



Council on
Geostrategy

Policy Paper
Geopolitics Programme
No. GPPP05
May 2024

China's PLAN: Maritime dominion beyond the South China Sea

By Dr Emma Salisbury

[This page is deliberately left blank.]



Contents

Foreword	1
Executive summary	2
1.0 Introduction	4
2.0 The PRC's maritime perspective and strategy	6
2.1 East and South China seas	10
2.2 Beyond the First Island Chain	11
3.0 Naval modernisation and build-up	14
3.1 The People's Liberation Army Navy	14
3.1.1 Submarines	18
3.1.2 Surface combatants	19
3.1.3 Aircraft carriers	20
3.1.4 Amphibious warfare and auxiliary vessels	21
3.2 The Chinese Coast Guard	22
3.3 The China Maritime Militia	22
3.4 Civilian vessels	23
4.0 How the Chinese naval build-up will change the Indo-Pacific	24
5.0 Implications for the Euro-Atlantic	25
6.0 Towards a British response	26
6.1 Shape the international environment	26
6.2 Deter, defend, and compete across all domains	27
6.3 Address vulnerabilities through resilience	27
6.4 Generate strategic advantage	28
About the author	30
Acknowledgments	31
About the Council on Geostrategy	32



Foreword

The People's Republic of China's naval build-up over the past decade has been substantial. Once a maritime minnow, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) – the Chinese navy – has grown into a shark. And that shark is increasingly less constrained. Propelled by a growing auxiliary fleet, the PLAN is becoming increasingly mobile, able to operate well beyond the PRC's shores and adjacent seas. The PLAN may have some way to go to meet the might of the United States (US) Navy or even navies such as the Royal Navy or Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force, especially if supporting the US Navy, but it will only be a matter of time until large Chinese expeditionary fleets are found regularly operating in the world's oceans.

Written by one of Britain's most promising maritime analysts, this Policy Paper explores the reasons for why the PRC has embarked on a dramatic naval and maritime expansion programme. It looks at how the Chinese battle fleet, coast guard, and maritime militia have grown since 2000, before postulating how the PRC's newfound naval strength may be used to secure Chinese interests in the decades to come. It explains how the PLAN's transformation will alter the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, as well as how it may affect the Euro-Atlantic. Finally, using His Majesty's (HM) Government's 'strategic framework' – as per the Integrated Review Refresh of March 2023 – the study identifies how Britain should respond to protect its national interests and secure its strategic objectives in the face of burgeoning Chinese maritime power.

This study should be read by anyone interested in how the PLAN's growth in size and advancement is accelerating the PRC's emerging as a systemic challenge. Indeed, it should be seen as a wake up call and a call to action; after all, it should not be forgotten that sea power is world power.

James Rogers

Co-founder and Director of Research, Council on Geostrategy



Executive summary

- This paper analyses how the growing naval strength of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the exercise of its maritime power will affect not only the South China Sea and broader Indo-Pacific, but also British interests in the region and in the Euro-Atlantic.
- The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), Chinese Coast Guard (CCG), and China Maritime Militia (CMM) have all undergone significant expansion and modernisation in recent years. Accordingly, the PRC now has considerable capability in its regional waters and an increasing ability to pursue blue water operations on a wider scale.
- The PLAN is now numerically the largest navy in the world, with growing numbers of modern multi-mission combatants; should this growth continue, it will not be long until it begins to near parity with the United States (US).
- For the last 30 years, the PRC leadership has consistently referred to the nation's 'maritime rights and interests' in nearby seas within the First Island Chain, and much of the Chinese build-up of maritime power is aimed at both defending these and advancing them coercively. By upholding a routine military presence and conducting patrols in disputed areas, the PRC maintains a state of ongoing controlled tension without either resolution of the dispute or escalation to outright war.
- In recent years, the PLAN has begun to perform missions outside the First Island Chain, gradually extending its ability to operate at increasingly longer ranges as it acquires larger and more advanced platforms which enable combat operations outside the range of the PRC's land-based defences.
- The PRC's naval expansion is driven by multiple factors, including its growing economic interests, maritime and territorial disputes, and a desire for greater influence on the



global stage. The development of a modern, blue water navy allows the PRC to protect its maritime communication lines and access to energy and natural resources, assert its territorial claims in the South China Sea, and project power beyond its immediate region.

- The implications of PRC naval expansion for the Royal Navy and the Euro-Atlantic region depend on how effectively the United Kingdom (UK) can work with allies and partners to navigate the complexities of geopolitical competition in the maritime domain.
- By investing in new and additional Royal Navy capabilities, strengthening alliances and partnerships, and promoting dialogue and cooperation, His Majesty's (HM) Government can work to safeguard the national interest and preserve an open international order which promotes peace and stability at sea.

1.0 Introduction

Maritime geopolitics is heating up in the Indo-Pacific as the People's Republic of China (PRC) converts its growing economic and technological strength into maritime power. For at least the past decade, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has been significantly enlarged, leaving the PRC in possession of an increasingly powerful naval fleet. As a previous study from the Council on Geostrategy explains, having been a 'minnow' for years, the PLAN is becoming a 'shark'.¹

With its growing strength, the PRC has accelerated its attempts to dominate the South China Sea, using its burgeoning maritime heft – its navy, coast guard, and civilian maritime militia – to shove other claimants and legitimate actors out of its way. This has resulted in simmering tensions, as countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam have sought to uphold their own rights, and others like the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK), Japan, and Australia aim to underwrite freedom of navigation in the region's waters. These tensions may seem distant from the UK, but they reflect Beijing's revisionist approach more generally to international relations, not least as the PRC generates the instruments with which to assert its interests in the region and beyond.

This Policy Paper will identify how the PRC's growing naval strength and the exercise of its maritime power will affect not only the South China Sea and broader Indo-Pacific, but also British interests in the region and further afield – and make recommendations on how the UK can best position itself to face this challenge.

Starting with an exploration of the PRC's perspective and strategy, this Policy Paper focuses on the country's regional waters and global ambitions, and then analyses the build-up and modernisation of the Chinese maritime assets across military, law enforcement, and civilian vessels. It then uses the 'strategic framework' as laid out in His Majesty's (HM) Government's Integrated Review Refresh of 2023 to identify how Britain can make itself more resilient to the challenge from the PRC's naval buildup, deter Chinese aggression, shape the international order in accordance with British interests, and secure

¹ Kevin Rowlands and Edward Hampshire, 'The Chinese navy: From minnow to shark', Council on Geostrategy, 07/12/2022, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 17/05/2024).



strategic advantage. The PLAN's expansion threatens not only the free and open international order in the Indo-Pacific, but also the global balance of power. As a leading maritime state, it falls to the UK to take remedial action alongside like-minded allies and partners.

2.0 The PRC's maritime perspective and strategy

The PRC's national strategy is aimed at the 'great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation' by 2049. This has embedded within it the PRC's view of strategic competition, characterised as a rivalry of powerful nation-states with opposing ideological systems. As Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), told national delegates in March 2023:

Western countries led by the United States have implemented comprehensive containment, encirclement and suppression against us, bringing unprecedented severe challenges to our country's development.²

In order to face what it sees as intensifying strategic competition with the US and its allies, the CCP is pursuing political, social, and military modernisation in order to expand its national power and alter the international order in tune with its interests.

In the military realm, the PRC's focus is on protecting its sovereignty, security, and development interests while moving towards a greater global role. Its strategy is based on the concept of 'active defence' – while acting to defend its interests, the PRC will avoid initiating conflict but respond with force if challenged, thus encompassing defensive, offensive, and pre-emptive aspects. As Wen Bing, Military Researcher at the Military Science Academy's National Defence Policy Research Centre, pithily put it: 'We will not attack unless we are attacked, but we will surely counterattack if attacked.'³

This is in keeping with the Western concept of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) – the PRC aims to keep approaching adversary forces at bay before they gain access close enough to do harm (anti-access), and if this fails, to defeat these forces before they are able to secure freedom of operation (area denial).

² 'Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China', Office of the Secretary of Defence (US), 12/10/2023, <https://media.defense.gov/> (checked: 17/05/2024).

³ '专家解读国防白皮书：赋予积极防御战略思想新内涵' ['Experts interpret the national defence white paper: giving new connotation to active defence strategic thinking'], 人民日报 [People's Daily], 27/05/2015, <https://www.gov.cn/> (checked: 17/05/2024).



As a central part of the overall modernisation push, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has the ambition of fully transforming into a 'world-class' force by 2049 – the centenary of the establishment of the PRC. While the Chinese leadership has not publicly defined what this means in practice, the strategic context implies that the PRC is aiming to develop military forces which are at least equal to those of the great powers it views as a threat – most notably, those of the US. However, this does not mean that the PLA will seek exactly to match the US military in each capability area – there will be considerable nuance in which capabilities the PRC leadership believe to be most useful and necessary to advancing the national interest. These capabilities are firstly intended to allow the PRC to deter and defeat third-party intervention in its immediate peripheral region, particularly in the East and South China seas, and secondly to grow the PLA's ability to project power by conducting military operations deeper into the Indo-Pacific region and then in other parts of the world.

While the PLA seeks to modernise its capabilities across all domains – land, air, maritime, nuclear, space, electronic warfare, and cyber – it is in the maritime domain that the clearest progress can be seen. The PLAN is now numerically the largest navy in the world, with growing numbers of modern multi-mission combatants, and it is now arguably the second-most capable blue-water navy after that of the US. The PRC is now the largest shipbuilding nation in the world by tonnage and continues to grow its shipbuilding capacity for all naval classes, as well as in uncrewed systems. The PRC also domestically manufactures engines, electronic systems, and armament for naval platforms, making it virtually self-sufficient in shipbuilding.

It is important to note that the PRC is not building itself into a naval power, but into a maritime power:

Building a strong People's Navy, entrusted with the long-standing aspirations of the Chinese nation to become a maritime power, is an important guarantee for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.⁴

⁴ '习近平：把人民海军全面建成世界一流海军' ['Xi Jinping: Build the People's Navy into a world-class navy'], 新华社 [Xinhua], 12/04/2018, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/> (checked: 17/05/2024).



Maritime power is a broader concept, encompassing not only traditional naval assets but also civilian capabilities. It covers the nation's military needs, but also embraces the needs to preserve access to maritime resources, ensure safe transit for people and trade, protect its maritime borders from intrusion, and uphold its maritime sovereignty.⁵ Chinese leaders, military officials, and security analysts consistently view maritime power in this way, but with a strong navy acting as a foundation for civilian capabilities.

The PRC has four critical maritime strategic objectives:

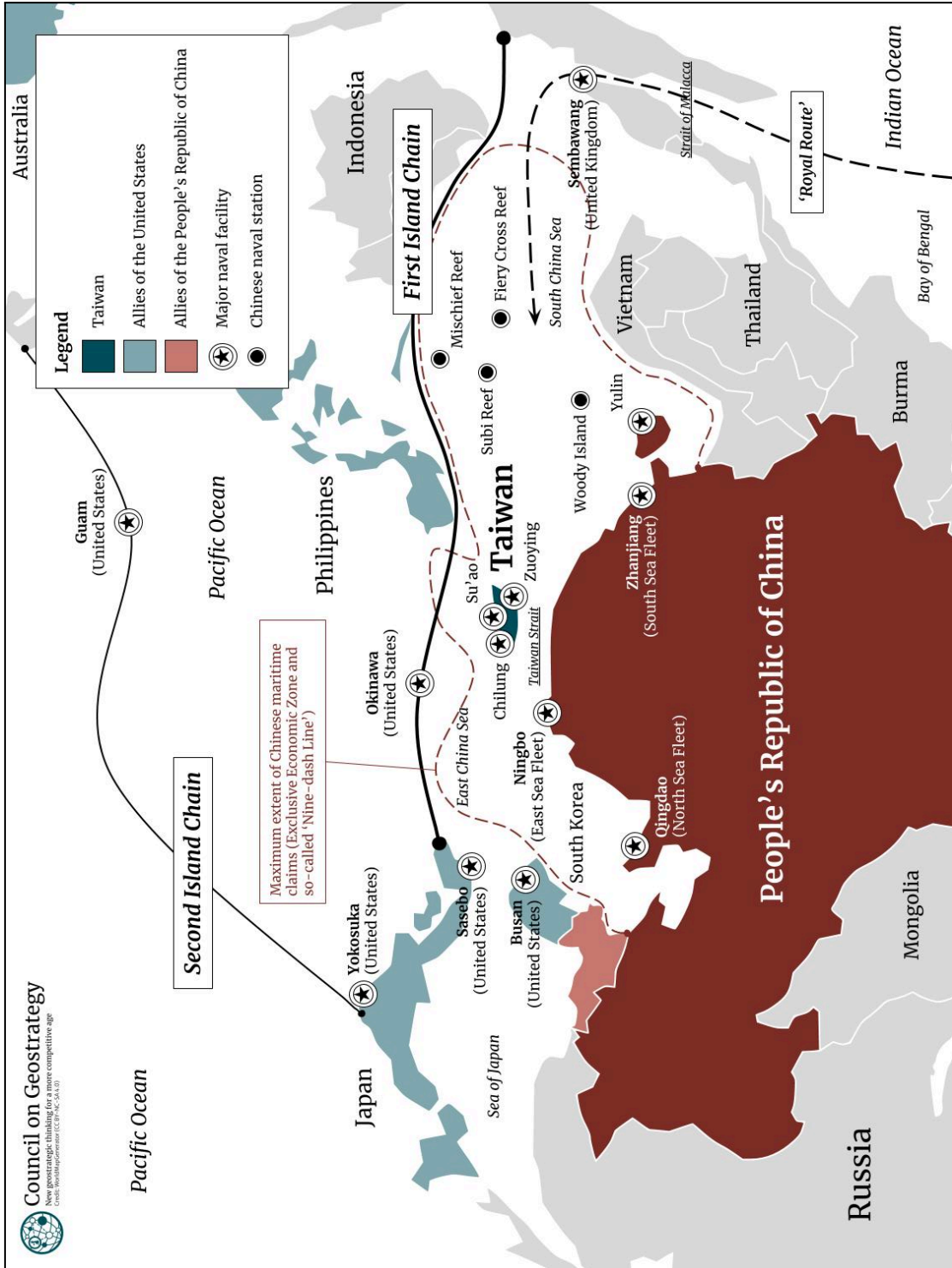
- Defend the mainland from an attack by sea by the US;
- Secure its seaborne international trade and maritime communication lines;
- Pursue global political, economic, and security interests; and,
- 'Recover' sovereignty over claimed maritime territories, especially Taiwan.

All of these require, in some manner, the ability to operate both inside and outside of the PRC's regional waters.

⁵ Michael A. McDevitt, *China as a Twenty First Century Naval Power* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), p. 3.



Map 1: The PRC's maritime outlook





2.1 East and South China seas

As Map 1 shows, from the PRC's perspective, the so-called 'First Island Chain' is a barrier around adjacent waters – the South and East China seas – which constrains Chinese access to the Pacific Ocean. Control of the seas within the chain serves a dual purpose – to defend the PRC from external attack through those waters (routes that have been used to do just that at several times in history) and to prevent others being able to deny the PRC access to the high seas beyond. Gaining control of Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands, the Paracel Islands, the Spratly Islands, and other land features within the First Island Chain is viewed as the best way to secure these objectives.

For the last 30 years, the PRC leadership has consistently referred to the nation's 'maritime rights and interests' in nearby seas, and much of the Chinese build-up of maritime power is aimed at both defending these and advancing them coercively. According to Xi:

We should be soberly aware that China, as a major coastal country with more than 18,000 kilometres of mainland coastline and approximately three million square kilometres of sea area, is facing an increasingly severe maritime security situation and an increasingly fierce struggle for maritime rights and interests.⁶

By upholding a routine military presence and conducting patrols in disputed areas, the PRC maintains a state of ongoing controlled tension without either resolution of the dispute or escalation to full conflict.

The PRC and Japan have overlapping maritime claims in the East China Sea around the separation of their exclusive economic zones and an ongoing dispute over the sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands, referred to by the Chinese as the Diaoyu Islands. The PRC regularly deploys coast guard ships and fishing vessels in disputed waters, to Japan's concern.

The PRC claims that international presence within the South China Sea is a challenge to its sovereignty over the various amphibious features within its self-proclaimed 'nine-dash line' – claims rejected by Brunei, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam, and by

⁶ 吴迪明 [Wu Diming] and 宋国鹏 [Song Guopeng], '牢牢把握全面建成世界一流海军的时代内涵' ['Firmly grasp the connotation of the times of building a world-class navy in an all-round way'], 人民日报 [People's Daily], 06/06/2018, <http://military.people.com.cn/> (checked: 17/05/2024).



the Permanent Court of Arbitration. The PRC has unilaterally reinforced and extended several of these features, as well as constructing airfields and other infrastructure. The PRC regularly deploys PLAN, coast guard, and civilian vessels to maintain a presence in disputed areas and conduct coercive actions against the vessels of other nations, such as deploying water cannons, cutting tow lines, and manoeuvring in dangerously close proximity to other nations' vessels. Its survey ships also frequently operate within the exclusive economic zones of neighbouring nations, including Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

The largest potential flashpoint in the region is, of course, Taiwan. The PRC regularly deploys military assets in the Taiwan Strait, sailing warships or flying aircraft, as well as coast guard and civilian vessels, in close proximity to Taiwanese ships and territorial features.

2.2 Beyond the First Island Chain

In recent years, the PLAN has begun to perform missions outside the First Island Chain, gradually extending its ability to operate at increasingly longer ranges as it acquires larger and more advanced platforms which enable combat operations outside the range of the PRC's land-based defences – including the fleet air defence capability that comes from growing numbers of aircraft carriers, emerging sea-based land-attack systems, longer-range submarines, increasing amphibious capabilities for expeditionary operations, and new long-distance replenishment vessels to support operations further afield.

The concept of 'Far Seas Protection' began appearing in PLAN analyses around 2003. In early 2004, Quan Jinfu of the PLAN Command Academy hinted that PRC naval strategy was transforming:

In this new century, the 'domain' of China's national interests in the maritime direction must continuously expand and extend from the waters of the near seas to the waters of the far seas...Inevitably, the substance of China's naval strategy for the

new century will gradually evolve from ‘Near Seas defence’ to ‘Far Seas Protection.’⁷

The PLAN’s current experience in longer-range operations primarily comes from extended task group deployments in the Pacific Ocean and its ongoing counter-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, as well as ship-based intelligence collection during other countries’ military exercises in the Pacific such as RIMPAC and TALISMAN SABER.⁸ The counter-piracy mission in particular has acted as an important laboratory for the PLAN, allowing Chinese admirals to learn how to sustain warships on distant deployments and facilitating its transition from a regional fleet to a proper blue-water navy – indeed, this is likely to be a core reason why the PRC signed up to participate in this international mission. The PRC also conducts joint exercises regularly with the Russian Navy.

The PLAN’s growing fleet is poised to expand on these operations beyond its immediate region, facilitating peacetime activities and participation in internationally sanctioned operations as well as the potential for military missions. While the PRC’s current global deployments are cast firmly in a defensive setting, there is no good reason to assume that this will continue – its worldwide economic interests (such as the Maritime Silk Road,⁹ Belt and Road Initiative, and so on) are joined with burgeoning political and security interests which may well come to require shows of strength – or gunboat diplomacy – or even the use of force.

To support expeditionary operations, it is likely that the PRC will continue to explore possibilities for the expansion of its overseas bases. Though currently limited to one support base in Djibouti and access to parts of the Ream naval base in Cambodia, the PRC is thought to be in

⁷ Quan Jinfu, ‘The Innovative Development of China’s Naval Strategic Theory in the New Century’, *Journal of PLA Nanjing Institute of Politics*, 3 (2004), p. 82.

⁸ For a comprehensive list of the PLAN’s global deployments since 2000, see: Michael A. McDevitt, *China as a Twenty First Century Naval Power* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), chapter 2.

⁹ See, for example: ‘发展海洋经济推进建设海洋强国的理论脉络与实践路径’ [‘The theoretical context and practical path of developing the marine economy and promoting the construction of a maritime power’], 中华人民共和国国家发展和改革委员会 [National Development and Reform Commission of the People’s Republic of China], 07/03/2024, <https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/> (checked: 17/05/2024).



talks with other nations to secure future access and basing agreements to build up its logistics and basing infrastructure.¹⁰ However, these capabilities are already substantially augmented by the China Ocean Shipping (Group) Company (COSCO), a state-owned enterprise in the civilian logistics business with a worldwide footprint – even though it does not have a network of military bases, the PLAN can count on replenishment support via COSCO at virtually every major port in the Indo-Pacific.¹¹

¹⁰ The US Department of Defence lists potential basing partners as: Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Equatorial Guinea, the Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, Nigeria, Namibia, Mozambique, Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and Tajikistan. See: 'Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China', Office of the Secretary of Defence (US), 12/10/2023, <https://media.defense.gov/> (checked: 17/05/2024), p. xi.

¹¹ For a comprehensive analysis of this, see 'China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations', US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 14/04/2020, <https://www.uscc.gov/> (checked: 17/05/2024).



3.0 Naval modernisation and build-up

There is considerable interoperability and integration between the PLAN, the China Coast Guard (CCG), the China Maritime Militia (CMM), and other civilian vessels. While the PLAN has been deployed outside of the First Island Chain for presence and counter-piracy missions, the PRC had tended to use the CCG and CMM in regional maritime disputes thus far (with the PLAN providing overwatch in case of escalation), and this trend is likely to continue. Given the close links between the PLAN, CCG, CMM, and civilian vessels, plus their interwoven use in the maritime domain, a full consideration of the overall PRC naval build-up must cover all four.

3.1 *The People's Liberation Army Navy*

The PLAN has updated or replaced its previous limited capability platforms in favour of larger modern multi-mission combatants with advanced anti-ship, anti-air, and anti-submarine weapons and sensors. It is also emphasising joint operations with the other branches of the armed forces. As Zhang Junshe, a Researcher at the Naval Military Academic Research Institute, has recently summarised:

The People's Navy today has developed from a single surface ship force into a strategic, comprehensive, and international military branch consisting of submarines, surface ships, naval aviation, marine corps, and coastal defence forces, with dual capabilities in nuclear and conventional warfare. It has become a modern maritime combat force capable of effectively defending national sovereignty, security, and development interests and accomplishing a variety of military tasks.¹²

The PLAN consists of three fleets – the North Sea Fleet (NSF; 北海舰队), the East Sea Fleet (ESF; 东海舰队), and the South Sea Fleet (SSF; 南海舰队) – with subordinate submarine flotillas, surface ship flotillas,

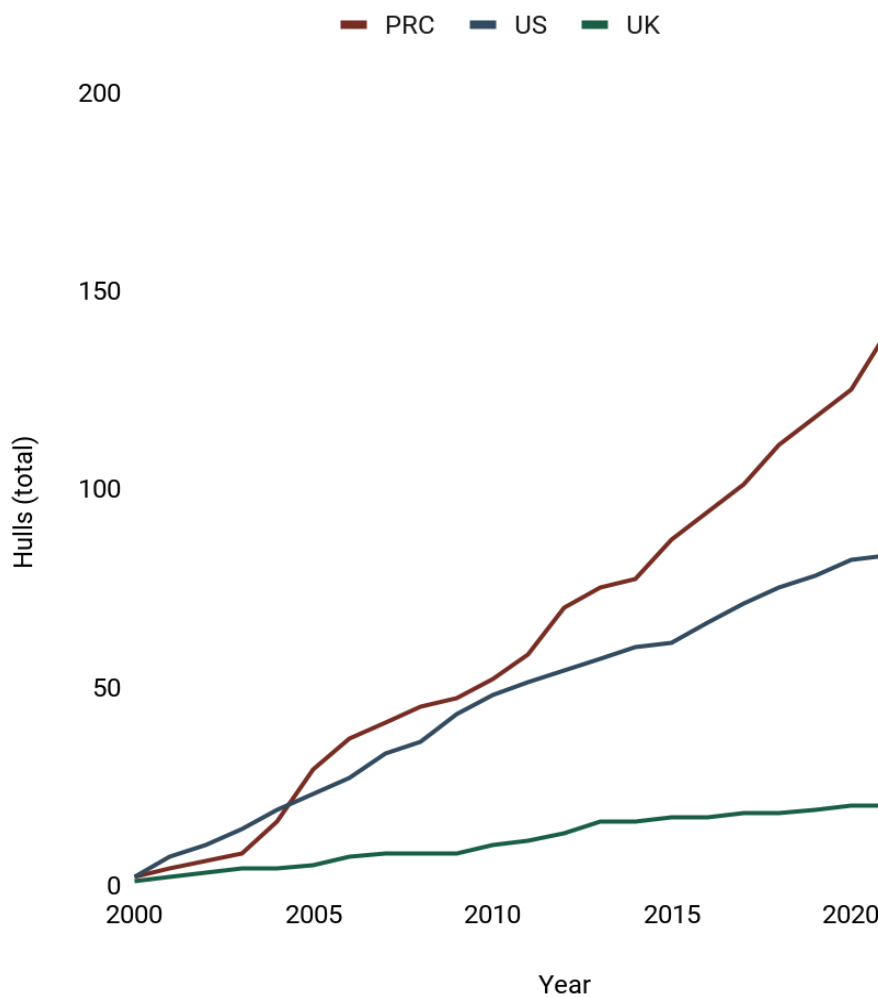
¹² 张军社 [Zhang Junshe], '专家：人民海军已实现近海防御与远海防卫相结合的战略转型' ['Experts: 'The People's Navy has achieved a strategic transformation combining near-seas defence with far-seas defence'], 澎湃新闻 [The Paper], 23/04/2023, <https://m.thepaper.cn/> (checked: 17/05/2024).



aviation brigades, and naval bases. The PLAN is now the largest navy in the world by ship numbers, excluding auxiliaries, but remains well behind the US Navy in terms of total displacement or warships geared for force projection.

Graphs 1, 2, 3, and 4 show comparisons between the PLAN, Royal Navy, and US Navy.

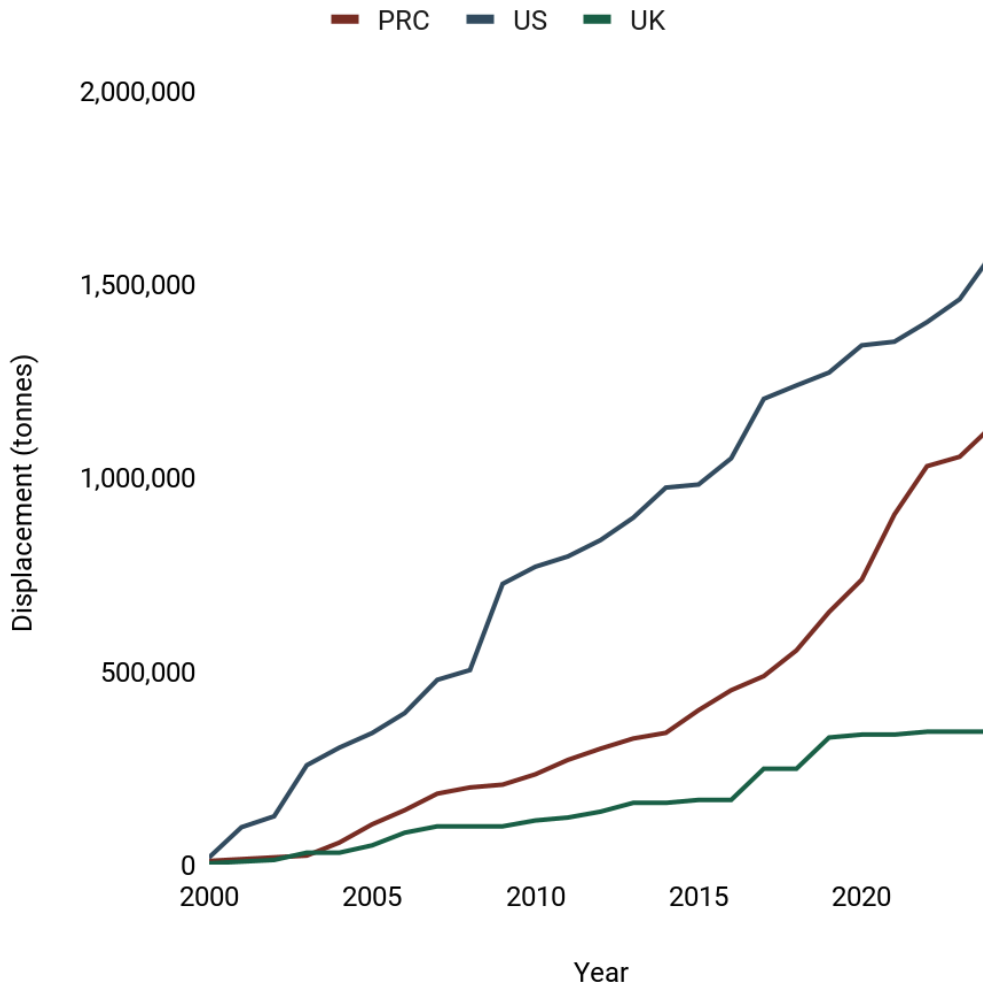
Graph 1: Total hull numbers commissioned since 2000¹³



¹³ Total hull numbers includes: Ballistic missile submarines; nuclear attack and cruise missile firing submarines; conventionally-powered submarines; aircraft carriers; cruisers; destroyers; frigates; and amphibious warfare vessels with a displacement of over 10,000 tonnes. For data, see: Alex Pape (ed.), *Jane's Fighting Ships 2023-24* (London: Jane's Information Group, 2023).



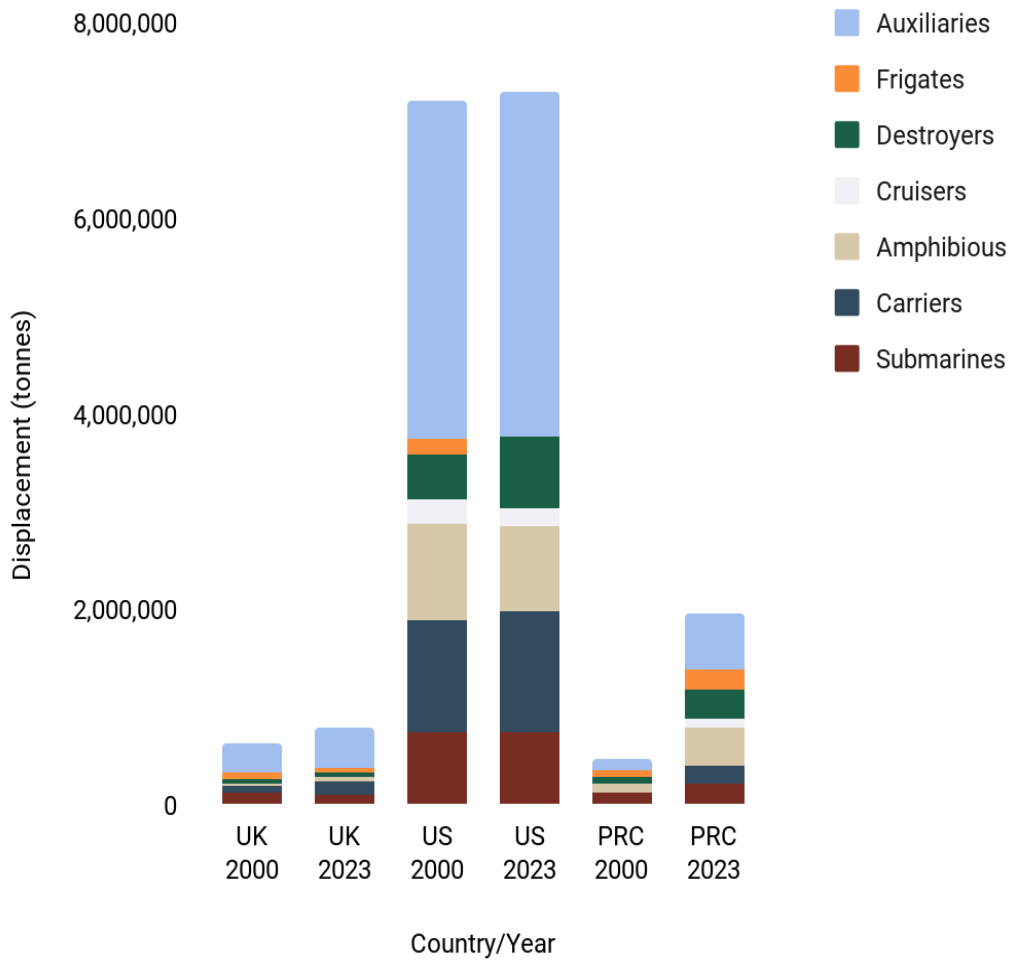
Graph 2: Total displacement commissioned since 2000 (tonnes)¹⁴



¹⁴ Total displacement includes: Ballistic missile submarines; nuclear attack and cruise missile firing submarines; conventionally-powered submarines; aircraft carriers; cruisers; destroyers; frigates; and amphibious warfare vessels with a displacement of over 10,000 tonnes. For data, see: Alex Pape (ed.), *Jane's Fighting Ships 2023-24* (London: Jane's Information Group, 2023).

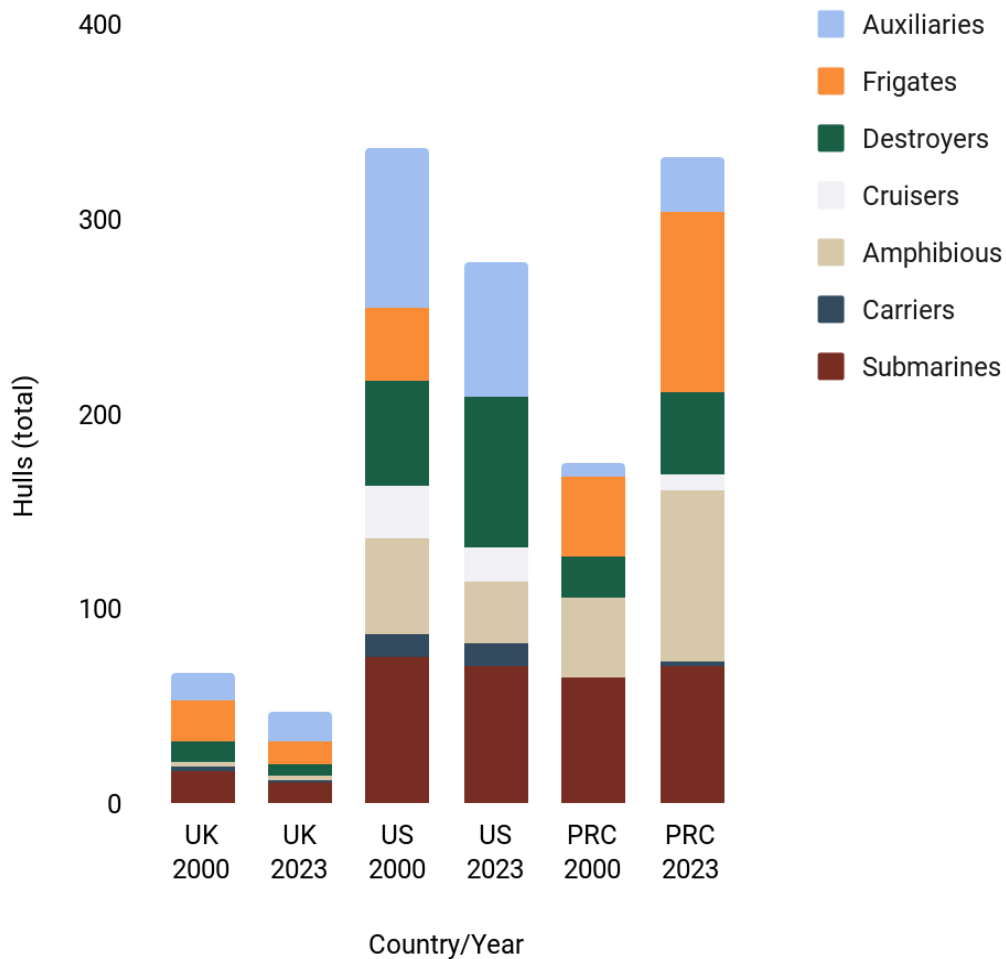


Graph 3: Displacement (tonnes) by type, comparison between 2000 and 2023¹⁵



¹⁵ Ibid.

Graph 4: Hull numbers by type, comparison between 2000 and 2023¹⁶



The data show considerable expansion in the PLAN fleet in terms of numbers, but these newer vessels also carry more modern capabilities.

3.1.1 Submarines

The submarine force has been a key priority for PLAN modernisation and expansion. The force currently consists of six nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), six nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs/SSGNs), and 48 diesel-powered/air-independent

¹⁶ *Ibid.*



powered attack submarines (SSKs/SSPs). The submarine force is expected to grow to 65 boats by 2025 and 80 boats by 2035 as an expansion of submarine construction capacity offsets the retirement of older vessels.

The PLAN is growing its inventory of conventionally powered submarines that can fire advanced anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs). It bought 12 Russian Kilo-class SSK boats in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but the PRC's own shipyards are now producing submarines domestically – 13 Song-class SSK boats and 21 Yuan-class SSP boats, with more of the latter to come.

The PLAN also operates domestically built SSNs – two Shang I-class boats, four Shang II-class boats – and two Shang III-class SSGNs currently being built. The latter could be equipped with land-attack cruise missiles, which would provide the PLAN with a stealthy strike capability in addition to the anti-surface warfare capability of submarines.

The operation of SSBNs for a credible sea-based nuclear deterrent has long been seen by the PRC leadership as an important step in achieving great power status. The PLAN has six domestically built Jin class SSBNs already conducting constant sea patrols, and these will be augmented sometime in the next decade with a new SSBN class. The JL-2 sea-launched ballistic missile could strike the continental US from somewhere in the mid-Pacific, but the newer JL-3 variant would reportedly allow a strike on the continental US from Chinese littoral waters.

3.1.2 Surface combatants

The PLAN is building large numbers of surface combatants, including guided-missile cruisers (CG), guided-missile destroyers (DDG), guided-missile frigates (FFG), and corvettes (FFL). These are central to improving the PLAN's anti-ship and anti-submarine capabilities for operations outside the range of shore-based air defences.

The Renhai class CG and the Luyang III class DDG construction programmes are ongoing. The Renhai class has 112 vertical launch system (VLS) cells and can fire a wide range of missiles, including anti-ship cruise missiles, surface-to-air missiles, torpedoes, anti-submarine missiles, and anti-ship ballistic missiles. Both the standard and lengthened variants of the Luyang III class have 64 VLS



cells, which can fire cruise missiles, surface-to-air missiles, and anti-submarine missiles, and the lengthened version can also carry the new Z-20 anti-submarine helicopter.

The PLAN has restarted production of the Jiangkai II class FFG but has completed the production run of the Jiangdao class FFL. The early variant of the FFL did not have towed-array sonar for anti-submarine warfare, so these 22 ships were transferred to the CCG in 2021, but the other 50 later variant FFLs have such sonar capability and have remained with the PLAN. Both the FFG and FFL carry anti-ship cruise missiles for anti-surface warfare capabilities, and the FFLs contribute to littoral warfare capabilities.

Longer-range missiles require a robust over-the-horizon targeting capability, so the PLA is also investing in joint systems for reconnaissance, surveillance, command, control, and communications to allow the provision of high-quality targeting information to surface and submarine launch platforms.

The PLAN surface fleet brings a modern set of anti-surface, anti-submarine, and anti-air capabilities, and the addition of land-attack capabilities is the next logical step in its transition to a global multi-mission fleet. It is thus likely to add land-attack cruise missiles to its newer CG and DDG models, with the possibility of retrofitting older vessels as well. Land-attack capabilities would give the PLAN flexible long-range strike options and allow the PRC to hold at risk land targets outside of its immediate region, adding to the already impressive range and volume of the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) from sites on the Chinese mainland.

3.1.3 Aircraft carriers

The PLAN currently operates three aircraft carriers and is in pursuit of a 'multi-carrier force' to provide fleet air defence capability for operations outside the range of shore-based defences. The Liaoning, a Russian-built Kuznetsov class design, and the Shandong, a domestically built version of the Liaoning, both use ski-jump take-off methods for their air wings. The latest carrier, the Fujian, has recently come into service – it is larger than the other two and has an electromagnetic catapult launch system, which allows it to support additional aircraft types with more rapid flight operations, extending its reach and effectiveness while increasing the striking power of any



potential PLAN carrier battle group or carrier strike group. Future carriers will likely be of this latest design - but the PLAN tends to iterate ship designs through constructing them, so the next one may have significant additions such as nuclear propulsion.

The standard fighter aircraft operating from the carriers is the J-15, which is limited by being heavier than most carrier-borne fighters, but the PRC is also developing a carrier-capable variant of its fifth-generation fighter, known as the J-35. There are also forthcoming carrier-based airborne early warning aircraft and improved anti-submarine rotary-wing aircraft. The PLAN has also been developing several large uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs) with vertical take-off and landing capabilities designed for deployment from carriers and other large combatants to perform intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions. Recent reporting indicates that the PLAN may have also constructed a dedicated drone carrier, although official reports are not yet available.¹⁷

3.1.4 Amphibious warfare and auxiliary vessels

The PLAN's continued investment in amphibious landing ships is a strong signal of its commitment to developing its expeditionary warfare capabilities. While any such development is clearly centred around a potential invasion of Taiwan, these capabilities can also be exercised elsewhere. The PLAN has recently built four Yushen class landing helicopter assault (LHA) ships and eight Yuzhao class landing platform dock (LPD) ships. These amphibious vessels provide significant long-range expeditionary capability and can carry large numbers of troops, landing craft, armoured vehicles, and helicopters.

This growing auxiliary fleet provides the PLAN with support for power projection outside of the immediate region. The PLAN is continuing to build large numbers of such vessels, including fast combat support ships, intelligence collection vessels, ocean surveillance ships, fleet replenishment oilers, hospital ships, and salvage/rescue vessels. There is also considerable interest in developing uncrewed systems of various sizes for both surface and subsurface operations, although confirmed details are scarce.

¹⁷ H. I. Sutton, 'China Builds World's First Dedicated Drone Carrier', *Naval News*, 15/05/2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/> (checked: 17/05/2024).



3.2 The Chinese Coast Guard

The CCG, a law-enforcement fleet under the command of the PRC's Central Military Commission, is tasked with a number of maritime security missions in the East and South China seas, ranging from tackling smuggling to defending PRC sovereignty claims. A new Coast Guard Law enacted in 2021 afforded the CCG the power to use force in 'maritime areas under Chinese jurisdiction.' Given that much of the recent aggressive activity which has occurred in disputed waters has been by CCG vessels, this has concerned neighbouring countries such as the Philippines and Vietnam, but also those more distant.

Like the PLAN, the CCG is undergoing considerable expansion and modernisation, and it is now the largest maritime law-enforcement fleet in the world. While the exact numbers are not publicly available, the US Department of Defence estimates that the CCG has over 150 regional and ocean-going vessels of over 1,000 tonnes, including the 20 former PLAN corvettes discussed above, equipped with helicopters, high-capacity water cannon, interceptor boats, and guns. The CCG also has around 50 vessels of 500-1,000 tons, for limited offshore operations, and around 300 smaller coastal patrol vessels.

3.3 The China Maritime Militia

The CMM is a subset of the PRC's national militia, an armed reserve force of civilians available for mobilisation. The PRC subsidises a range of local and provincial commercial organisations to operate CMM vessels, performing official missions outside of their regular civilian activities. The units employ maritime workers, particularly fishermen, who are trained as a supplement to their day jobs and can be activated when needed.

CMM vessels train with and assist the PLAN and the CCG in operations within the First Island Chain, particularly around disputed land features in the South China Sea. The PRC deploys the CMM for low-intensity 'grey zone' operations, aiming to frustrate an effective response from the other involved parties, and as a massed harassing presence in disputed waters to play a coercive role. CMM vessels also act to protect Chinese fishing vessels operating in disputed waters and have engaged in small-scale reclamation activity on unoccupied



disputed land features.

In the last decade, the PRC has built a new ‘Spratly Backbone Fleet’ of over 235 large steel-hulled fishing vessels to operate in the disputed waters around the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. Some vessels were built for important CMM units in Hainan, Guangdong, and Guangxi, and others were offered as an incentive for other mariners to affiliate with the militia. Over the same time period, the PRC has also developed a CMM unit in the Paracel Islands, which now consists of around 84 purpose-built steel-hulled vessels with water cannons, crewed by armed full-time former sailors or fishermen. The unit conducts regular patrols around disputed land features in the South China Sea.

3.4 Civilian vessels

The PRC mandated in 2015 that all newly built civilian vessels across five main categories – container ships, bulk carriers, break bulk ships, roll-on/roll-off (RORO) ferries, and multipurpose vessels – must meet specific ‘national defence requirements.’ Various images and media reports have since emerged of these modifications, including a RORO fitted with a ramp for the disembarkation of amphibious forces and a flat-deck container vessel modified as a helicopter landing platform (likely for transportation or refuelling). The military has also used ROROs in some limited training exercises for supporting troop movements.

As there are no official numbers available, estimates vary wildly on how many civilian vessels could or would be made available to the PLAN during a conflict, much less how quickly they could be usefully integrated into military operations. Some estimates contend that if the PRC requisitioned its entire dual-capable civilian fleet, that alone would give it more tonnage than the total US amphibious assault fleet. Many vessels may indeed end up used for military purposes, reflecting the PRC’s broader national strategy of Military-Civil Fusion. Certainly, the PLAN is dangerously eroding the principle of distinction that is central to the law of armed conflict, blurring the distinction between civilians and combatants while confusing assessment of what vessel is a legitimate military target.



4.0 How the Chinese naval build-up will change the Indo-Pacific

The expansion and modernisation of the PLAN has significantly improved its anti-surface, anti-submarine, and anti-air capabilities, and it is likely moving towards improving its land-attack capability as well. The PLAN's new surface combatants and submarines are modern multi-mission vessels comparable to those of other navies – including the Royal Navy and US Navy – and these new platforms are increasingly capable of conducting operations within and beyond the First Island Chain. The PLAN, in conjunction with the CCG and CMM, is now also better placed to deter third-party intervention in its regional waters, whether around disputed land features in the South China Sea or in the Taiwan Strait. The mix of civilian, law-enforcement, and military vessels expands the range of options available for coercive action, with a great deal of flexibility on shades of escalation or grey-zone deniability.

The PLAN's expansion of its amphibious fleet and expeditionary capability is likely focused on a potential invasion of Taiwan. While growth in the numbers of LPD and LHA ships has not yet been coupled with an expansion in the other types of landing craft that the PRC would need for a large-scale assault on Taiwan, the PLAN may be focusing on augmenting this capability via civilian vessels – or, indeed, the PRC may view its shipbuilding industry as being capable of producing such vessels in a relatively short span of time.



5.0 Implications for the Euro-Atlantic

The emergence of a Chinese navy with expeditionary capabilities has significant implications for the Royal Navy and the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture. As the PRC expands its maritime capabilities, it is reshaping the strategic landscape in ways which demand attention and response from traditional maritime powers such as the UK and its Euro-Atlantic allies.

The PRC's naval expansion is driven by multiple factors, including its growing economic interests, maritime and territorial disputes, and a desire for greater influence on the global stage. The development of a modern, blue-water navy allows the PRC to protect its maritime trade routes and resources, assert its territorial claims in the South China Sea, and project power beyond its immediate region.

For the Royal Navy, PLAN expansion underscores the importance of maintaining a robust naval presence to protect British interests in the Indo-Pacific region, such as upholding an open international order – including freedom of navigation – and reassuring close allies and partners that HM Government takes their needs seriously. The Royal Navy's historic role as a global maritime power gives it the experience and capabilities to contribute to multinational efforts to uphold maritime security in areas affected by PRC assertiveness, particularly when it comes to maintaining open sea lanes for trade and navigation.

Moreover, PRC naval expansion has broader implications for the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. While the focus of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) traditionally has been to defend its members against conventional military threats, the alliance increasingly is confronted with challenges emanating from other regions, including the Indo-Pacific. The PLAN's growing presence in the Atlantic Ocean, through expanded naval deployments and investments in port infrastructure, raises questions about the role of the Royal Navy and allied European navies in addressing non-traditional security threats in more distant theatres.¹⁸

¹⁸ Geoff Ziezulewicz, 'Navy's top officer warns of increased Russian and Chinese activity in the Atlantic Ocean', *Navy Times*, 10/08/2018, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/> (checked: 17/05/2024).

6.0 Towards a British response

The Integrated Review Refresh 2023 updated HM Government's 'strategic framework', which designated four 'pillars' with which to uphold the sovereignty, security and prosperity of the UK and its overseas territories.¹⁹ These pillars include: shaping the international order, deterring threats to British interests, enhancing national resilience, and pursuing strategic advantage. This offers a valuable schema for conceptualising and connecting policy recommendations which deal with the PRC's growing heft in the maritime domain.

6.1 Shape the international environment

The UK ought to continue to work with nations which support a stable and open international order and the protection of global public goods, while balancing and competing against nations that do not – the PRC falls firmly in the latter camp. HM Government should adapt to the evolving strategic environment by strengthening maritime cooperation with like-minded partners in the Indo-Pacific, including Australia, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Enhanced interoperability and information sharing among naval forces, particularly through exercises in-theatre and deployments such as the Royal Navy's planned Carrier Strike Group mission in 2025, will help to deter PRC aggression and enable friendly nations to cooperate to respond effectively to crisis situations in regions of mutual concern. Likewise, the AUKUS programme offers a valuable way of building capacity in the Indo-Pacific, while simultaneously enhancing Britain's capabilities in the Euro-Atlantic.

At the same time, the UK should engage with the PRC through diplomatic channels to promote transparency, confidence building measures, and adherence to international norms and rules of behaviour at sea. While competition between the PRC and other powers may well be inevitable, it is essential to do what can be done to manage tensions and avoid miscalculations which could escalate into conflict. This may

¹⁹ 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world', Cabinet Office (UK), 13/03/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 17/05/2024).

be a frustrating and difficult task, but any non-military actions that could potentially shape behaviour to avert conflict should be attempted.

6.2 Deter, defend, and compete across all domains

HM Government recognises the necessity of a shift towards an integrated approach to defence in order to counter geopolitical challenges and deter a global and myriad set of threats. The Royal Navy faces resource constraints and competing priorities, and balancing commitments to NATO, the Euro-Atlantic region, and the Indo-Pacific requires careful resource allocation and strategic planning. As the PRC's naval capabilities continue to grow, the Royal Navy will need to invest in new platforms and technologies to maintain its edge in contested maritime environments.²⁰

The PRC's notion of itself as a maritime power also offers lessons for the UK. The PLAN is directly and deliberately buttressed by the CCG, CMM, and civilian vessels, whereas the links between the military and the civilian sides of seafaring in Britain are not as closely linked. HM Government and the Royal Navy should closely consider how to build and improve similar links between maritime actors in British waters through a more holistic lens, with a more coordinated whole-of-nation effort.

6.3 Address vulnerabilities through resilience

Resilience is vital to addressing the vulnerabilities which may leave the country exposed to crises and hostile actors. As a major trading nation, the UK relies heavily on maritime routes in the Indo-Pacific for the transportation of goods, energy resources, and raw materials. Any significant disruption of these routes due to conflict would lead to increased shipping costs, supply chain disruptions, and shortages of essential goods and commodities. This, in turn, could result in inflationary pressures, reduced consumer confidence, and slower economic growth.

Furthermore, heightened tensions in the Indo-Pacific could have spillover effects on global financial markets, leading to increased

²⁰ William Freer and James Rogers, 'Why Britain needs a larger navy', Council on Geostrategy, 05/12/2023, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 17/05/2024).

volatility and uncertainty. Any economic downturn in the Indo-Pacific would be likely to have ripple effects on the global economy, affecting British exports, foreign direct investment, and financial stability.²¹

Preserving maritime communication lines in the Indo-Pacific thus contributes directly to the resilience of the British economy, given the global nature of trade and the UK's vulnerability to the significant knock-on effects that would be triggered by open conflict in the South China Sea or the wider Indo-Pacific.

Resilience is also a vital component in ensuring that Royal Navy and allied deployments in the region can achieve their goals effectively. For example, the Royal Navy plans to deploy new Type 31 frigates in the Indo-Pacific as they become available towards the end of the decade – these should be in addition to, rather than a replacement of, the current deployment of two offshore patrol vessels (HMS Tamar and HMS Spey), as the latter can work more effectively with smaller nations' maritime forces to help uphold their sovereignty and capacity.

6.4 *Generate strategic advantage*

Britain's relative ability to achieve its national objectives compared to competitors through the use of catalysts – or strategic advantage – is central to maintaining the nation's freedom of action when operating in a more contested environment.²² A stronger Royal Navy and bolstered alliances and partnerships are catalysts for strategic advantage which will better enable the UK to achieve the first three pillars outlined above.²³

Ultimately, the implications of PRC naval expansion for the Royal Navy and the Euro-Atlantic region depend on how effectively the UK can work with allies and partners to navigate the complexities of geopolitical competition in the maritime domain. By investing in Royal Navy capabilities, strengthening alliances and partnerships, and promoting dialogue and cooperation, HM Government can work to

²¹ Jennifer Welch, Jenny Leonard, Maeva Cousin, Gerard DiPippo, and Tom Orlik, 'Xi, Biden and the \$10 Trillion Cost of War Over Taiwan', *Bloomberg*, 09/01/2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/> (checked: 17/05/2024).

²² Gabriel Elefteriu, William Freer and James Rogers, 'What is strategic advantage?', Council on Geostrategy, 23/11/2023, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 17/05/2024).

²³ William Freer and Emma Salisbury, 'A more lethal Royal Navy: Sharpening Britain's naval power', Council on Geostrategy, 13/05/2024, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 17/05/2024).



Council on Geostrategy

safeguard the national interest and preserve an open international order which promotes peace and stability at sea.



About the author

Dr Emma Salisbury is Robert Whitehead Associate Fellow in Military Innovation at the Council on Geostrategy. She is also an Associate Fellow at the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre in the Ministry of Defense, and holds a PhD from Birkbeck College, University of London.



Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank William Freer and Elizabeth Lindley for their invaluable research assistance with this paper, as well as those at the Council on Geostrategy and beyond who kindly offered their comments on earlier drafts. Any errors or omissions remain those of the author.



About the Council on Geostrategy

The Council on Geostrategy is an independent non-profit organisation situated in the heart of Westminster. We focus on an international environment increasingly defined by geopolitical competition and the environmental crisis.

Founded in 2021 as a Company Limited by Guarantee, we aim to shape British strategic ambition in a way that empowers the United Kingdom to succeed and prosper in the twenty-first century. We also look beyond Britain's national borders, with a broad focus on free and open nations in the Euro-Atlantic, the Indo-Pacific, and Polar regions.

Our vision is a united, strong and green Britain, which works with other free and open nations to compete geopolitically and lead the world in overcoming the environmental crisis – for a more secure and prosperous future.

[This page is intentionally left blank.]



Council on Geostrategy



Dedicated to making Britain, as well as other free and open nations, more united, stronger and greener.

ISBN: 978-1-914441-69-1

Address: 14 Old Queen Street, Westminster, London, SW1H 9HP

Phone: 020 3915 5625

Email: info@geostrategy.org.uk

© 2024 Council on Geostrategy

Disclaimer: This publication should not be considered in any way to constitute advice. It is for knowledge and educational purposes only. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council on Geostrategy or the views of its Advisory Council.

Please do not print this document; protect the environment by reading it online.

Geostrategy Ltd., trading as Council on Geostrategy, is a company limited by guarantee in England and Wales. Registration no. 13132479. Registered address: Geostrategy Ltd., Lower Ground Floor Office, 231 Shoreditch High Street, London, E1 6PJ.

New geostrategic thinking for a more competitive age

<https://www.geostrategy.org.uk>