaponry purchased or developed.

Little noticed by many commentators is a new trend in China of enhanced cooperation through even more extensive multilateral and bilateral agreements. Previously discussed already has been China's participation in ASEAN and the UN. However in the past 12 months it has been noticed by scholars such as Fravel that China appears to have taken on board a policy of enhanced cooperation after a brief experiment in 2009-2010 with an aggressively confrontational policy[17] (something which will be discussed in detail later), however it should be noted a gradual engagement with new multilateral measures has been undergoing since the late 90s. China has attempted to strengthen maritime cooperation with regional powers such as Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia[18]. In the past year China has been actively pursuing enhanced regional cooperation with its fellow regional actors. In October 2011 for example Chinese Premier heir apparent Xi Jinping and Vietnamese General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong agreed to a bilateral trade agreement of 60 billion dollars[19], whilst Japan and China (two traditionally historical enemies) were able to agree to joint oil and gas exploration in the East China Sea[20], these represent two of many examples of a sudden change in Chinese Foreign Policy. Furthermore, by accessing the state controlled media we can further see the true intentions of the Chinese elite. State media since late 2011 through 'columnist Zhong Sheng' has been increasingly stressing the importance of less confrontation in the South China Sea and instead arguing for increased cooperation in order to create stability[21]. Fravel sees this as 'the Chinese elite explaining this new policy to its domestic populace.'[22]

What this evidence indicates is a clear sign from China that currently it's intentions are purely cooperative with no noticeable major change in national security strategy, Beijing clearly realised the detrimental impact of its confrontational policy. Instead this almost new found love affair with multi and bilateral engagements clearly indicates Chinese attempts to deter rationale for a US presence in the South China and East China Sea regions by approaching with its fellow regional actors through Kantian methods of enhanced trade and cooperation.

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Furthermore, when one looks in to the constraints China currently has to contend with we can see more so why the current naval expansion is not symptomatic of a change in Chinese National Security Strategy. China faces a wide range of constraints, predominantly budgetary, geographical and domestic. China as a continental power and as a result of her extreme size is bordered by an extraordinary number of nations, 14 in total, notable also is the fact that four of these nations, North Korea, Pakistan Russia and India are also nuclear powers[23]. So expansive are Chinese borders that they range from Afghanistan to Mongolia and are notoriously difficult to defend[24]. Just to keep Chinese borders relatively secure the PLA has to commit 300,000 of its troops to border patrol, this is a staggering number when you consider that this alone is double the number of the entire British army, whilst the US only commits a mere 11,000 of its troops to border control[25]. This extra commitment to Chinese land forces is only intensified by current Sino-Russo tensions over competition over Central and South East Asia[26]. These constraints play a critical element on the expansion of Chinese naval power. Despite increases in spending on the PLA Navy only 10% of all military spending upon the PLA goes their way, this is in stark contrast to the 40% of all military spending the US government commit to their Navy & Marine Corps[27].

Overall this evidence suggests that Chinese naval expansion is not symptomatic of a change in national security strategy as China is simply currently too constrained by the demands of multiple factors. Lack of budgetary allocation as well as the sheer number of forces currently dedicated in maintain domestic security simply show that currently the Chinese priority is still focused on the military despite increasing efforts towards naval modernisation. In addition, the domestic threats China face forces her to prioritise continental defence at the expense of costly maritime capabilities.

Lastly, one should take considerable note of the increased military transparency that China has adopted since 1996[28], further building upon their national security strategy of cooperative internationalism. Firstly China published five white papers regarding their intentions with personal defence, in the case of navy for example clearly stating their mission statement[29]. In addition Chinese participation in joint military exercises and consultations has sky rocketed since 96[30]. Between 1996 and 2003 China sent over 1,300 military students to several western countries whilst regularly inviting foreign militaries to observe Chinese military exercises[31]. Not only this but China has pursued a heavy increase in maritime cooperation with its fellow regional actors, such as Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines, participating in 17 maritime exercises neighbouring nations alone[32]. This shows us further how Chinese naval modernisation is not symptomatic of a change in the national security policy of China, the increased military transparency and willingness to not only participate in joint naval and military exercises as well as clearly shows us China's intentions to maintain their policy of cooperative internationalism.

However, despite the evidence suggesting that Chinese National Security Strategy remains the same despite recent naval modernisation one also needs to take in to consideration the evidence, which suggests the converse.

In the past ten years there has been a notable rise in what Ross refers to as 'naval nationalism'. Naval nationalism one can argue suggests a shift in national security policy. Ross believes this is predominantly the case as it represents a shift in Chinese politics and defence policy that will soon embark on a more ambitious naval policy[33]. Naval nationalists want to see a further development of the Chinese Navy, predominantly with the construction of an aircraft carrier, with the key objective of using such a navy to recover "lost territory[34]". Furthermore Chinese navy nationalists seek to expand their navy power in order to undermine the US ability to block Chinese oil shipments through the Malacca strait[35], a lifeline of China and a straight the US could easily block without any Chinese capabilities to counter such a blockade. Such expansion would be achieved with the development of an aircraft carrier and a blue water navy. This suggests a shift in national security policy as a result of naval modernisation, predominantly as it has inspired much of Chinas naval elite to gain Chinese prestige by expanding Chinese naval capabilities for the sake of upholding Chinese prestige, even if this means using for expansionist reasons[36]. For any historian this will also ring alarm bells, other previous continental powers that sought to expand their navy include France, Germany and Japan, on each occasion their rapid naval expansion with their rival naval power escalated in to war.[37]

Despite the undisputed rise in Naval nationalism one needs to take in to account that this predominantly centres around a frustrated Naval elite who believe that their branch of the PLA are getting the undue attention it needs, especially if China is to remain economically strong. Although there is sound reasoning in their argument the simple

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fact of the matter is that China as a traditionally closed country is still far more focused on their own internal matters than power projection which a powerful navy and aircraft carriers can provide.

Lastly, when one looks at China's behaviour in recent years particularly between 2005-2010 one can see an alarming level of aggression upon fellow regional actors within the SCS. Beijing has long considered many elements of land within the SCS as part of their unclaimed land mass and has even publically announced that land (such as Taiwan) is of core interest to China[38]. Such expansionist rhetoric in conjunction with naval modernisation suggests a shift in national security policy from mere cooperative internationalism. Furthermore in 2009 a Chinese military vessel shot and killed 9 Vietnamese fisherman inside Vietnamese waters, whilst also in an entirely separate incident seized 17 Vietnamese shipping boats inside their own waters as well as 210 fisherman[39].

Overall this evidence suggests a change in Chinese national security policy as a result of naval modernisation. Such aggressive treatment of regional actors shows a clear shift from their national security policy of cooperative internationalism and instead a shift towards expansionist policies as well as a use of international bullying in order to gain influence within the region.

In sum it is quite clear that the naval modernisation that China has undergone is not symptomatic of a change in its national security policy, if anything one can argue that it in fact symbolises a continuation of the 'cooperative internationalism' policy. China's embrace of multilateral and bilateral cooperation has recently greatly improved her image and appears to be serving to keep the US out of the region; however it also further shows a desire to promote cooperative internationalism. In addition, the Chinese focus on defensive measures seen with their policy of access denial as well as new found military transparency further displays China's intentions of maintaining her current national security policy and promoting better cooperation between herself and other states. Although it is true that there are calls within the naval elite for a pursuit of an air craft carrier and blue water navy, it should be noted that these calls are predominantly from within the navy itself who no doubt have interest in expanding the capabilities of what they command, furthermore these calls are nationalist rhetoric, and don't have any genuine implications for a change in national security policy. The fact these confrontational incidents haven't occurred in so long suggests a conscious decision to stop them.

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[2]ibid

[3] ibid

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[6] ibid

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[8] ibid

[9] Mingjiang Li (2010): China and Maritime Cooperation in East Asia: recent developments and future prospects, Journal of Contemporary China, 19:64, 291-310 – P293

[10] Ibid – 305

[11] Li – p303

[12]Ross – p58

[13] Kaplan – p35

[14] ibid

[15] Ross – p77

[16] Ross – {58

[17] Fravel – P1

[18] Li – P304

[19]Fravel – P2

[20]Li – P303

[21] Fravel – P2

[22] Fravel – P1

[23] Ross – p52

[24] Ross – P55

[25] Ibid p p54

[26] Ibid – P55

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[27] *ibid*

[28] Li – p306

[29] *ibid*

[30] *Ibid* – p308

[31] *Ibid* – p298

[32] Li – p301

[33] Ross – P52

[34] Ross – p60

[35] Ross – P70

[36] Ross – P 54

[37] Ross – P50

[38] Li – P293

[39] Pedrozo, R. (2010, November 15). Beijing's Coastal Real Estate.Foreign Affairs, from <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67007/raul-pedrozo/beijings-coastal-real-estate> – P1

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Date written: March 2012