

REVIEW ESSAY

THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Norman Friedman

Yoshihara, Toshi, and James R. Holmes. *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2010. 292pp. \$36.95

This is at once a timely and somewhat disappointing book. The authors quote numerous Chinese writers as arguing that sea power is essential to a rising China. They also argue, as Mahan did, that any country as dependent on sea-borne trade as China must also be interested in sea power. These ideas may have been controversial when the authors began writing, but the recent appearance of the refitted Chinese aircraft carrier formerly known as *Varyag* is an indication that should be obvious to all.

The technique of carefully sifting through a country's military and technical literature, as the authors and their colleagues at the China Maritime Studies Institute of the Naval War College do, can be valuable. The authors, for example, suggest that Chinese fascination with Mahan suggests a much deeper-rooted interest in developing sea power than may be imagined, and that in turn suggests

that the Chinese government is likely to keep investing in it. But this approach has its limitations. What is published is in effect the tip of an iceberg. Part of that iceberg is classified technical and tactical literature; part is technical information that is not classified but may not be discussed in the open literature. Part is also the political and bureaucratic environment within China, which for many reasons may never be discussed frankly in public. A full evaluation of the prospects for

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the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) ought to include all of these factors. Since this is an unclassified study, at the least it should have taken into account much more completely Chinese internal politics as well as pertinent material from non-Chinese sources.

Much of this book is devoted to an account of the rise of modern Chinese naval weaponry, the most spectacular being the "carrier killing" DF-21 ballistic missile, and the tactics associated with it. The tactical discussion makes much of Mao's doctrines developed for guerrilla warfare. It is surprising that the authors spend no time at all looking at the style of warfare developed by the Soviets during the Cold War. The PLAN began under Soviet tutelage, and much of its technology is of Russian origin. It is difficult, for example, not to see Cold War Soviet concepts in Chinese descriptions of a fleet operating under the umbrella of shore-based weaponry. The current Chinese Su-30 force armed with Russian-developed AS-17 missiles is not too different in principle from the Cold War-vintage Soviet Backfires using AS-4s.

The main lesson of Cold War tactical development was that ocean surveillance was crucial. If it worked, then a moving force at sea could be targeted; if not, the force was free to operate as it wished. Ocean surveillance makes no appearance whatever in this book, perhaps because it is not discussed in open Chinese literature. One might also suspect that open-literature Chinese calculations, e.g., of how many Su-30s it takes to kill an Aegis cruiser, do not reflect any detailed classified work, but rather are intended to inspire the reader. The authors may be quite right that open writing about strategy often reflects reality, but that is much less the case with tactics. For example, during much of the Cold War U.S. open-ocean antisubmarine warfare relied heavily on the Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS). For decades it was hardly mentioned in the open literature.

Other slips leave the reader uncomfortable. We are told that the Chinese may be able to operate carriers under the umbrella of the new antiship missile, as though it takes a carrier to sink another carrier. U.S. submariners may find that difficult to believe; the South China Sea is usually described as a paradise for them. This ability, incidentally, is said to allow the Chinese not to build full-up supercarriers—as though the size of the carrier is dictated by its need to beat off opposition, rather than by its potential striking power. Aegis ballistic-missile defense is evaluated mainly as a possible limitation on Chinese intercontinental ballistic missile effectiveness, but it is probably much more important as a counter to the antiship ballistic missile, a point not at all clear from this book. These are only examples.

The authors set up (and destroy) a straw man, that many in the United States may imagine that the new Chinese navy is being built up specifically to overrun Taiwan, and that somehow it will vanish as soon as that is achieved. Who is that

naive? When the Chinese first bought *Varyag*, the rumor was not that it would help them conquer Taiwan, but that it was essential for dominance of the South China Sea (which made a lot more sense). The Chinese navalists certainly explain how valuable Taiwan could be in their hands, but a cynic would have to wonder to what extent they are playing to their government's internal propaganda, with its emphasis on Taiwan.

It would have been interesting to have had some quantitative comparison of Chinese investment in the different services, because that might have indicated how far Chinese naval expansion is likely to go; at some point any expansion or modernization program hits financial limits, and heavy investment in the other services would limit purely naval investment. The Chinese are currently modernizing across the board. The authors dismiss future growth in army investment on the ground that there are no current border problems. However, a Chinese central government nervous about stability has to see its army as the force that guarantees its survival. It is worth spending a great deal on more or less useless toys to keep that army loyal and happy. The army is also the backup if an enemy does make it ashore, and it is the force needed to conquer Taiwan—if the Chinese government ever decides to take that chance. It is also the force that faces Russia in Siberia.

In this reviewer's opinion, the authors have produced a wake-up book that alerts readers to the reality and the likely enduring character of Chinese naval expansion. That certainly matters. Beyond that they seem to falter. Besides the gaps implied above, there is no discussion of the Chinese industrial base (e.g., the extent of dependence on foreign technology and the potential for overcoming it).

Yoshihara and Holmes read the Chinese literature; this reviewer does not. But the main conclusion from that reading—that the Chinese have decided to build an oceanic navy—now seems so obvious that it is not really worth arguing. To go further, it is necessary to read other languages, not well reflected in this book, such as those of naval hardware and of naval tactics.