



The modernisation of the Chinese fleet: the
emergence of an instrument of power



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INTRODUCTION

It is a very modern and Western thing to consider time in a linear way. The ancient Greeks considered existence as a perpetual present, or as a cycle, a loop, with each generation repeating the triumphs and defeats of its forebears: thus Cronus slaughtered Ouranos and devoured his children, and Zeus slaughtered Cronos and devoured Metis and the daughter she bore, Athena, in the same movement. The spirit of Asian civilizations is different from ours in that the idea of renewal prevails much more than the idea of permanent progress, which our own societies believe in.

China, at the crossroads of Buddhism and Confucianism, is no exception to this rule, and remembers a past that was, that is no longer, but that could be, again. It honors Zheng He, the great explorer who, in the XVth century, travelled the entire coast of the Indian Ocean at the head of his Treasure Fleet, one hundred years before Vasco de Gama discovered the route to India by braving the Cape of Good Hope. This exceptional adventure, a work of such prestige that it consecrated the greatness of the Ming dynasty in the memory of the whole world, is an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the country's modern leaders. Here are three hundred ships, thirty thousand men, setting out from Nanking, the ancient imperial capital, and making their way to all the great ports of Asia; they stopped at Taipei, at Brunei, visited Java and Ceylon, whose king they subdued; at Calicut, in India, they dazzled the population with fireworks, and made known the power of the Emperor Yongle; they defeat the pirates who terrorize the Straits of Malacca; they proceed to Hormuz, venture into the Red Sea, meet the rulers who rule the lands now called Somalia and Kenya, and return to Nanking to deposit all the treasures and presents they have acquired in the magnificent Porcelain Tower which the Emperor has in the meantime erected. However, it is a characteristic of epics that they shine brightly and then fade away just as suddenly, leaving only a dancing spark in the darkened eye.

Zheng He died on his last voyage, and his body was claimed by the sea that had offered him its glory. The successors of Emperor Yongle lost interest in the world, for China was, after all, the Middle Kingdom, the center of the universe, and its ruler the Son of Heaven. While the Europeans began the Great Explorations and travelled the world's seas, China closed in on itself and ceased to be a naval power for almost five hundred years.

Nietzsche, however, would say that the future belongs to the one whose memory is longest. And Beijing's gaze today oscillates between two directions. On the one hand, the past,



that despised 19th century when British, French and American gunboats landed diplomats with arms full of unjust treaties; the 1940s, during which Japan, once a peripheral state, came to establish its domination over all the territories formerly vassals of the Empire; the Cold War, finally, when the United States demonstrated, once again, that its incomparable power came from controlling the seas. On the other hand, the future: a future in which China regains control of its immediate space, in which nothing and no one threatens its environment, in which, once again, Chinese ships can travel the Zheng He route, receiving gifts, ovations and tributes. And this future is underway, underpinned by Beijing's considerable efforts to make its fleet such an instrument of power that America itself would no longer dare to confront it head-on.



Military innovations and Beijing's strategic objectives

The commissioning of three different combat ships by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) on Saturday 24 April 2021 is both a banal and highly significant event. Banal, because China has embarked on a major naval program that allows it to launch the equivalent of the French fleet every four years, i.e. a tonnage of around 350,000 tons¹, to reach a total of around three hundred and fifty ships². This is significant because a submarine, a cruiser and an amphibious helicopter assault ship have entered service, illustrating Beijing's strategic ambitions and its plans for the future.

As early as the 1980s, thanks to the work of Admiral Liu Huaqing, China realized its geographical situation: most of the nations on the other side of the sea were either allied with or favorable to Washington (South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia, Philippines). Beyond this first belt were the direct American possessions (Guam, Midway, Hawaii). In other words, China was entirely within the reach of US ships and missiles, while the US remained out of reach. The first Chinese efforts were therefore directed, with Soviet assistance, towards the development of submarines, both conventional and nuclear, attack and missile boats. However, their first models suffered from poor acoustics, an essential element for the effectiveness of such a vessel, while their ballistics did not allow them to reach the major American cities from a long distance: to do so, they would have had to get close to Hawaii or California and would have been inevitably detected before being neutralized. Chinese doctrine has evolved to overcome these weaknesses: if these ships could not be invisible, they had to operate from a fortified sanctuary, without fear of detection or retaliation: and what better sanctuary than the deep waters of the South China Sea³? This region has many strategic advantages, and it is easy to understand why the islands in its center, the Spratleys and the Paracels, are the subject of such bitter claims by all the neighboring nations (Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and Taiwan). For China, however, this objective was absolutely central to its strategy of nuclear deterrence, provided

¹GROIZELEAU Vincent, "La Chine consolide sa position de seconde flotte mondiale", Mer et Marine - Toute l'actualité maritime, published on 06 February 2019. URL: <https://www.meretmarine.com/fr/content/la-chine-consolide-sa-position-de-seconde-flotte-mondiale>

²ROMANACCE Thomas, "China now has the largest navy in the world", Capital, published on 04 September 2020. URL: <https://www.capital.fr/economie-politique/la-chine-possede-desormais-la-plus-grande-marine-militaire-au-monde-1379583>

³SHELDON-DUPLAIX Alexandre, "La vertigineuse ascension de la marine chinoise", IRSEM, podcast presented by Alexandre Jubelin, broadcast on 17 November 2020. URL: <https://www.irsem.fr/le-collimateur/la-vertigineuse-ascension-de-la-marine-chinoise-17-11-2020.html>



that it also had long-range missiles capable of travelling more than 12,000 kilometers. This is why, in the 1990s, the Julang 2 program was launched, which has been continued to this day, to give rise to the JL-2 missile, operated from a Jin-class nuclear-powered ballistic missile (SNLE), the characteristics of which, although not yet fully understood, suggest that it has a range of 8,000 or even 10,000 kilometers and can carry, according to some sources, up to eight nuclear warheads⁴.

The other major issue in the China Sea is the control of Taiwan, the island refuge of the former Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek, which still claims to be a Republic of China, but is only described as a "rebel province" by the authorities in Beijing. The island is fiercely defended by the United States: what is at stake for China, in the words of researcher Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix, is to demonstrate that, virtually, it is now in a position to win a new war in the Pacific, and to dissuade any outside intervention should it wish to seize this island by force⁵. Would America be willing to sacrifice tens of billions of dollars in a war with China to protect Taiwan, a war it is no longer certain to win?

It is in this context that the deployment of the amphibious ship Hainan on 25 April takes on its full meaning. As early as 1989, Chinese magazines announced the government's desire to acquire modern assault ships, carrying marine infantry troops capable of "*rapidly conducting landing maneuvers, defending islands and strategic points in the coastal zone, and supporting other military operations*".⁶ The Type 075 Hainan is a helicopter carrier, but unlike the lighter French Mistral, it is heavily armored, capable of operating under fire, and equipped with sufficiently advanced electronics to be described by US officials as "one of the most advanced and powerful ships in the world".⁷ In other words, it is an essential part of a strategy aimed at guaranteeing Chinese domination over the islands in its immediate environment, including in the face of other technologically advanced powers in the region (let's not forget the dispute with Japan over control of the Senkaku Islands).

The last major component of this new Chinese maritime doctrine is none other than the aircraft carrier. Here again, it was Admiral Liu Huaqing who, after his visit to the American

⁴ Missile Defense Project, "JL-2 (Ju Lang-2/CSS-NX-14)" *Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 12, 2016, last modified October 7, 2019. URL: <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/jl-2/>

⁵ SHELDON-DUPLAIX Alexandre, "La vertigineuse ascension de la marine chinoise", op. cit.

⁶ FOUQUOIRE-BRILLET Elisabeth, "La stratégie navale chinoise", Institut Stratégie. URL: http://www.institut-strategie.fr/strat_048_Fouquiere.htm

⁷ LAGNEAU Laurent, "Le même jour, la Chine a mis en service un sous-marin nucléaire, un croiseur et un navire d'assaut amphibie", on opex360.com, published on 26 April 2021. URL: <http://www.opex360.com/2021/04/26/le-meme-jour-la-chine-a-mis-en-service-un-sous-marin-nucleaire-un-croiseur-et-un-navire-dassaut-amphibie/>



Kitty Hawk and the example of the British victory over the Argentinians during the Falklands War, realized the need for his country to acquire such projection vessels. The first model acquired by China, the *Liaoning*, was purchased from Ukraine in 1998, which owned what was a former Soviet *Admiral Kuznetsov-class* aircraft carrier, and, after extensive refurbishment, was recommissioned in 2017. The *Shandong*, China's second aircraft carrier, was the first to be built entirely in domestic shipyards.⁸ But both models suffer from a defect that will be removed from the next MAPL aircraft components: the curved flight deck. At present, aircraft take off with a slightly raised deck, like a springboard, so that they do not need a catapult. Catapulting is a particularly delicate technology that, globally, only the United States and France have mastered at present - and even then! Florence Parly, the French Minister of the Armed Forces, had herself declared that the next French aircraft carrier would be equipped with an American electromagnetic catapult, because its purchase cost, one billion dollars, was still lower than the cost of maintaining an industry capable of maintaining this technology, as France only has one ship using it.⁹ However, the catapult offers a considerable advantage to the ship that uses it, because, by allowing aircraft to save a significant amount of fuel on take-off, it increases their time in the air, and their range of action. In addition, the considerable thrust allows the aircraft to take off carrying a much greater quantity of weapons: the flight deck of an aircraft carrier being very short, a fighter could not take off quickly enough with too much mass. Similarly, the next Chinese models should also have nuclear reactors, again to increase their range at sea, without the need for refuelling. It would seem that the PLA Navy plans to eventually commission six aircraft carriers, a figure that is not at all risky: this is the exact number of aircraft groups that the Americans could assign to a possible conflict in the Pacific, out of their total of eleven, without taking the risk of critically abandoning other strategic spaces in the world's seas.¹⁰

China's overseas footholds

Beyond the strategic issues of direct proximity, China also seeks to protect its interests in other parts of the world. The interesting thing about studying the past is that geography, on the scale of human time, hardly changes: a strategic point in antiquity remains a strategic point in the 21st century, and Zheng He's journey seems to be a clear path for the maritime component

⁸ GROIZELEAU Vincent, " La Chine va mettre sur cale son quatrième porte-avions ", Mer et Marine - Toute l'actualité maritime, published on 13 January 2021.

⁹New generation aircraft carrier, Senate, Information report, 30 April 2021. URL: <http://www.senat.fr/rap/r19-559/r19-5595.html>

¹⁰ SHELDON-DUPLAIX Alexandre, "La vertigineuse ascension de la marine chinoise", op. cit.



of the modern "New Silk Roads" project (*One Road One Belt*). Today, the country is the world's second largest consumer and importer of oil, 80% of which transits by sea. 60% comes from the Persian Gulf, notably from Iran and Saudi Arabia, the rest from its African suppliers in Angola, Sudan and Nigeria. Finally, 85% of these supplies pass through the Strait of Malacca, along with 70% of the country's trade flows¹¹¹². These figures explain the existence of a "*Sea Line of Communications*", which is actually common to several East Asian countries, including Japan and South Korea. It is not by chance that the country is planning a series of deep-water ports stretching from Burma to Djibouti via Sri Lanka, the most famous of all these projects being the port of Gwadar, in Pakistan, linked to China by a huge motorway crossing the whole of the country as far as Tibet (the Karakorum route).

Officially, these ports are intended to accommodate merchant ships, but while it is common to distinguish between civilian and military port facilities, in practice there are many similarities. In both cases, the important thing is to have structures that allow for the handling of cargo, the management of personnel, the deployment of equipment and food, and the technical requirements to maintain the ships.¹³ Thus, although some ships such as aircraft carriers or submarines require dedicated structures, overall, civilian facilities can be used as a support point for military ships: such facilities are called "*Dual Use Logistic Facilities*"¹⁴. Finally, the last point that should be mentioned is the depth of the docks: large warships, like oil tankers and LNG carriers, have a very deep draught of around ten meters. As soon as a port is able to accommodate a *supertanker*, a warship can dock and stay there for several days, while its crew and personnel carry out their duties in hangars and other buildings whose layout can be easily modified. This is why, of the fifteen Chinese support points currently in operation, while only three are actually military or semi-military ports, practically all of them are capable of accommodating at least second-rate ships, and thus of enabling the Chinese navy to carry out its security missions throughout the Indian Ocean.

Strategically, this mode of operation is particularly useful. These dual platforms offer great flexibility in terms of layout, and can be used as operational logistics platforms in the

¹¹ MERIGOT Kevin, "'String of Pearls' and Dual Logistics Bases", *Geostrategica*, CSFRS, 7 February 2019, [online], accessed 30/5/21.

¹² VERON Emmanuel & LINCOT Emmanuel, "Comment la Chine avance ses pions dans le monde indo-malais", on theconversation.com, published on 06 July 2020. URL: <https://theconversation.com/comment-la-chine-avance-ses-pions-dans-le-monde-indo-malais-141574>

¹³ MERIGOT Kevin, "'String of Pearls' and Dual Logistics Bases", *Geostrategica*, CSFRS, 7 February 2019, [online], accessed 30/05/21

¹⁴ Idem.



context of special operations. They are useful for low-intensity combat (piracy, terrorism, etc.) but also for non-combat missions, such as civilian evacuation or the rapid delivery of aid in a humanitarian context¹⁵ . In addition, they have other very significant advantages: they cost considerably less than traditional bases because of their versatility, and they encourage commercial activity in the host country; they are much less threatening to neighboring countries because they do not permanently host armed forces, which is positive from a political point of view; and finally, they allow military operations to be conducted more discreetly than with a fixed base. Networked, they create a flexible and efficient logistical network, which can give the armed forces a significant advantage in an engagement.

¹⁵Idem.



CONCLUSION

It is clear that China, while not overtly warmongering, is preparing for a confrontation with the US. It is aware that, in history, the decline of one power and the emergence of another have almost always resulted in a major war, and that the Americans view with great suspicion Beijing's rise to the rank of global superpower, capable of confronting their interests and objectives head-on. Moreover, it does not ignore the natural antagonism of the two countries which, beyond economic competition, is rooted in ideology (liberalism versus communism), political model (democracy versus dictatorship) and worldview (messianic universalism versus firm non-interference). Finally, the central stumbling block of these differences lies in Taiwan, so coveted by China, so firmly defended by the Americans.

China does not want war, as the development of its nuclear deterrence strategy indicates; but it does not want to depend on the United States for anything: it does not want their presence in the China Sea; it does not want them to ensure the security of the Straits of Malacca; it does not want them to be the only ones to monitor the strategic points of Aden and Hormuz; and above all, it does not want them to get involved in defending Taiwan. It is not in the American perspective of a fleet by sea, of an omnipresence on the seas of the globe: its army is only there to defend its direct interests, and its navy, to ensure the security of its immediate environment.

No one is fooled: quantity is certainly a quality in itself, but six Chinese aircraft carriers are not the same as six American ones, and the same is true for aircraft and submarines. The United States has know-how and experience that China is just beginning to acquire. This is the very reason why China is also focusing its efforts on other instruments, such as the Dongfeng-21 and 26 anti-ship missiles, which are designed to be "carrier killers". However, it is reaching milestones that Western staffs did not believe it could achieve, and this is a fact to be taken into account: will China's next technological advancements put it on an equal footing with the US military?