

The Implications of China's Growing Military Strength on the Global Maritime Security Order

Written by Sophie Wushuang Yi

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SOPHIE WUSHUANG YI, OCT 2 2023

Over the past two decades, China has emerged as a global economic powerhouse, undergoing a transformation that extends beyond its economic prowess. China's pursuit of enhanced military capabilities, particularly in far-sea naval projection, has been equally remarkable. This expansion of China's naval power projection capabilities, while unsurprising from a realist perspective, has raised profound questions about its true intentions and the resulting implications for global maritime security. This analysis delves into China's naval ambitions, the strategic consequences of its enhanced naval posture in the South China Sea, and the broader context of Sino-U.S. strategic competition in the maritime domain. As of 2023, the security landscape in the South China Sea exhibits relative stability, with a reduced risk of intensified military confrontation and escalation. However, China's shift in strategic focus from the South China Sea to the Taiwan Strait underscores significant implications of China's naval force posture in far-seas for the prevailing global maritime security order. It is crucial to understand that, from Beijing's perspective, Taiwan is considered an internal sovereignty issue, rather than an external flashpoint in international relations.

The current situation in the South China Sea presents a low-risk status. While China and ASEAN countries, especially the claimant countries, have expressed the will to maintain peace in the South China Sea, fundamental differences in maritime interests and security policies among the involved countries persist. Diplomatic frictions between nations over the South China Sea issue continue to occur, as do the policies and actions of the U.S., Japan, Australia, and other extraterritorial countries in the South China Sea. Additionally, small-scale incidents between maritime military forces and law enforcement forces, including coast guards, occur sporadically. These unstable factors affecting the security situation in the South China Sea may lead to new dangerous incidents at sea and in the air, or even escalate into armed conflicts or military confrontations.

China's economic rise and concurrent naval expansion are nothing short of extraordinary, positioning it as both a formidable land and maritime global security actor. As the world's second-largest economy, it is logical that China seeks to bolster its military capabilities commensurate with its global stature. From a realist perspective, nations act in their self-interest, and a powerful military is perceived as essential for safeguarding those interests. China's substantial investments in its navy are emblematic of its ambitions to protect maritime interests, secure critical sea lanes, and establish itself as a major maritime power.

This naval buildup encompasses the development of aircraft carriers, modern submarines, advanced surface combatants, and the rapid expansion of its naval aviation arm. These developments transcend regional naval expansion, signifying China's emergence as a global maritime power projection player. To protect and defend China's economic and security in the waters of Indian Ocean, the blue water capabilities in the medium and long term will support its new global naval reach. Consequently, China's military reach now extends beyond its immediate borders, introducing the potential to influence and reshape the global maritime security order.

Understanding China's naval intentions is essential in evaluating its impact on global maritime security. Remarkably, since its last conventional warfare engagement in 1979, China has refrained from large-scale military conflict, opting for smaller-scale confrontations and standoffs instead. This pattern of behaviour adds complexity to the interpretation

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of China's naval intentions, particularly concerning the application of its offensive naval warfare capabilities in blue-water scenarios.

The ambiguity surrounding the extent to which China seeks to expand its influence and control in the South China Sea remains a cause for concern among maritime security stakeholders. While China asserts territorial claims based on historical references, its actions, such as the construction of artificial islands and military installations in disputed areas, engender doubts about its commitment to peaceful coexistence and adherence to international norms established and framed under the U.S. naval forward presence. This ambiguity presents complex signals about potential escalations and conflicts in the region. Concurrently, the United States has played a pivotal role in shaping the current global maritime security order. Its forward deployment naval strategy, particularly in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait, serves not only to reassure regional allies of Washington's security commitment but also to counterbalance China's expansion of naval projection capabilities in the far-seas.

China's enhanced naval force posture in the South China Sea carries profound strategic implications. This region boasts abundant natural resources and serves as a critical artery for global trade, with over \$3 trillion in goods traversing its waters annually. China's growing assertiveness in this area amplifies the potential for maritime incidents, accidents, and conflicts that could disrupt the global supply chain and induce economic instability. Furthermore, China's actions in the South China Sea have instigated a strategic realignment in the Indo-Pacific region. In response to China's increasing presence, the United States has bolstered its alliances and partnerships in the region, pursuing a forward-deployment maritime strategy to maintain its influence and ensure the security of its allies. Chinese academic Hu Bo has characterized the evolution of U.S. South China Sea policy: from non-interference during the 1960s-1990s, to limited interference from the late 1990s-early 2000s, and direct intervention from the 2010s onwards. This dynamic has fostered a complex web of military alliances and strategic partnerships, heightening the potential for unintended escalations.

For instance, the United States plays a pivotal role in the South China Sea disputes between China and the Philippines, as underscored by recent developments. In September 2023, the determined efforts of the Philippine Coast Guard to remove China's floating barriers at Scarborough Shoal reflect the persistent tensions in the region. The United States has publicly lauded the Philippines for its "bold step" in asserting its rights and has unequivocally reaffirmed its security commitments to the nation. The U.S. position aims to maintain its crucial role as a significant factor in the ongoing bilateral disputes between China and the Philippines. Manila strategically leverages its status as a claimant state in these territorial disputes with Beijing as a bargaining chip to further its objectives in its relationship with Washington.

While the South China Sea remains a significant focal point, recent developments underscore a shift in strategic focus toward the Taiwan Strait. The Taiwan issue has long been a contentious element in Sino-U.S. relations, with China considering Taiwan a renegade province and the United States staunchly committed to supporting its security and autonomy. China's military operations in the Taiwan Strait, often characterized as gray-zone tactics, involve unconventional military activities aimed at undermining Taiwan's sovereignty and testing the resolve of the United States, given Beijing's refusal to recognize Taiwan's sovereignty. These actions encompass airspace incursions, cyberattacks, and naval exercises conducted in close proximity to Taiwan. The strategic significance of Taiwan, both as a potential flashpoint and as a symbol of U.S. commitment to the region, cannot be overstated. Solving the Taiwan problem is of paramount importance to Beijing, symbolizing a significant step toward its vision of great rejuvenation and ending a century of humiliation, affirming China's status as a global superpower.

In light of these developments, the international community must carefully observe and objectively interpret China's naval intentions and actions. Despite the strengthening of China's naval capabilities and its assertive maritime presence, it is notable that China has not engaged in conventional warfare since 1979. Therefore, while China's ascent as a global power is undeniable, it is plausible that Beijing will continue to abide by international norms and principles governing maritime security. Dialogue and diplomacy must remain central to addressing disputes in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, preventing potential conflicts that could have far-reaching consequences.

While questions have arisen and concerns have been raised about what may happen over the Taiwan Strait and

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whether incidents could escalate into direct military confrontations or naval warfare between China and the United States, the chances of escalated frictions in the South China Sea remain a flashpoint for potential escalation of military confrontation. The United States, as a longstanding maritime power, faces the delicate task of balancing its commitment to the security of its allies with the imperative to avoid direct confrontation with China. A measured approach that combines deterrence, diplomacy, and a commitment to regional stability is indispensable.

In conclusion, China's burgeoning naval power projection capabilities are a logical consequence of its ascent as a global economic juggernaut. Nevertheless, these developments raise significant strategic concerns in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, central to the ongoing Sino-U.S. strategic competition. The international community must diligently observe and interpret China's actions, promote peaceful dispute resolution, and collectively work toward preserving the stability of the global maritime security order. The stakes are substantial, and the world cannot afford to underestimate the consequences of mismanaged tensions in these vital maritime regions.

About the author:

Sophie Wushuang Yi is a Ph.D. Candidate in Chinese Studies Research (International Relations) at King's College London. She holds a bachelor's degree in international politics and security Studies from the University of Sheffield and has pursued graduate studies in Economics at SOAS and China in Comparative Perspectives (International Relations) at LSE. Her research focuses on China's naval force posture in the South China Sea from a defensive realist perspective, contributing to a deeper understanding of China's role in international relations. From 2021 to 2023, she worked as an Economist Assistant at the UN Resident Coordinator Office in China, and has also worked in think tanks as Research Fellow.