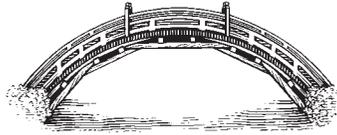


REVIEW ESSAY

Turning to the Sea... This Time to Stay

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Scott W. Bray



Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, William S. Murray, and
Andrew R. Wilson, eds.

China's Future Nuclear Submarine Force
Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2007 ≈ 400 pp.

Gabriel B. Collins, Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and
William S. Murray, eds.

China's Energy Strategy: The Impact on Beijing's Maritime Policies
Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008 ≈ 576 pp.

Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, eds.
China Goes to Sea:

Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective
Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009 ≈ 544 pp.

Turning to the Sea...This Time to Stay

Scott W. Bray

For years now, China analysts have debated the rise of China and Beijing's global ambitions. We have debated the future of the U.S.-China relationship, both in terms of how the two countries see each other now and how their paths are likely to unfold. We have even discussed the military modernization program on which China has embarked—some of which was put on impressive display in October 2009 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Among these many debates, however, there has been relatively little understanding of the complexities of China's transition from a land power to a maritime power. In a series of three edited volumes published to date, the China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI) at the U.S. Naval War College has taken on the challenge of explaining what drives China's turn toward the oceans, some of the elements of military might that Beijing is developing, and the process by which other nations have tried—and usually failed—to realize the same transformation.

China's naval modernization efforts first gained public attention earlier this decade when China acquired a large number of highly capable submarines in a very short period of time. CMSI began exploring this issue with a volume entitled *China's Future Nuclear Submarine Force*, edited by Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, William S. Murray, and Andrew R. Wilson. This series of essays captures important aspects of China's submarine force that explain the rationale for Beijing's large submarine investment, beginning by recounting its maritime goals and doctrine, then examining the applicability of a submarine force to these goals. China's already impressive fleet of diesel submarines is treated lightly in the book, though the criticality of this force to a Taiwan contingency is acknowledged and the underlying reason that Beijing chose to focus on submarines is drawn out in a chapter by Christopher McConnaughy. McConnaughy writes about China's nuclear ballistic missile submarines, but his explanation of the harsh acoustic environment that would make it difficult for the United States to locate and track these submarines applies equally to China's diesel and nuclear attack submarines. These environmental factors

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and the inherent challenges of targeting submarines lead McConaughy to conclude that “prominent analysts...believe that China will be hard pressed to catch up to the technology of the West....However, because of the nature of undersea warfare, with its complexities and variables,...China does not have to catch up to the West to be a serious threat...” (pp. 95–96).

This book, therefore, explains in broad terms how the requirements to oppose U.S. intervention in a Taiwan contingency led to a strong submarine investment, but it leaves a number of questions unanswered, mostly because authoritative sources on China’s submarine force are rare, particularly regarding the operational philosophy and new naval hardware China now employs. Although contributors such as Paul H.B. Godwin discuss the role of nuclear attack submarines in a Taiwan scenario, the only other utility of the nuclear submarine force offered in the volume relates to protection of the sealines of communication (SLOC). Multiple chapters make the analytically debatable observation that China’s nuclear submarine force can serve as an indicator of the country’s power projection aspirations. Though an important part of China’s access denial strategy and an excellent tool for interdicting SLOCs, submarines are not the platform of choice for SLOC protection—the role that is drawing China into the power projection game, as this review will address below. SLOCs are best preserved with a visible display of military power and the tactical advantages enjoyed by surface combatants, including the speed to keep up with the ships being guarded.

Rather than for SLOC defense, both the United States and the Soviet Union developed a large nuclear submarine force in order to target each other’s sea-based nuclear deterrent force, as James Patton recounts in his chapter. This introduces an important variable that has influenced the construction of the world’s only large nuclear attack submarine forces. An additional chapter reviewing China’s nuclear strategy and evaluating whether or not there are applicable parallels with the U.S. and Soviet models would have provided valuable analysis.

China’s Future Nuclear Submarine Force raises many important issues that influence the future of China’s nuclear submarine force, but as a collection of essays on a subject with few primary sources available, this collection of essays does not present integrated analysis to assess the central question of the book: what will China’s future nuclear submarine force look like?

In *China’s Energy Strategy: The Impact on Beijing’s Maritime Policies*, Gabriel B. Collins, Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and William S. Murray have described the drivers of China’s quest for a limited power projection capability—and they did so well before Beijing’s December 2008

decision to deploy a series of task groups to the Gulf of Aden in order to protect shipping from an onslaught of pirate attacks. (These task groups, by the way, are exclusively surface combatants; submarines will do little to deter pirates.) This volume makes the case that Beijing's desire to ensure steady and secure access to the energy resources required to continue the momentum of China's economic growth will "compel the PLAN [People's Liberation Army Navy] to be used increasingly in nonconflict situations in a wider variety of regions" (p. xiv). The PLAN's actions today certainly support this argument; Beijing's naval task groups in the Gulf of Aden are operating thousands of miles from China to protect merchant shipping, much of which is transporting oil. With this established presence in the Gulf of Aden, James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara's contribution on China's naval ambitions in the Indian Ocean are especially relevant. Holmes and Yoshihara expect China to remain focused on soft power influence in the Indian Ocean until the Taiwan situation is settled, but the current cross-strait dynamic and the immediacy of the piracy problem seem to be pulling the PLAN toward the Indian Ocean today.

CMSI's latest installment, *China Goes to Sea*, edited by Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, compares historical examples dating from the Persian Empire's maritime transformation in 550–490 BC to China's ongoing metamorphosis, expertly addressing the factors influencing China's turn to the sea. Andrew Wilson argues that, despite the oft-cited Ming retreat from the sea after the Zheng He voyages, China maintained a maritime tradition through use of the Grand Canal (also known now as the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal), which spurred continued development of maritime technology. Bruce Elleman argues that this, along with the regional nature of maritime threats posed to China throughout much of its history, meant that naval challenges "could be managed by a small...naval force, which depended mainly on defensive strategies, such as trade embargoes" (p. 294). As such, China's historical naval development has aligned with the perceived maritime threat.

Bernard Cole notes that the recent recognition of the importance of naval issues came about "only after the breakup of the Soviet Union and the dramatically increased availability of financial resources that followed the Cold War" (p. 334). Cole goes on to argue that "Chinese post-Cold War naval efforts were made possible by China's post-Cold War explosion of economic growth; in this sense, China's naval efforts have been Mahanian—closely linked to national economic development" (p. 333). From this reader's perspective, these Mahanian goals—the same that have traditionally encouraged development of blue water navies—have not only given Beijing

the means to invest in a modern navy but have also provided the impetus for a navy designed for missions broader than the Taiwan issue.

Erickson and Goldstein present a less optimistic assessment of China's ability to successfully make the transition to a bona fide sea power. "While it is making dramatic and in some ways unprecedented progress," these authors argue, "maritime transformation is a difficult and treacherous process that no modern land power has fully accomplished" (p. xvii). This volume includes excellent work, however, that complements Erickson and Goldstein's assessment, highlighting a number of ways in which China appears to be deviating from the path historical precedence would seem to dictate. Gabriel Collins and Michael Grubb, for example, argue that

The Soviet Union, Meiji Japan, and Wilhelmian Germany built their navies first and then promoted merchant marine development....China is following a different path marked by an emphasis on commercial maritime development, with naval development trailing. If China continues to expand its naval forces...the single most prominent element will be that Beijing's policymakers are struggling to keep up with China's dynamic commercial mariners. In this sense China's maritime and naval development path may better approximate the successful path of the United States. (p. 345)

Further evidence that China's path may not replicate historical examples is offered by Erickson and Goldstein, who provide an excellent overview of how Beijing has studied the rise of great powers in hopes of emulating successes and avoiding pitfalls. Carnes Lord reviews the factors that led to failed maritime transformations and finds no compelling reason that China's turn to the sea will fail. Instead, he finds a country that has accurately identified its geostrategic vulnerability to seaward attack and has adjusted its maritime policies to these changing security requirements. Lord's only question is the pace and degree of China's maritime transformation.

Overall, these three books provide excellent perspective and concepts for understanding China's maritime history and the strategic drivers behind modernization and expansion of China's navy. Written before the PLAN's Gulf of Aden mission—which observers will likely reflect upon as the transformation point for China's development not only as a maritime power but also as a great power—the volumes capture the rationale that pushed Beijing to begin executing military missions for the protection of Chinese interests abroad rather than merely the protection of Chinese territory. Though history points to many difficulties in transitioning from a continental to sea power, Carnes Lord points out in *China Goes to Sea* that "for states that are not self-sufficient in basic resources, long-distance trade may be vital

to their survival, and the protection of trade routes accordingly seen as a key to national security” (p. 436). *China’s Energy Strategy* details how important maritime commerce is to China’s continued economic development. China’s Future Nuclear Submarine Force addresses some of Beijing’s new naval capabilities. Together, these collections of essays are important sources for understanding China’s current military goals and investments. ◆