

# FIGHTING THE NAVAL HEGEMON

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## Evolution in French, Soviet, and Chinese Naval Thought

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**G**eography gives strategy its context. Secure from land invasion, Great Britain and later the United States employed a distinctive form of sea power to defeat their adversaries. Both used their navies to control sea-lanes and vital choke points and to apply direct pressure along enemy coastlines. Through their dominance of the oceans they were able to shape the political and economic order of the world. It is fair to say that what amounts to the Anglo-American school of naval power has demonstrated its efficacy time after time: over the past 250 years these two powers have, singly or together, and always with other allies, defeated every opponent that has attempted to change that order.

An alternative school of naval thought, one rooted in coastal defense, follows an asymmetric path intended to enable the weak to take down the strong. This approach to naval warfare has always sought to capitalize on leading-edge technology while drawing inspiration from French tactics of *guerre de course* (with their origins in piracy and privateering), the Russian Revolution, and “people’s war” in China. In contrast to the oceanic outlook of the Anglo-American tradition, this approach focuses on operations in the littorals and command of the sea in those waters alone. It yokes the operational and tactical offense to the strategic defense. It eschews fleet-on-fleet engagement and refuses frontal battle. Instead it seeks to wear down the opponent while channeling enemy forces as they approach the shoreline, forcing them to attack coastal and inland positions from unfamiliar seas. The aim is to make the intruder vulnerable to a counterattack that shifts the initiative to the defender. It extracts advantage from geography. For instance, China’s control over Asian waters and major shipping lanes would give Beijing substantial global leverage.

For over a century, this tradition of naval thought has evolved through various iterations in France, the Soviet Union, and the People's Republic of China, while retaining its essential features. However, the unique geopolitical contexts, cultural attitudes, and economic circumstances produced variation in how these three states employed sea power. This alternative approach to naval warfare began life in late-nineteenth-century France, where, known as the *Jeune École*, it arose as a counter to British naval strategy. It reemerged in the Soviet Union during the 1920s, when the revolutionary government felt especially vulnerable to foreign intervention and was in no position to build a battle fleet. There it mutated on contact with revolutionary war experience, becoming known as the "Young School" and emerging as an alternative to Alfred Thayer Mahan's "command of the sea" theory. From there it was transmitted to the People's Republic, where several of its attributes have persisted in Chinese naval doctrine.

Breaking from the past, however, China today can compete economically with the United States, the leading maritime power, even as it holds on to its preference for waging asymmetric warfare at sea. By contrast, neither France nor the Soviet Union possessed the wherewithal to challenge seriously the economic position of the naval hegemons of their respective eras. The prospect in China of alignment of economic prowess with unorthodox ideas about naval combat is a potentially new phenomenon worthy of close attention by the United States. While China is at the forefront of this alternative school in the twenty-first century, its ideas also animate the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy and exert a strong influence on the Russian navy. Notably, Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing are ambivalent about, if not hostile to, American primacy at sea, and their navies have begun to cooperate with each other.<sup>1</sup> It is thus very likely that this alternative tradition will live on and be felt across the littorals of Eurasia in the coming years, posing multiple, yet varied, challenges to U.S. naval predominance.

The Soviet Young School and Mao's "people's war" virtually simultaneously shaped the early development of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). While the two theories clearly overlapped, however, they represented separate sources of influence on Chinese naval strategy and tactics.<sup>2</sup> In both France and the Soviet Union, doctrines that stressed the importance of the battle fleet eventually enveloped this alternative naval school of thought. In China, this tradition remains energetic and influential alongside the growth of a more conventional naval force. Whether such coexistence will continue remains unclear. Indeed, Chinese strategists have debated the future course of naval doctrine for decades. In an earlier manifestation of this discourse, one group argued that "people's war" theory was irrelevant at sea against technologically sophisticated enemies such as the United States and Japan. Another view, while agreeing that the Chinese navy should no longer serve exclusively as the guardian of the army's coastal flank,

insisted that people's war at sea simply needed to be adapted to "new historical" conditions.<sup>3</sup>

A similar debate now surrounds the PLAN's recent ascent at sea and its future implications. Will the naval service follow the Anglo-American model of sea power and develop a globe-straddling blue-water navy capable of waging transoceanic campaigns? Or will the PLAN focus on homeland defense, staying true to its longstanding core identity, even as it becomes more modern, lethal, and expeditionary? Or will the Chinese navy chart a unique path that reflects the imperatives peculiar to Beijing's evolving circumstances? As the PLAN's growth continues to tilt the naval balance of power, these questions are gaining policy urgency in Washington and across Asian capitals. The PLAN's current naval strategy, which enlarges China's maritime defense perimeter farther out to open waters, is an outgrowth of rather than a break with its formative period, when the ideas of the alternative school took root. Consequently, the United States and other seafaring regional powers must remain attentive to the continuing vibrancy of this tradition in China and its implications for littoral warfare in Asia.

#### THE *JEUNE ÉCOLE*: HOW THE WEAK CAN DEFEAT THE STRONG

The *Jeune École* went through two evolutions. The first laid its primary emphasis on commerce war, linked secondarily to coastal defense; the second merged these priorities. Both evolutions stressed the importance of technology, the use of ship speed and numbers, and the redundancy of large battle fleets. Both were responses to constrained naval budgets.

The theory as a whole is associated indelibly with Vice Admiral Hyacinthe-Laurent-Théophile Aube, who first articulated the school's basic ideas in the 1870s before serving as France's minister of marine 1886–87.<sup>4</sup> Aube was a man of the colonies. When he returned to France in 1881 he brought with him the adventurous colonial spirit and sided with a group of young, reform-minded officers who favored his ideas. These were the *Jeune École*—the Young School. The traditionalists who opposed them became known eventually as the "French School." Once Alfred Thayer Mahan in the United States began to publish, they worked to adapt his thinking to France's position as a secondary naval power.

Aube became the intellectual driving force behind the *Jeune École*, along with a young journalist, Gabriel Charmes, with whom he worked closely until Charmes's death early in Aube's term as minister. However, its basic features had been delineated in the late 1860s by Captain Richild Grivel, who suggested that France, as the inferior power with respect to Britain, should pursue commerce war (*guerre de course*) and use its battle fleet (in *guerre d'escadre*) only against enemies inferior to itself.<sup>5</sup>

Military power derives directly from economic power. France's economy during the years running up to World War I was not weak, but it was never as strong as that of Great Britain or, eventually, Germany. France's navy, consequently, always struggled to match those of its principal rivals, a situation that worsened in the period between Grivel and Aube. In 1870–71 France lost the Franco-Prussian War. The army of the newly created German Empire became France's principal enemy and France's army the recipient of the bulk of French state defense

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*From its first days, an alternative school of thought has emphasized innovation, new operational methods, deception, camouflage, joint operations, assaults on rear areas and communications, and guerilla methods.*

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expenditure. Consequently, the French navy had to find another way to compete at sea with Britain and, eventually, Germany; the result was a vigorous and, some have argued, destructive and politicized de-

bate.<sup>6</sup> Aube's position was that while the naval high command might argue for a traditional, battleship-heavy navy to meet Britain on the best affordable terms, such fleet-on-fleet engagements were now rare and posed much greater risk to the inferior power than to the superior. He argued that the weaker side must search out alternative tactics, exploit new technology, and decline to engage the superior enemy until it became no longer numerically inferior.

Strategies for dealing with a superior naval power have traditionally fallen into two categories. One involves "risk fleets," otherwise known as "fleets in being," forces structured similarly to the superior power's but smaller. In the modern age, the Imperial German Navy assembled by Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz is the classic example. The second comprises "coastal-defense fleets," bringing together land-based capabilities, such as forts and artillery, with minefields, patrol boats, and submarines, as assembled in various periods by France, the Soviet Union, and China. The *Jeune École* supported coastal-defense measures but never argued for a risk fleet, which would aim eventually to confront the opponent's main battle fleet, if and when a favorable opportunity occurred.

Instead, the *Jeune École* took aim at the enemy's economic power and social stability, seeing trade as Britain's greatest strategic weakness.<sup>7</sup> British naval exercises suggested that this assessment was right—the nation's trade had increased massively since the Napoleonic Wars and was now heavily dependent on imports, while the Royal Navy's traditional policy of close blockade had been rendered untenable by the advent of steam power and the threat to the fleet posed by small, fast-moving torpedo boats.<sup>8</sup> Charmes argued that commerce campaigns should be pursued without pity; it was a tenet of the *Jeune École* that international law had no place in modern war. Despite the ruthlessness of its means, however, the *Jeune École's* primary aim was to induce not starvation but economic panic,

leading to financial and social upheaval.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, the French navy was never to pursue the *Jeune École*'s recommendations, but during World War I the Imperial German Navy would, in addition to its risk-fleet strategy. There were strategic differences but operational similarities between what the *Jeune École* recommended and the Germans later implemented, and the latter's experience confirmed many of the *Jeune École*'s views.<sup>10</sup>

### *Alternative Tactics, New Technologies, and Numerical Superiority*

The *Jeune École*'s first evolution ended when Aube left office in 1887, at which time the school's influence went into temporary decline. The second evolution began in the 1890s, when his ideas were taken up by a new generation of young naval officers. Underlying both evolutions was the need to deliver naval effect with limited budgets. If commerce war and coastal defense—with the emphasis on commerce war—were the *Jeune École*'s alternatives during the first phase, its alternative technological focus was on the self-propelled torpedo, married to specialized torpedo boats. The *Jeune École* argued consistently that numbers matter and that therefore it was better to build larger numbers of smaller ships than to rely on a smaller number of battleships and cruisers—better to replace armor and large guns with speed and numerical superiority.<sup>11</sup> It was this view that led to adoption of the torpedo, because, though in Aube's time it was still in its technological infancy, it could be launched from fast-moving small craft.<sup>12</sup> Small meant cheap, which translated into large numbers.<sup>13</sup> Camouflage and deception too were always vital components of the *Jeune École*'s methods. There was nothing more demoralizing for a battle fleet, Charmes suggested, than to be attacked by small, mixed flotillas of gunboats and torpedo boats flitting like “phantoms” amidst the confusion of battle.<sup>14</sup>

Critically, numerical superiority would not be achieved by a single force operating from a single base. The total force would be distributed in flotilla-sized packets across multiple, fortified bases coming together only long enough to hit a target before scattering again to elude counterattack. Aube broke from accepted wisdom when he argued that small boats could be used offensively. An exercise conducted while he was minister of marine showed that his confidence was largely justified.<sup>15</sup> Despite their limitations, small craft were demonstrably capable of slipping past any blockade to attack shipping; consequently, commerce war in “narrow seas” was a viable option.<sup>16</sup>

The tactical emphasis during the *Jeune École*'s second stage switched to coastal defense. The torpedo was maturing as a weapon to a degree that the focus by the 1890s was on small, fast torpedo boats operating in and from the littorals.<sup>17</sup> However, this did not mean commerce war was abandoned. The theory now was that rather than attempting to dislocate British trade on the high seas, France could

exploit its geographic position (including its position in the Mediterranean) so as to fuse commerce war and coastal defense into a single, littoral-war concept.<sup>18</sup> Ship numbers still mattered most, and speed remained important. Aube's idea of ship specialization was retained; the intention was to equip each flotilla with a single ship type designated for a single mission.<sup>19</sup>

### *Jeune École: Its Effect and Its Legacy*

As the nineteenth century merged into the twentieth, plans that were inspired by *Jeune École* theories but at the same time retained cruisers and much of the traditional battle fleet, thereby once again making distant *guerre de course* possible, were put forward. They were argued by two senior advocates: Admiral François-Ernest Fournier, head of the newly established Naval War College, and, later, Jean-Louis de Lanessan, the minister of marine from 1899 to 1902. Both called for the French navy to be based in multiple locations to force the British to divide their blockading forces. Torpedo boats and submarines would harry isolated British units, pushing them farther out to sea. French battleships and cruisers would then be able to evade the now-fragmented blockade line and hunt down British trade in distant waters.

In the end, however, time caught up with both the *Jeune École* and the conglomerate strategy of Lanessan. In 1904, Britain and France signed the Entente Cordiale.<sup>20</sup> The effect on relations was not immediate, but the two countries were put on a path that eventually made them allies against Germany, thus removing the political and strategic context that had given the *Jeune École* its rationale. Technical developments elsewhere also lessened the torpedo threat, including the advent of wireless, steel armor, quick-firing artillery, searchlights, and torpedo nets. In Britain, there was now a naval revival, including the building of torpedo boat *destroyers*, specifically to defend the fleet; French morale was undermined by its success, compared with France's own poorly conceived building program. Also in France, Aube's dismissive attitude to international law and public opinion was questioned, while the type of fleet the *Jeune École* concept demanded was rejected as too specialized for orthodox conceptions of naval strategy.<sup>21</sup>

The *Jeune École* has been maligned by naval practitioners and historians—often for partisan reasons—even though it changed contemporary strategy and tactics, affected the development of new technologies, and left a tactical legacy that remains influential today.<sup>22</sup> Admiral Raoul Castex, the early-twentieth-century French strategic theoretician, was caustic about the school's ideas and what he regarded as the confusion they spread, yet he agreed that its emphasis on speed, specialization, and numbers was not misplaced.<sup>23</sup> The distinguished American historian Theodore Ropp, who also regarded the *Jeune École* unfavorably, conceded that its ideas represented a genuinely new school of naval warfare.<sup>24</sup> Technologically, it influenced the development of the torpedo, the

submarine, the offensive employment of small craft, and the integration of land- and sea-based coastal-defense forces. Tactically, it affected coastal warfare, commerce warfare, the exploitation of modern communications to effect the dispersal and rapid concentration of force, and the evolution toward what was known in France as *guerre industrielle* and elsewhere as “total war.”

It had perhaps its greatest impact outside France, first and most obviously in Germany’s unrestricted submarine warfare campaigns of World Wars I and II. But it was the British who, once they recognized that their trade was vulnerable and their traditional blockade strategy unworkable, became, in the words of naval historian Geoffrey Till, “more worried about these ideas than they cared to admit.”<sup>25</sup>

### FISHER AND FLOTILLA WARFARE

Admiral of the Fleet Sir John “Jackie” Fisher, First Sea Lord 1904–10 and 1914–15, thought much as Aube had. While his name is linked irrevocably with the “dreadnought” capital ship revolution, he argued with all his renowned vigor that the Royal Navy should rely on torpedo-equipped flotillas in home waters and fast battle cruisers to protect the imperial shipping lanes, rather than on the battle fleet as the main instrument of strategic deterrence.<sup>26</sup> Fisher’s view in 1905 was that if torpedo boats were available in sufficient numbers they could make the English Channel and the western Mediterranean basin impenetrable to warships within three or four years.<sup>27</sup> Like Aube’s, Fisher’s conception depended on mass, not individual superiority.<sup>28</sup> His vision was one of sea denial, which aims to prevent an opponent from using maritime space as it chooses.<sup>29</sup> The historian Nicholas Lambert suggests it was “a completely new way of thinking.”<sup>30</sup>

Sea denial has often been castigated as a strategy of negativity, but in Fisher’s view it was the opposite. What made the concept so attractive to him was that he could deploy large numbers of relatively cheap surface combatants in “flotillas” to patrol the English Channel, the approach to the British Isles that concerned him the most. Although access to this strip of water could be effectively denied to both sides, as the French would act against British capital ships in the same way, this flotilla-based defense would be to Britain’s advantage, because while the capital ships and small combatants of both navies were busy holding or denying the English Channel, the Royal Navy could deploy its armored cruisers much more productively in defense of imperial possessions and trade routes overseas.<sup>31</sup> Far from being tied down, they would be liberated to fulfill their most important role. By the end of 1905 the Royal Navy’s Director of Naval Intelligence, Captain Charles Ottley, was writing of employing “flotilla defense” from Brest in the west to the mouth of the Elbe in the east, thereby also restricting the German navy, which operated from bases in and around Wilhelmshaven.<sup>32</sup>

Any suspicion that flotilla defense was for Fisher some sort of sideshow is dispelled by his own writings. He wrote that it was a strategy “*peculiarly adapted*” to the defense of the narrow seas and that in terms of his own preparations, “some vessels, such, for instance, as torpedo craft and submarines, are wanted sooner than others,” because they constituted “the advanced guard and first striking force of the whole fleet.”<sup>33</sup> It was the submarine that Fisher lauded above all. In Fisher’s view the submarine represented a true “revolution” in naval warfare.<sup>34</sup>

Many of Fisher’s predictions about the submarine’s effectiveness and the threats presented by torpedoes were borne out. The battle of Jutland in 1916 confirmed what had been plain since 1914—that the High Seas Fleet, Germany’s “risk fleet,” was strategically irrelevant unless it was able to sink an isolated element of the Royal Navy’s Grand Fleet of sufficient size to erode the latter’s overall numerical superiority. The only way the German navy could influence the outcome of the war was to use long-range submarines, not cruisers, to sink British commerce. The commerce-war strategy that the *Jeune École* had advanced forty years earlier was now brought to fruition, albeit at a technologically more advanced level.<sup>35</sup>

#### THE SOVIET “YOUNG SCHOOL”

Like the *Jeune École*, the Soviet “Young School” (*molodaia shkola*) was driven by the need to maintain a naval capability and capacity in an era of constrained resources; in the Soviet case, naval budgets were restricted and shipbuilding capability had been crippled by civil war. In France, state resources had been directed to the army. In the Soviet Union, the overwhelming priority during the interwar years was rapid industrialization, and the army was allocated most of what was left. The naval focus accordingly switched to coastal defense, “using an integrated system of minefields, coastal artillery, submarines and motor torpedo boats,” with the aim of conducting its war at sea “on lines quite novel in maritime strategy.”<sup>36</sup> Traditionalists were vilified as utterly out of touch.<sup>37</sup>

Unlike the *Jeune École*, however, it was also driven by ideology: its advocates, although influenced strongly by the Red Army, clearly worked under Communist Party direction.<sup>38</sup> The intention was to provide a theoretical underpinning for a light and inexpensive naval defensive-deterrent force centered on submarines and with only a small number of large ships retained to support them.<sup>39</sup> Stripped of its Marxist-Leninist terminology, the central tenets of what became known (because of its conscious use of ideas drawn from the *Jeune École*) as the Soviet Young School were that the navy existed to guard the army’s seaward flank, that it should be refocused on “small war,” that smaller craft and submarines could be manufactured quickly and losses could therefore be readily replaced, and that the submarine had replaced the battleship as the main striking arm of the fleet.<sup>40</sup>

The drive for a proletarian military doctrine that aimed to bring together all the arms of state power had begun after the Russian civil war ended in 1921.<sup>41</sup> Despite this political orientation, many members of the old tsarist navy retained their positions because of their technical and operational experience. They continued to argue that the ability to exert command of the sea as described by Mahan was essential for defending the nation's sea approaches and forcing the straits that confined Soviet naval power. Their opponents branded them the "Old School."<sup>42</sup> Few in the party understood what these men were talking about; most thought they were unrealistic, given the Soviet Union's parlous financial state.

Admiral Sergey Gorshkov, who was to be the commander in chief of the Soviet navy from 1956 to 1985, summed up in 1972–73 the changes that took place in the 1920s in terms that could have described an updated version of the *Jeune École*:

The small number of combatant ships available [at the time] necessitated research on the strategy and tactics for carrying on defense of our maritime borders with the forces of a "small navy" in cooperation with ground forces. . . . Its essence—the delivering of quick strikes on the main objective of the enemy without being separated from one's base, with all types of forces secretly concentrated and jointly operating from opposite directions . . . [using] surface ships, torpedo boats, submarines, aviation, and coastal artillery organized on mine-artillery positions . . . [—amounted to the best use of what resources were available].<sup>43</sup>

The thrust of the Young School was blunted by Joseph Stalin. He never endorsed its thinking. In 1928 the Revolutionary Military Council decided to create a fleet whose missions were largely coastal and in support of the army.<sup>44</sup> On 27 May 1936 a decision to create a "large sea and ocean fleet" was approved instead.<sup>45</sup> Stalin's initiative did not arise from a clear strategic assessment or force-planning process. Whatever his reasons were—and the relevant documents have not emerged—during the second half of the 1930s measures were put in hand to build a high-seas fleet.<sup>46</sup> Admiral Nikolai Kuznetsov, appointed commander in chief of the Soviet navy in April 1939, explained in 1965 that this building plan coincided with the emergence of a new "Soviet School" that melded Young School and Old School thinking, in a manner reminiscent of the changes Lanessan had initiated in the French navy in the early 1900s.<sup>47</sup> The project was stymied, however, because despite successes achieved with tanks and aircraft, the sheer size of the shipbuilding program Stalin proposed—which exceeded 1.3 million tons—was completely beyond what Soviet industry could accomplish.<sup>48</sup> The program was suspended, and shipbuilding hastily focused on coastal vessels and submarines once again as cooperation with Germany turned to fears of war in the months prior to June 1941.

The rhetorical impression given is that the large battleships and cruisers Stalin wanted would have shifted the navy's focus from defense to offense and from coastal to oceanic waters; the stated strategic aim in 1939 was to achieve sea supremacy in the four fleet areas. But there was no definition of why or to what end. On one hand, the battleships were quite unsuited to shallow-water operations, and on the other, no plans have come to light showing how these ships would have been deployed oceanically. Kuznetsov was to admit that after talking to Stalin late in 1939 he was "not quite clear in [his own] head why they were being built at all."<sup>49</sup> In retrospect, it would seem that this huge effort—which was Stalin's and Stalin's alone; no one dared oppose him—was a response to German plans (and therefore consistent with interwar arms racing) but was also inspired by ideas of Soviet imperium very similar to Hitler's ambitions for Germany. It amounted in the end to nothing more than a vainglorious political statement intended to demonstrate that the Soviet Union was capable of building (or buying) a navy as good as that of any other major power.<sup>50</sup> Because Stalin's building program was hastily abandoned, the Soviet navy actually fought World War II as a coastal force, supporting the army's flank.

After World War II Stalin threw naval planning into reverse; instead of returning to his obsession with size, he reined the navy in. In 1948 he said the Soviet Union had no need "to protect ocean lines of communications. . . . We need to guard the shores and coastal shipping"; in 1950 he criticized naval officers for "blindly copying the Americans and the English. . . . We are not thinking about conducting ocean battles, but will fight close to our shores."<sup>51</sup> Effectively, whatever large ships were available would dilute the navy's dependence on submarines and flotillas of small craft. Nonetheless, the latter would remain the backbone of the navy, continuing to operate from fortified coastal bases defended by artillery, mines, naval infantry, and fighter aircraft. The large ships would not operate oceanically but at a "tactically favorable distance" to retain command of the sea in specific areas to deny the enemy its strategic objectives.<sup>52</sup> The overall implication was that the flotilla forces needed to be supplemented by heavier squadron forces if the strategically defensive but tactically offensive concept known as "active defense" was to be realized.<sup>53</sup>

While Nikita Khrushchev, now the Soviet leader, implemented a massive submarine building program starting in 1956, his political weakness (which led to his eventual fall from power in 1964) meant that sufficient elements of the Soviet School fleet-in-being concept remained to pave the way for the gradual construction of a fleet capable of more than sea denial.<sup>54</sup> But it was to be a fleet that was built around the army's territorially inspired doctrine of "deeply echeloned zones of defense," with three zones—near, far, and open-ocean—that theoretically extended to the coasts of the Soviet Union's potential enemies.<sup>55</sup>

## CHINESE GUERRILLA WARFARE GOES TO SEA

The Chinese navy that emerged following the communist triumph in 1949 had much in common with that of the Soviets. Chinese naval developments in the 1950s were circumscribed by economic constraints similar to those experienced by the Soviets in the 1920s and '30s. As its formal title made clear, the People's Liberation Army Navy was subordinate to the army, as in the Soviet model. Geographically and ideologically, both China and the USSR were continental powers, and both regimes advocated revolutionary war.<sup>56</sup> Yet the notion that the Chinese navy was essentially a replica of its Soviet counterpart obscures important home-grown influences.

Chinese strategists clearly possessed their own intellectual agency. Mao Zedong, after all, was a towering military theorist in his own right, and his pervasive influence reached naval affairs. The similarities between Mao's strategic thought and that of the Soviet Young School may have made some of the imported Soviet naval concepts more digestible. But it seems unlikely that the Chinese would have unquestioningly privileged foreign ideas over their own thinking.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Chinese combat experiences at sea in the 1950s and 1960s produced enduring lessons that were peculiar to China's local circumstances. Similarly, doctrinal developments and force modernization were products of thoughtful integration of domestic and foreign ideas. The Chinese were by no means unthinking automatons who borrowed slavishly from their Soviet patrons.

### *Glorious History*

The Chinese navy's operational history, while sparse, has played an important role in forming the service's identity. Official accounts portray the navy's early combat experiences as defining moments. The historiography shows how the PLAN beat the odds, prevailing against technologically and materially superior adversaries. After the communists won the Chinese civil war, the new regime in Beijing faced a grave security situation at sea. The Nationalists (Kuomintang, or KMT) were now on Taiwan but still controlled the littorals and occupied numerous strategically located offshore islands. KMT naval units prowled the mainland shores, harassing shipping and disrupting coastal communications. Despite resource constraints, the Chinese navy improvised and made do with the woefully equipped forces at hand. The PLAN helped dislodge the Nationalists from key islands while putting a stop to the KMT's ability to act with impunity at sea. Guerilla thinking, in fact, served the PLAN well during its early years, and Soviet Young School ideas fitted in easily.<sup>58</sup>

The first objective was the Wanshan Islands, which lay astride critical sea lines of communications at the mouth of the Pearl River, the epicenter of maritime commerce in southern China. In May 1950, the Central Military Commission

directed local commanders to “use the small to strike the big and conduct close-in attack and night attack to bring into full play our forte.”<sup>59</sup> In the first sea battle of the People’s Republic, Chinese small craft snuck into the main harbor of the offshore islands at night and ambushed an enemy flotilla at anchor. In the ensuing melee the communists sank a number of vessels, causing confusion and chaos among the surprised Nationalists. In the most important and dramatic encounter of the attack, a twenty-eight-ton patrol boat severely damaged the 1,200-ton KMT flagship. The communists managed to pull off a major upset, opening the way for taking the islands.

China turned next to the Nationalist-occupied Yijiangshan Islands off the Zhejiang coast. Prior to launching the famous 1955 Yijiangshan campaign, dur-

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ing which the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) successfully conducted its first joint amphibious operation, Chinese forces sought to wrest control of the air and seas from the

KMT. To clear the approaches to Yijiangshan, the communists had to neutralize enemy naval forces, particularly the corvette *Taiping*, patrolling nearby around Dachen Island. The PLAN secretly dispatched four torpedo boats—using larger ships to screen their movement—to forward staging areas, where they awaited orders for a surprise attack. In the meantime, aerial bombardment against Dachen attempted to distract the KMT defenders. When *Taiping* was detected on the night of 14 November 1954, shore-based radar guided the twenty-ton torpedo boats to their 1,430-ton target. The hit-and-run torpedo attack sank the much larger warship, tilting control of the local waters toward the communists.

The struggle against the Nationalists culminated in a series of sea battles in 1965. On 6 August six torpedo boats and four fast patrol craft from the PLAN’s South Sea Fleet sprang a surprise on the 1,250-ton *Jianmen* and the 450-ton *Zhangjiang* off the waters of Dongshan Island, near the Fujian–Guangdong provincial border. The night attack sank both vessels, killing 170 men, including a rear admiral, and capturing thirty-three others. The “86 Sea Battle” remains a celebrated and carefully studied victory in the Chinese navy. Three months later, six torpedo boats and six fast patrol craft engaged in another night battle, this time against the KMT’s 945-ton *Yongchang* and 903-ton *Yongtai* just east of Quanzhou, Fujian. After a fierce exchange, a severely damaged *Yongtai* fled the scene, and *Yongchang* sank from two torpedo hits and follow-on gunfire.<sup>60</sup>

These early victories became integral parts of the PLAN’s institutional memory. They resonate to this day. The Chinese navy’s handbook for officers and enlisted, for example, recounts these feats in a section entitled the “Glorious

History of the Navy.”<sup>61</sup> Such a historical narrative conveys the service’s tradition of resourcefulness in the face of adversity. It illustrates the importance of offensive spirit, stratagem, and surprise at sea. It casts China in the role of David against the Nationalist Goliath. Chinese campaign histories go to great lengths to show how the Nationalist ships vastly exceeded the PLAN’s in displacement. But it also sends the message that China must still prepare for conflicts involving superior adversaries. The problem of overcoming the power asymmetry between weaker and stronger sides is as relevant today as it was six decades ago; it is as relevant for China then and now as it was for France in the late nineteenth century and for Russia after the revolution.

Perhaps more importantly, the navy’s formative experiences highlight the influence of the war-fighting traditions of the People’s Liberation Army, forged in the brutal, decades-long civil war. The hit-and-run attacks that featured so prominently at sea have their antecedents in Mao Zedong’s guerilla warfare. For example, writing in *Military History*, a bimonthly journal of the Academy of Military Science, Zhou Lingui praises the nascent Chinese navy for transposing guerilla tactics to the maritime domain. “At the time,” Zhou observes, “the vast majority of the naval troops and officers originated from the army, boasting rich operational experiences on land. Consciously or unconsciously, they applied those valuable lessons from guerilla warfare on land to combat at sea.”<sup>62</sup> The authors of a study extolling the continuing relevance of Mao’s military theories in the twenty-first century credit the chairman for inspiring the early naval actions of the 1950s and ’60s. Mao’s people’s war concept, they contend, helped “create such tactics as rely on islands and shores, close-in fighting and night fighting, sea-air coordination, shore-ship coordination, near seas annihilation, and small boats fighting large ships.”<sup>63</sup>

### *Sabotage Warfare at Sea*

The pressing Nationalist threat in the first half of the 1950s compelled the PLAN to take action. The operational principles behind the engagements at sea were largely implicit. Formal operational guidance did not emerge until the mid-1950s. Practice had to come before theory. At length, in March 1956, the Central Military Commission issued military strategic guidance under the rubric of “active defense, defend the motherland.” “Active defense,” a concept that Mao developed and refined in the 1930s, called for the employment of offensive operations and tactics to achieve strategically defensive goals. The navy’s role was to support the army and the air force against the enemy on land. Under active defense, the PLAN’s missions were to

conduct joint counter landing operations with ground and air forces; wreck the enemy’s sea lines of communications, severing the supply of materiel and manpower;

weaken and annihilate the enemy's seaborne transport tools and combat vessels; jointly operate with ground forces in contests over key points and locations along the coast; guarantee the security of our coastal base system and strategic locations; support ground forces in littoral flanking operations; act in concert with ground forces to recover offshore islands and all territories.<sup>64</sup>

In 1957, Admiral Xiao Jinguang, the first commander of the PLAN (1950–79), more systematically developed operational guidance for the Chinese navy. Xiao, a Long March veteran and a corps commander of the Fourth Field Army during the Chinese civil war, was an army officer, with no training or background in naval affairs. He and many of his comrades had to adapt quickly to an entirely new operational domain in which China's adversaries, the Nationalists aided by the United States, seemed to hold an upper hand. It was therefore not surprising that Xiao applied what he knew best to his new task of leading the PLAN.

After consulting Mao Zedong's military writings from the 1920s and 1930s and those of Soviet experts, Xiao articulated the operational concept of "sabotage warfare at sea" (海上破袭战). Confronted with better-armed enemies, he understood that China was in no position to fight them head-on. Drawing on his own battlefield experiences, the admiral reasoned that inferior Chinese forces had to "use suddenness and sabotage and guerilla tactics to unceasingly attack and destroy the enemy, accumulate small victories in place of big wins, fully leverage and bring into play our advantageous conditions, exploit and create unfavorable conditions for the enemy, and implement protracted war."<sup>65</sup> Mao would have instantly recognized these ideas as his own.

Four key features characterized Xiao's sabotage warfare at sea. First, it called for the use of all available weaponry to deliver all possible types of attacks against the enemy. Second, it emphasized covert action and sudden surprise attacks to overpower unsuspecting or unprepared adversaries, so as to seize the initiative. Third, it required offensive campaigns and tactics to assault unceasingly the effective strength of the enemy. Fourth, it demanded the agile use of troops and combat styles to preserve one's own forces while annihilating the opponent. Xiao essentially codified what his forces had practiced out of sheer necessity in previous years. In contrast to a "naval strategy" as such, seeking to align available means with larger political aims, the admiral furnished a concept that was largely operational and tactical in nature. Xiao, in essence, identified methods for winning battles.

Surprise, deception, unorthodox methods, offensive spirit, and small incremental victories were essential to Xiao's conception of naval battle. According to the PLAN's encyclopedia, sabotage warfare at sea involved

offensive operations at sea in which naval forces employ destructive and surprise attacks against the enemy. It is also known as guerrilla warfare or irregular warfare at

sea. It is a combat style that relies on small groups of naval forces to carry out covert surprise attacks. . . . To achieve the operational objectives, it uses unconventional combat methods to attack the enemy's critical targets. In coordination with conventional operations on the strategic and campaign levels, it seeks to annihilate, weaken, deplete, tire out, and divide the enemy in order to pin down the enemy or throw into confusion the enemy's deployment of forces.<sup>66</sup>

Opportunism suffused the concept. Sabotage warfare at sea sought to exploit China's complex maritime geography, notably the convoluted eighteen-thousand-kilometer (eleven-thousand-mile) coastline and the offshore islands that dot the approaches to the mainland. Chinese naval forces could use the shorelines and islands to disperse and hide, to await orders, to deploy and redeploy, to launch and coordinate attacks, and to operate under the cover of shore-based artillery and naval aviation.<sup>67</sup> The intended targets of such sabotage were vulnerable transport vessels, isolated warships, and poorly defended naval bases and ports. The specific tactics to destroy such military objects included rapid raids with high-speed vessels and aircraft, minelaying, hunter-killer submarine operations, and sneak attacks after infiltration of enemy ports. In keeping with Mao's people's war, conventional forces would be supported by fishermen and the coastal population.

Xiao's operational concept provided an important organizing principle around which the Chinese navy could employ tactics and develop weaponry. To Zuo Liping of the Naval Military Studies Research Institute, sabotage warfare at sea was "a type of innovation in military theory." "The navy," Zuo claims, "not only combined research with actual combat experience, but it also provided a naval theory with Chinese characteristics. The development of sabotage warfare at sea as operational guidance represented a type of naval thought that was highly strategic and comprehensive."<sup>68</sup> Note that Zuo describes the theory as an operational framework rather than a strategic one. It is important to reemphasize, therefore, that Xiao offered a tactical solution for the weaker side at sea. But his approach left largely unanswered how the navy would serve China's foreign-policy and longer-term strategic objectives.

While China's own theorizing and its hard-won lessons at sea informed the PLAN's operational doctrine, a major source of early communist naval thinking was undoubtedly the Soviet Union. In August 1950, Admiral Xiao convened the first navy conference to discuss the future development and direction of the PLAN. To Xiao, ideological kinship as well as access to technology and know-how made the Soviet navy a logical, politically correct partner. As he later observed, "Especially for our navy, which was starting from scratch, it was no good to lean on our own experiences and to grope about by ourselves. Only by learning well and borrowing from others' advanced experiences could we quickly

build up a powerful navy that was modern and conventional.”<sup>69</sup> Attesting to the importance attached to cooperation with the Soviet Union, Xiao in April 1952 led the first delegation to Moscow to negotiate the purchase of naval weaponry. After several rounds of talks, the two sides agreed to a major transfer of warships and submarines in June 1953. In the meantime, Soviet consultants and experts rotated through the Dalian Naval Academy. Between 1949 and 1960, nearly 3,400 advisers visited the PLAN.

Even so, Xiao’s memoir acknowledges that considerable debate divided his subordinates over the initial decision to depend on the Soviets. On one side, former Nationalist naval officers who had defected to the communists during the civil war argued that access to Western, particularly British and American, technologies should not be written off. On the other side, doctrinaire adherents of people’s war contended that they had more to learn from their own civil-war experiences than from foreign powers. The resistance to Soviet technology and naval ideas came from continentalist cadres who favored strong land forces and whose faith in Mao’s people’s war doctrine was almost mystical. The argument in China thus bore noticeable similarities to the debate that had raged between the Old and Young Schools in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. The Chinese continentalists, like the Soviet political leaders before them, applied their mindset to naval affairs.

Xiao himself opposed blind adoption of all things Soviet. He insisted that the Chinese navy had to be selective, rejecting Soviet ways that were unsuited to China’s unique, local conditions. To him it was plain that the PLAN could draw technological and institutional lessons from the Soviets. But it was imperative for the service to stick to its own traditions on such important matters as political indoctrination.

*“Naval Aviation, Submarines, Fast Attack Craft”*

Xiao’s landmark meeting in August 1950 produced a lasting effect on the Chinese navy’s force structure. The nation’s dismal economic, industrial, and technological conditions limited the navy’s ambitions and options, as had been the case for the navies of France and the Soviet Union. Analogously, the PLAN clearly could not stand up to the modern navies of the West on a symmetrical basis. Also, the immediate Nationalist danger, much closer to home, dictated the scope of naval modernization. In summarizing the findings of the conference, Xiao concluded, “With an eye toward long-term development and departing from the current situation, we will build light combat power at sea that is modern and offensive in nature. We need to first organize and develop our current capabilities and, on the foundation of those current capabilities, develop torpedo boats, submarines, and naval aviation to gradually build a strong, national navy.”<sup>70</sup>

Xiao's call for surface, undersea, and air forces reflected an early appreciation of the character of naval warfare. "Modern sea battle," he declared in 1950, "is necessarily a kind of three-dimensional war and is a kind of composite war. We must use the aircraft above the waves, the warships on the sea's surface, the submarines in the water, and artillery along the coast to form a synergy of integrated power. In war, the lack of any one of those capabilities could well spell disaster."<sup>71</sup> The offshore engagements of the 1950s and 1960s amply validated the importance of mutual support between surface forces and shore-based weaponry. Xiao's directive—commonly known as "*kong* [空], *qian* [潜], *kuai* [快]," Chinese shorthand for "naval aviation, submarines, fast attack craft"—set the course for the PLAN's buildup over the next two decades.

Initially, torpedo boats were imported from the Soviet Union or constructed in Chinese shipyards from Soviet designs and parts. In the 1960s, local industry began to deliver more ship types, also of Soviet origin. Frigates, submarine chasers, minesweepers, guided-missile fast attack craft, torpedo boats, patrol boats, diesel-electric submarines, and shore-based tactical bombers joined the fleet. The PLAN fielded large numbers of small craft and submarines, particularly the Type 021 Huangfeng guided-missile boats and the Type 033 Romeo-class submarines, while slighting larger surface combatants and naval aviation. These added capabilities constituted the light naval force that Xiao set forth in 1950. They were well suited for coastal combat marked by speed, concealment, mobility, and offensive punch.

#### *From the Lost Years to "Near-Seas Defense"*

The Chinese navy's early operational history, the doctrine of sabotage warfare at sea, and the buildup that began in the 1950s produced legacies that proved stubbornly resistant to change. Moreover, external shocks and strategic decisions helped entrench the status quo. For one thing, the chaos of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s severely disrupted the modernization process. For another, Mao's determination to pursue an undersea nuclear deterrent strained resources while diverting attention from conventional forces. China thus struggled to remake its light, coastal-force posture.

Despite some important developments for the Chinese navy in the 1970s, including the introduction of the Type 051 Luda-class guided-missile destroyer and the Type 091 Han-class nuclear attack submarine, obsolescent platforms composed the bulk of the navy. The naval service overproduced outdated ships and submarines and neglected new research and development projects. Single-mission platforms that lacked organic self-defense weapons and nonexistent coordination between combat arms hobbled the PLAN. The limited range of shore-based airpower, on which surface units depended for protection against air

and submarine threats, confined naval operations to two hundred nautical miles from mainland shores.<sup>72</sup> In short, the Chinese navy lacked the ability to wage the type of “three-dimensional war” that Xiao had envisioned two decades before. Worse, the problems would persist for decades.

Naval doctrine too was stuck in the past. In the 1960s, ’70s, and early ’80s little had changed since the 1950s. According to Shi Xiaoqin, a naval analyst at the Academy of Military Science,

the main mission was to exploit the risks inherent to transiting straits to delay, to the extent possible, the initial offensives of the enemy’s navy. Once the delaying phase ended, there would be a transition to positional defensive warfare for holding actions along the coast together with guerilla warfare at sea in the enemy’s rear. [These operations] all emphasized reliance on islands and shores, set-piece battlefields, and reliance on support from all types of shore-based weaponry and firepower in order to bring about bastion defense. Surprise attacks against the enemy’s rear communications constituted the main form of guerilla warfare at sea.<sup>73</sup>

Outmoded doctrine and bloated force structure reinforced each other, in a vicious cycle. This state of affairs would persist until Admiral Liu Huaqing became the PLAN’s commander (1982–87). Much has already been written in the West about Liu’s central role in advancing the concept of “near-seas defense” (or “off-shore defense”), and no reprise of the existing literature will be attempted here.<sup>74</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the near-seas defense strategy remains the bedrock for the Chinese navy. It is therefore an important concept, one that bridges the PLAN’s doctrinal past, present, and future. The PLAN encyclopedia states,

[Near-seas defense involves] the combined use of all kinds of methods to exercise the overall effects of maritime power to preserve oneself to the maximum extent while unceasingly exhausting and annihilating the attacking enemy. It requires a sufficient grasp of mobile combat capabilities to search and destroy the enemy, gradually shift the power balance, change the strategic situation, and thereby appropriately time the transition to the strategic counter offensive and attack.<sup>75</sup>

The concept of near-seas defense articulated a long-term, regionally oriented strategy that enlarged China’s maritime defense perimeter, extending the Chinese navy’s area of operations much farther from mainland shores in a series of echelons in a manner that reflected earlier Soviet thinking. Instead of fighting the enemy in China’s coastal waters, the PLAN aimed to keep the opponent at arm’s length while shielding from attack important political and economic centers on the seaboard. In contrast to sabotage warfare at sea, which sought to tie up or slow down enemy forces, near-seas defense would defeat and roll back the enemy offensive. Instead of pinpricks and hit-and-run attacks with small forces, more-substantial and organized formations would be involved in naval engagements.

In contrast to its previous subordination to the army and role as an adjunct to land operations, the navy would enjoy greater scope for action as an independent, strategic service.

Yet the strategy did not grow out of a vacuum. It was (and remains) anchored in long-standing strategic principles. For example, Liu insisted that near-seas defense conformed to the strategic guidance of active defense. It would employ offensive means for strategically defensive goals, including such core interests as national unity, territorial integrity, and maritime rights. At the same time, near-seas defense continues to assume that China will fight from a position of material weakness. To close the gap in naval power, offensive action would be employed aggressively to grind down the enemy. Over time, an accumulation of such attacks would shift the naval balance, perhaps decisively, in China's favor, affording the PLAN the opportunity to go on the offensive. The sequence of events parallels the famous three phases in Mao's protracted-war concept that envisioned a similar reversal of fortunes between the enemy and the communists.

Moreover, sabotage warfare was not abandoned outright. Rather, it was subsumed into the new, larger strategic concept. In a retrospective of China's naval strategy during the era of "paramount leader" Deng Xiaoping, Liu Zhongmin of the Ocean University of China explicitly points to positional, mobile, and guerilla warfare in tracing the lineage of near-seas defense back to Mao's revolutionary era.<sup>76</sup> To Liu, the strategy closely links naval operations farther from shore to combat on land and near the coastline, tethering the navy to homeland defense. With more symmetrical, conventional forces operating at the outer limits of China's maritime defense perimeter, sabotage warfare would presumably play a subsidiary but no less important role in rear areas close to shore.

## ECHOES OF THE PAST

Chinese analysts continue to look back to their strategic traditions for guidance about future wars at sea. Quan Jinfu and Chen Ming, two professors from China's Naval Command College, call on the PLAN to prepare for "naval strategic operations," which they define as "operations employing naval power to fulfill objectives of the war at sea that greatly influence the war as a whole." To them, naval combat would assume such familiar forms as mobile warfare at sea, positional warfare at sea, and sabotage guerilla warfare at sea, concepts drawn directly from Mao's writings.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Wang Zheng at the Chinese National Defense University argues that future wars under "informatized conditions" would use methods that would have been familiar to guerilla fighters in the 1930s. Wang declares that the People's Liberation Army must seek to "trap the enemy in the vast seas of people's war with special operations, sabotage warfare, and guerilla warfare at sea using high-technology weapons deep behind enemy lines."<sup>78</sup>

Admiral Xiao's early emphasis on aircraft, submarines, and fast attack craft is still visible in the force structures of the PLAN and its sister services. Between 2000 and 2012, China's fleet of attack submarines increased eightfold, from five boats to forty.<sup>79</sup> This modern undersea force can launch antiship cruise missiles (ASCMs) while submerged, posing a potent threat to surface forces. Assuming that the likely course of an oncoming enemy fleet could be anticipated, these

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*An alternative school of naval thought, one rooted in coastal defense, follows an asymmetric path intended to enable the weak to take down the strong.*

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submarines would transit to firing positions in advance and wait for the right time to spring an ambush. With the aid of off-board sensors and targeting systems, dispersed

PLAN submarines could fire coordinated, multivector missile salvos to surprise the adversary at a distance.<sup>80</sup>

The analogue to the PLAN's light torpedo forces of the 1950s is the large fleet of Type 022 Houbei fast attack craft. According to Nan Li of the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, "The Type 022 . . . represents a continuation of the PLAN's historical ethos as a successful, small-ship navy that is able to take on adversaries with potentially more substantial deployments."<sup>81</sup> Armed with long-range antiship cruise missiles, these wave-piercing catamarans pack a punch.<sup>82</sup> The stealthy hull structure, high speed, and small size of the Houbeis make them ideal platforms for evading enemies and launching surprise attacks in offshore waters. With at least sixty boats in service, the PLAN may be well positioned to launch coordinated saturation missile volleys to overpower fleet defenses.<sup>83</sup> The Type 022s could form wolf packs to conduct the hit-and-run tactics envisioned in sabotage warfare at sea.

Notably, Chinese analysts continue to extol the value of the submarine and fast attack craft as maritime guerilla forces. An extensive study on the twenty-first-century relevance of fast attack craft envisions large numbers of small modern combatants in the near seas providing support to the larger surface fleet operating in the far seas.<sup>84</sup> Three analysts from the Navy Engineering College propose "maritime swarming warfare" in future wars at sea, a concept that would fit very well with the Type 022. Surprise attacks, ambushes, concealment, and deception would characterize swarming tactics.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, two researchers at the Naval Command College have invoked "guerilla warfare tactics" on numerous occasions to illustrate how modern attack submarines could engage carrier strike groups.<sup>86</sup>

China's land-based air and missile forces can potentially influence events at sea independently or in conjunction with Chinese surface and undersea forces. The PLAN's air arm fields shore-based fixed-wing aircraft that could fire ASCMs. Notably, the Su-30MKK multirole fighter and the H-6 medium-range bomber

can threaten surface ships cruising well east of the “first island chain” (running generally from Kamchatka through Japan, the Ryukyus, and the northern Philippines to Borneo). Massed formations of such maritime strike aircraft armed with long-range ASCMs could conceivably deliver concentrated blows to overwhelm enemy fleet defenses.

The antiship ballistic missile (ASBM)—a maneuverable ballistic weapon capable of hitting moving targets at sea—of the Second Artillery Corps, China’s strategic missile force, is perhaps the ultimate technical expression of shore-based firepower. With a range reportedly exceeding eight hundred nautical miles, the truck-mounted missile joins an extended family of ship-killing missiles that can be fired from submarines, ships, and aircraft. Whether it will perform as advertised has been a subject of intense debate, but its existence is an unmistakable sign that the Chinese are seeking to hold at risk an enemy’s surface fleet with as many maritime strike options as possible.

A hypothetical Sino-U.S. war at sea perhaps best illustrates how the sabotage warfare of the 1950s might still take place in the twenty-first century. Tactically, China would seek to engage and interdict American naval forces at the maximum effective ranges that its weaponry would permit. Antiship ballistic missiles and long-range aircraft could deliver the first blows: ASBM raids and massed formations of maritime strike aircraft armed with long-range ASCMs could conceivably punch through a U.S. fleet’s defenses. Such shore-based firepower allows China to deliver ordnance on an American carrier strike group directly from the mainland well before it could get close enough to shore to retaliate in kind with its combat aircraft. As the U.S. fleet approached the Chinese seaboard it would then encounter lurking ASCM-armed submarines, stealthy fast attack craft, and other units armed with shorter-range missiles. Resistance would become stiffest and deadliest in this inner ring of China’s defense, where sabotage warfare involving high-tech guerilla tactics would most likely be employed.

## DISCERNING CHANGE AND CONTINUITY

Yet there is no denying that change is afoot. The PLA Navy has grown rapidly from a coastal-defense force composed of largely obsolescent Soviet-era technologies into a modern naval service. Over the past two decades, multiple classes of China’s major surface combatants—notably the Type 052D Luyang III destroyer, the Type 054A Jiangkai II frigate, and the Type 056 Jiangdao corvette—have entered serial production, adding mass and balance to the fleet. The buildup of such warships has accelerated since 2008. China’s first aircraft carrier, *Liaoning*, joined the fleet in 2012. Only twenty years have elapsed since China began to construct and import modern frontline fighting ships. This is an impressive feat by any standard.

At the same time, the PLAN appears to be pursuing an even more outward-looking naval strategy. While the most recent defense white papers insist that the Chinese navy's primary task remains near-seas defense, the 2009 and 2011 editions explicitly acknowledge the need for the PLAN to operate in the "far seas." The 2013 report calls on the Chinese navy to "enhance far seas mobile operations." While the geographic scope of the far seas has been subject to varying interpretations, actual Chinese naval operations in recent years suggest that the term likely encompasses "a vast area that stretches from the northwest Pacific to the east Indian Ocean."<sup>87</sup> It has become commonplace for Chinese naval flotillas to sail through the narrow seas of the Ryukyu island chain and cruise in the open waters of the western Pacific. The PLAN has also dispatched naval escorts on antipiracy missions in the Gulf of Aden on an uninterrupted basis since December 2008.

The Chinese navy is thus at once posturing itself to conduct defense-in-depth operations to protect the homeland from seaborne attack and moving toward a more expeditionary, blue-water force. The Janus-faced character of Chinese naval power at present suggests that critical decisions loom in the future. As Shi Xiaoqin persuasively argues, the Chinese navy will soon have to reassess both its strategic thinking and its force structure. Whether sabotage warfare at sea should give way to symmetrical naval engagements and whether a carrier-centered fleet should replace a submarine-oriented one are questions of growing urgency for the PLAN. "Clearly," Shi concludes, "the Chinese navy stands at a crossroad."<sup>88</sup>

If Shi is right, the PLAN's force structure, strategy, and institutional identity could follow any of several distinct pathways. First, China could, over time, construct a navy that resembles the Anglo-American model of sea power. In this case, the PLAN would gradually shed its small-ship ethos and capabilities. Second, China could continue to focus on force modernization and doctrinal development aimed at keeping hostile powers out of its backyard. Expeditionary forces would be subordinated to this primary defensive task, while conducting lesser included missions in distant waters during peacetime. Third, a two-tiered force could coexist, perhaps uneasily, within the PLAN, though whether China could afford or sustain a navy along two parallel tracks remains to be seen. As the Chinese navy evolves in the coming years, it will have to grapple with these fundamental choices on force structure and naval thought.

The purpose here is not to predict what the precise outcome will be. The foregoing analysis suggests that past may well be prologue. China's formative experiences and guerilla ethos appear quite durable and applicable in the twenty-first century. At the very least, China's concept of sabotage warfare at sea provides a baseline by which to measure the degree of continuity and change in future Chinese naval strategy. At the same time, the evolution of various incarnations of

the Young School impulse in the West points to a universal logic with respect to the naval strategy of the weaker side. Owing to asymmetries in sea power, China would have likely gravitated to Xiao's war-fighting doctrines even in the absence of Soviet and Maoist influences. It is also worth acknowledging that China's naval future will not likely follow in lockstep the French and Soviet experiences—the political and economic conditions that shaped naval thought in France, the Soviet Union, and China were too different, notwithstanding clear similarities. The impressive trajectory of China's comprehensive national power could furnish Beijing options comparable in ambitiousness to the Anglo-American model of sea power, options of which French and Soviet strategists could only have dreamed.

Despite these uncertainties, what is clear is that this alternative school of thought stands quite apart from the British and American ways of naval warfare. From its very first days, it has emphasized technological innovation, pursuit of new operational methods, deception, camouflage, joint operations transcending the land-sea divide, assaults on rear areas and lines of communications, and guerrilla methods. It is a view of the sea that is essentially territorial and consequently alien to the Anglo-American understanding of naval warfare. The Chinese thus likely think differently from adherents of the Anglo-American tradition about naval strategy and will likely fight differently at sea. Whereas French and Soviet naval thought emerged as a response to austerity and then faded, in Chinese hands the alternative approach to naval warfare has continued, and the innovation and technology it demands have been fully funded. It thus behooves Western policy makers and strategists to keep a steady eye on China's turn to the seas.

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#### NOTES

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5. David H. Olivier, “Two Sides of the Same Coin: German and French Maritime Strategies in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *Commerce Raiding: Historical Case Studies, 1755–2009*, ed. Bruce A. Elleman and S. C. M. Paine, Newport Paper 40 (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 2013), p. 93; Theodore Ropp, *The Development of a Modern Navy: French Naval Policy 1871–1904*, ed. Stephen S. Roberts (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1987), pp. 19–22; Røksund, *Jeune École*, pp. 1–3.
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10. The crucial difference was that the Imperial German Navy did not seek to undermine Britain’s economy and induce social unrest but to inflict physical damage on its war effort. David H. Olivier, *German Naval Strategy, 1856–1888: Forerunners to Tirpitz* (2004; repr. London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 131–32.
11. M. Gabriel Charmes, *Naval Reform*, trans. J. E. Gordon-Cuming (London: W. H. Allen, 1887), pp. iv–v, xiii.
12. Paul Halpern, “The French Navy, 1880–1914,” in *Technology and Naval Combat in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*, ed. Phillips Payson O’Brien (London: Frank Cass, 2001), p. 37; Ropp, *Development of a Modern Navy*, pp. 112–16.
13. Charmes, *Naval Reform*, p. 28.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 68, 70. Also Halpern, “French Navy,” p. 39.
15. Ropp, *Development of a Modern Navy*, pp. 159–60. Røksund, *Jeune École*, pp. 64, 67, argues that Ropp misrepresented the outcome of the exercise and that the efficacy of the torpedo boat was never questioned.
16. Røksund, *Jeune École*, p. xi.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 97, 254–55.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 104–105.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 107–108, 117.
20. Lanessan founded the Entente Cordiale Society in 1897, paving the way for the accord. Ropp, *Development of a Modern Navy*, pp. 324, 328; Halpern, *Mediterranean Naval Situation*, pp. 47–49, 50–51.
21. Halpern, *Mediterranean Naval Situation*, p. 48; Olivier, “Two Sides of the Same Coin,” pp. 99–100.
22. See the vigorous defense in Erik Dahl, “Net-centric before Its Time: The Jeune École and Its Lessons for Today,” *Naval War College Review* 58, no. 4 (Autumn 2005), pp. 110, 112, 119–25.
23. Røksund, *Jeune École*, p. xiv.
24. Ropp, *Development of a Modern Navy*, p. 215, a view echoed by Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 70. Olivier, “Two Sides of the Same Coin,” p. 80, goes farther, calling it an “entirely new philosophy of war at sea.”
25. Geoffrey Till, *Maritime Strategy and the Nuclear Age*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984), p. 37. Also Nicholas A. Lambert, “Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Concept of Flotilla Defence, 1904–9,” in *Technology and Naval Combat*, ed. O’Brien, pp. 75–80.
26. Nicholas A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1999), p. 117.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
28. Lambert, “Concept of Flotilla Defence,” p. 82.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
30. Lambert, *Naval Revolution*, p. 121. This comment is somewhat dismissive of Aube.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 122, 125; Charles H. Fairbanks, Jr., “The Origins of the Dreadnought Revolution: A Historiographical Essay,” *International History Review* 13, no. 2 (May 1991), pp. 265–66.

32. Lambert, *Naval Revolution*, p. 124.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 162–63. The italics are Fisher's and entirely characteristic of his emphatic style.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 176, 182. Also Till, *Seapower*, p. 71.
35. The argument that if the *Jeune École* extolled the advantages of technology somewhat excessively, it was nonetheless ahead of its time has been advanced by a number of authors. For a summary see Dahl, "Net-centric before Its Time," esp. pp. 110, 124–25.
36. Till, *Seapower*, pp. 73, 206.
37. Robert Waring Herrick, *Soviet Naval Strategy* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1968), pp. 21–22; Jürgen Rohwer and Mikhail Monakov, "The Soviet Union's Ocean-Going Fleet, 1935–1956," *International History Review* 18, no. 4 (November 1996), p. 838.
38. Andrei A. Kokoshin, *Soviet Strategic Thought, 1917–91* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), p. 78; Robert Waring Herrick, "Roles and Missions of the Soviet Navy," in *The Soviet and Other Communist Navies*, ed. James L. George (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1986), pp. 16–17.
39. Robert Waring Herrick, *Soviet Naval Theory and Policy* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988), p. 50; Rohwer and Monakov, "Soviet Union's Ocean-Going Fleet," pp. 841–42.
40. D. Fedetoff White, "Soviet Naval Doctrine," *RUSI Journal* (August 1935), pp. 608–609; Herrick, "Roles and Missions," pp. 16–17; Rohwer and Monakov, "Soviet Union's Ocean-Going Fleet," p. 845.
41. Kokoshin, *Soviet Strategic Thought*, p. 26; Herrick, *Soviet Naval Strategy*, pp. 19, 21.
42. Herrick, "Roles and Missions," pp. 9–10.
43. Quoted in Herrick, *Soviet Naval Theory and Policy*, p. 12. See also S. G. Gorshkov, *The Sea Power of the State* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1976), p. 135. The parallels between this and the Red Army's thinking in the 1920s about maneuver warfare under Triandafillov and Tukhachevsky are striking; Rohwer and Monakov, "Soviet Union's Ocean-Going Fleet," p. 841.
44. Tobias R. Philbin III, *The Lure of Neptune: German-Soviet Naval Collaboration and Ambitions, 1919–1941* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1994), p. 24.
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47. Herrick, *Soviet Naval Theory and Policy*, pp. 57–59; Philbin, *Lure of Neptune*, p. 144.
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49. Hauner, "Stalin's Big-Fleet Program," p. 114.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 91, 114; Philbin, *Lure of Neptune*, pp. 35–36, 143.
51. Yegorova, "Stalin's Conception of Maritime Power," pp. 162–63.
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56. David G. Muller, *China as a Maritime Power* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1983), pp. 48, 49–50; Bernard D. Cole, *The Great Wall at Sea*, 2nd ed. (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2010), p. 171.
57. Muller, *China as a Maritime Power*, p. 49, and Cole, *Great Wall at Sea*, pp. 171–72, suggest that the Soviet "Young School" dominated PLAN thinking during this period. Huang, "PLA Navy at War," p. 243, and Till, *Seapower*, p. 73, recognize that the approach was shaped as much by China's circumstances and the desire on the part of some Chinese thinkers to create an alternative maritime strategy.
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