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# China Moves Out: Stepping Stones Toward a New Maritime Strategy

by Christopher H. Sharman



Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs  
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**Cover photo:** Chinese and Russian vessels gather at designated sea area during China-Russia joint naval drill in the East China Sea, May 24, 2014  
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## **China Moves Out**



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by Christopher H. Sharman

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## Executive Summary

Over the last decade, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has increased the frequency, duration, complexity, and distance from the mainland of its operations. Not only does China maintain a permanent counterpiracy escort flotilla in the Indian Ocean, it also now routinely conducts naval exercises and operations beyond the first island chain throughout the year. This normalization of PLAN operations in the Western Pacific and beyond is an important step toward an emerging new maritime strategy that will incorporate far seas defense.

*Far seas defense* involves extending PLAN combat capabilities into waters farther from China. The concept is consistent with stated PLAN goals and training requirements, but it is not formally incorporated into China's current maritime strategy. Chinese President Hu Jintao's 2004 New Historic Missions charter provided the PLAN with the strategic direction to develop concepts, experience, and tactics germane to establishing far seas defense capabilities. PLAN deployments to and exercises in the near seas since 2004 have been evolutionary steps toward implementing a near seas active defense strategy, but regular deployments deeper into the Western Pacific have also helped the PLAN build the ability to operate in the far seas and begin to operationalize the concept of far seas defense.

This monograph begins by examining the geography, history, and strategic focus of near seas active defense, China's current maritime strategy. It illustrates how the New Historic Missions expanded PLAN mission requirements from traditional near seas operating areas to operations in the far seas. The paper provides a strategic framework for a new maritime defense strategy that would incorporate far seas capabilities. It then examines the evolution of PLAN operations and exercises since 2004. The monograph concludes by identifying several factors that, if observed, would indicate PLAN incorporation of far seas defense as part of an emerging new maritime strategy.

PLAN deployments to the Western Pacific since 2004 demonstrate a deliberate and methodical approach to normalization, from single fleet and single-dimensional (surface ship against surface ship) scripted exercises in the Western Pacific to multifleet coordinated unscripted training involving submarines, surface ships, unmanned aerial vehicles, and fixed-wing aircraft. There has also been a gradual increase from a few ships conducting deployments to as many as 12 ships and submarines deploying simultaneously. The monograph summarizes these changes as well as PLAN trends in signaling and in the steady expansion of chokepoints used by PLAN ships to access the near seas. It also highlights the growing complexity of informatization over time.

The PLAN is likely to gradually increase the frequency of combat readiness patrol deployments to the far seas over the next 5 to 7 years. An uptick is likely in mixed-platform PLAN surface action groups rehearsing a myriad of combat warfare disciplines, such as exercising antisubmarine, anti-air, and antisurface warfare during deployments to the far seas. These combat readiness patrols may include deployments along various strategic sea lines of communication in the Pacific, chokepoints in the Indian Ocean, and perhaps even to the Northern Pacific to support China's Arctic interests.

Operationalization of far seas defense will consist of regular deployment of surface action groups that provide maximum flexibility to address ever-changing mission objectives. PLAN ships deploying to the far seas will possess robust communications capabilities and will be linked through relatively rapid information flow across and up the chain of command. PLAN near seas operations over the last decade have included political signaling, suggesting the PLAN will be used for this mission in the far seas as well.

Indications that the PLAN is aggressively looking to operationalize far seas defense missions would include observation of *Jiangdao* light frigates assuming greater responsibility for missions traditionally assigned to larger PLAN combatants within the first island chain, construction of icebreakers, enhanced intelligence support to deployed ships, active reporting on distant sea operations in the official Chinese press, a gradual increase in the frequency of deployments, and enhanced PLAN logistics support capabilities.

## Introduction

The Director of Intelligence for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Rear Admiral Paul Becker, recently stated the United States has a “data glut but an information deficit” on China. He indicated there is a lack of understanding of China’s “interim objectives” and “main campaigns” and urged, “We need to understand their [China’s] strategy better.”<sup>1</sup> Admiral Becker’s assertions are particularly pertinent when considering recent changes in Chinese naval operations.

Over the last several years, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has increased the frequency, duration, complexity, and distance from the mainland of its operations. Not only does China maintain a permanent counterpiracy escort flotilla in the Indian Ocean, it also routinely conducts naval exercises and operations beyond the first island chain. These changes in PLAN operational patterns raise many strategic questions. To what extent are the recent changes intended to send political signals to other countries in the region? Are the changes mainly a continuation of PLAN modernization trends? What do they suggest about where the PLAN will operate in the future?

To help close the existing information deficit identified by Admiral Becker, this paper asserts that Chinese President Hu Jintao’s 2004 New Historic Missions charter provided the PLAN with the strategic direction to develop concepts, experience, and tactics germane to establishing far seas defense capabilities.<sup>2</sup> It employs a historical approach to examine PLAN near seas operations and exercises from 2004 to 2014. It argues that PLAN deployments to and exercises in the near seas since 2004 have been evolutionary steps toward implementing the near seas active defense strategy. These Western Pacific deployments have become routine for the PLAN and are now conducted throughout the year. The analysis yields insights into how lessons learned from near seas operations are being combined with far seas deployment proficiencies to modify China’s current near seas active defense maritime strategy. The paper argues the PLAN will routinely deploy ships to defend China and its interests in the far seas by integrating far seas defense capabilities into China’s existing maritime strategy. It concludes by identifying several factors that, if observed, would indicate that this transition is occurring.

## Near Seas Active Defense Strategy

China’s current maritime strategy is commonly referred to as “offshore defense” or translated more literally, “near seas active defense” [*jin hai jiji fangyu*, 近海积极防御].<sup>3</sup> It is a regional strategy that matches China’s naval capabilities to its regional maritime interests.<sup>4</sup> The scope of near seas active defense is not constrained by geographic features but instead covers “the area

of the sea that is under China's legitimate jurisdiction as well as any area that can be used by an enemy to threaten China."<sup>5</sup> Admiral Liu Huaqing, China's navy commander from 1982 to 1988, defined near seas active defense operating areas as covering: "1) The first island-chain, which stretches from the Kurile Islands through the islands of Japan, Ryukyu Archipelago, Taiwan, the Philippines to Borneo Island; 2) the Yellow Sea, East China Sea and South China Sea, or the three near seas within the inner rims of the first island-chain, and 3) sea areas adjacent to the outer rims of this island-chain, and those of the north Pacific."<sup>6</sup>

Liu's definition suggests PLAN strategists would consider operations east of Taiwan or in the Philippine Sea, throughout the South China Sea and Spratly Islands, as well as at strategic chokepoints such as the Bashi Channel and Miyako Strait, as all being within the traditional near seas active defense operating areas. PLAN operations in the Gulf of Aden, Indian Ocean, or well into the Pacific would be considered far seas missions.<sup>7</sup> Operationally, near seas active defense consists of layered defenses in the near seas orchestrated to deter a potential adversary from threatening China from the sea.

Near seas active defense was first conceptually proposed by Deng Xiaoping in 1979 and was actively debated and evaluated during the 1980s. It was formally introduced in 1993 when the Central Military Commission issued revised strategic guidelines that shifted the "Main Strategic Direction"—the PLA's assessment of where it would most likely be called upon to conduct main operations—from China's northern border with Russia to Taiwan.<sup>8</sup> Even though the strategy had been discussed for over a decade, this shift marked its official implementation,<sup>9</sup> which required that the PLAN have the capability to operate proficiently both within its near seas and along strategic approaches to China—to include the Western Pacific—to be able to defend the People's Republic of China (PRC).<sup>10</sup>

Operationalization of the near seas active defense strategy has been a key factor driving PLAN modernization efforts since the mid-1990s.<sup>11</sup> Not only did the PLAN need new platforms to operate at sea for sustained periods of time, it also had to develop the requisite command and control, logistics, doctrine, and training to carry out a sustained campaign against Taiwan.

The 1995–1996 Taiwan crisis, in which the U.S. Navy dispatched aircraft carriers as a show of force, reinforced the need for the Chinese navy to include with near seas strategy the capabilities and tactics to deny, delay, or degrade the ability of the United States to intervene in a Taiwan crisis.<sup>12</sup> The production of second-generation *Luhu* and *Luhai* destroyers and *Jiangwei* frigates, as well as contracts to acquire *Sovremenny* destroyers in the 1990s, represented some of the PLAN's first steps toward modernization in support of this strategy. Identification of this Chinese approach—whereby a PLAN strategy influences its modernization—suggests that implementation

of far seas defense capabilities into China's maritime strategy may require another round of modernization or a reevaluation of how existing platforms are employed.

### **New Historic Missions**

The scope of PLAN operating areas was enlarged again in 2004 when President Hu Jintao revised the traditional missions of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) during a speech to the Central Military Commission. Traditional PLAN missions had been derived from the Chinese Communist Party's *Military Guiding Theory*, which defines the PLA role in Chinese national security as providing the "historic mission" of safeguarding Chinese national interests. President Hu's "New Historic Missions" speech addressed China's growing global strategic interests and directed the PLA to guarantee the rule of the party, safeguard national economic development and territorial sovereignty, defend China's expanding national interests, and uphold world peace.<sup>13</sup> The first two of these "new historic missions" have always been PLA responsibilities, but the third mission of defending China's expanding national interests and the fourth mission of upholding world peace were new.

Because China's economic interests are global in scope, new historic missions provide the PLAN with official guidance to expand its operations well beyond the immediate Chinese periphery.<sup>14</sup> While China's maritime near seas active defense strategy and its commensurate modernization were focused on Taiwan contingencies and defending China, new historic missions increased the number and scope of naval missions.

China's navy has gradually expanded the area of its operations since President Hu announced the new historic missions in 2004. China's 2006, 2008, and 2010 Defense White Papers highlighted PLAN moves to expand its operating range.<sup>15</sup> The 2013 Defense White Paper went further and stated that the PLAN was "developing blue water capabilities of conducting mobile operations, carrying out international cooperation, and countering non-traditional security threats, and enhanc[ing] its capabilities of strategic deterrence and counterattack."<sup>16</sup> The expansion of PLAN operational range and capabilities has enabled it to gradually begin fulfilling its newly identified responsibility to protect Chinese national interests. This move to more frequent blue water operations has also pushed the PLAN to develop capabilities that are prerequisites for implementation of a new maritime strategy that can defend China's interests in the far seas.

### **Strategic Framework for a New Maritime Defense Strategy**

China's navy faces a two-fold challenge. It must continue improving its capabilities to defend China's national security in the near seas while simultaneously conducting new historic

missions that will frequently divert navy resources to the far seas. PLAN experience conducting long-range counterpiracy deployments, coupled with its normalization of deployments to the Western Pacific, makes the present an ideal time for it to incorporate far seas defense capabilities into China's current near seas active defense maritime strategy.

Far seas defense involves an extension of PLAN combat capabilities into the far seas. It is consistent with PLAN stated goals and training requirements but not formally incorporated into China's current maritime strategy. It includes stationing PLAN assets along strategic sea lines of communication (SLOCs), at strategic chokepoints, and along approaches to China in the far seas. Far seas defense enables China to rapidly respond to diverse challenges or threats originating in the far seas, to protect its economic interests in or transiting through the far seas, and to dissuade potential adversaries operating in the far seas from intervening in contingencies involving China.

Surface and subsurface deployments to the Indian Ocean are becoming more regular, and China is expanding its operations further east in the Pacific. These deployments represent an evolution of PLAN capabilities to operate further from shore, but they also indicate the beginning of a fundamental strategic shift from a near seas active defense strategy to a maritime strategy that includes far seas defense capabilities. This conclusion is supported by analysis of China's primary maritime interests, the Indo-Pacific strategic maritime environment and Beijing's likely assumptions about it, and Chinese strategic maritime goals.

China's primary interests that drive PLAN missions are national security and economic stability. Its maritime security concern is homeland defense, which includes Taiwan, its territorial claims within the nine-dash line in the South China Sea, and the Diaoyu (called Senkaku by Japan) Islands in the East China Sea. Threats to its security interests come from any military that can prevent China from asserting its claims. China's maritime strategy must anticipate these threats, which may require the PLAN to be defensively postured in the far seas.

China's economic interests are global in scope, which will influence how the country will employ its navy. Piracy is a threat to China's economic interests and is subsumed under the threats to international SLOCs, which cause delays in imports or exports. Protecting SLOCs may require modifications to China's current near seas active defense strategy because many of them fall outside traditional defense operating areas.

Geography, domestic concerns about stability, and internal political structure are driving factors influencing China's maritime strategy. China's geographic location between the Middle East and the United States is a strategic challenge for the PLAN. Not only must the navy defend against threats from the Pacific, it must also look at potential challenges from the Middle East

and Indian subcontinent. This factor suggests China's maritime strategy may require the PLAN to deploy regularly to the far seas of the eastern Indian Ocean and farther east in the Pacific.

A second factor is acute concern about domestic instability. Beijing cannot afford to allow external threats to create or exacerbate domestic instability. This concern may influence China's use of the navy in response to real or perceived threats in both the near and far seas. It also helps ensure the navy is resourced to address stability threats.

A third driver of China's maritime strategy is the PLA organizational structure. Xi Jinping serves as both president of the PRC and chairman of the Central Military Commission. He takes advice on military issues directly from uniformed PLA officers. Because of this organizational structure, PLA perceptions of threats, military requirements, and capabilities influence President Xi and China's collective decisionmaking calculus. Access to the highest levels enables the PLA to remain attuned to leadership threat perceptions and make the necessary structural changes, such as a new maritime defense strategy, to support strategic objectives.

The same factors that shape China's maritime strategy also color its assumptions about its strategic environment, influencing how the navy should be employed. One assumption Beijing likely makes is that U.S. military capabilities represent China's greatest military threat. The United States has demonstrated its willingness to intervene in Taiwan (which China considers to be a domestic issue), and China's maritime strategy must address potential U.S. intervention. This assumption suggests China will continue to prioritize capabilities to execute near seas active defense within its maritime strategy.

Furthermore, PRC leaders likely assume their neighbors will continue to challenge China's perceived sovereignty over disputed maritime territories, which underscores the importance of near seas active defense capabilities within China's maritime strategy. Japan's refusal to acknowledge the Diaoyu Islands as being in dispute, the Philippines challenge to China at Scarborough Reef and Second Thomas Shoal, and Vietnam's resolve in its recent dispute over oil exploration in disputed waters are evidence to Beijing that it continues to face significant near seas challenges.

Beijing probably calculates that its dependence on commercial imports will continue to grow. China already imports much of its oil, but the demands of the growing middle class will require increased global imports. China's maritime strategy must address how the navy will be used to protect commercial shipping through international SLOCs. This assumption suggests the PLAN will be required to deploy more regularly to the far seas to protect SLOCs.

Beijing likely assumes it cannot predict every type of contingency that its military may need to respond to around the world. In the last several years, the PLAN has participated in



humanitarian assistance and disaster relief in the Philippines, counterpiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, recovery efforts associated with Malaysian Airlines Flight 370, and noncombatant evacuation in Libya, to name just a few. The diversity of potential future missions suggests the need for flexible capabilities in all navy task groups deploying to the far seas.

Finally, Beijing likely assumes it has made significant progress improving its near seas defense capabilities but that it is not yet fully capable of effectively executing near seas active defense. The PLAN is keenly aware of the areas in which it must improve to be able to successfully execute near seas active defense. This assumption suggests the PLAN will continue to train and exercise in the near seas to enhance those defense capabilities.

Identification of Chinese interests and threats to those interests, Beijing's assumptions about its strategic situation, and analysis of the operating environment all help to clarify Chinese strategic maritime goals. Defending China is the primary goal, but there are several subsidiary goals nested within this objective for the navy. These include ensuring the PLAN is capable of defending China from its greatest military rival, developing capabilities to address island disputes in the East and South China Sea, and supporting potential PLA contingencies against Taiwan.

A secondary PLAN strategic maritime goal is protecting China's global economic interests. This goal includes subsidiary objectives of enhancing capabilities to protect SLOCs and strategic chokepoints, countering piracy threats, and protecting commercial interests transiting new routes to China, such as the Northern Sea Route through the Arctic.

China must examine the current maritime resources available to accomplish its strategic goals. The PLAN has 73 destroyers and frigates, 62 submarines, and 14 corvettes divided relatively evenly among its three fleets.<sup>17</sup> Chinese fixed-wing naval aviation assets and coastal defense cruise missiles are factors in strategic decisionmaking but are primarily germane to the near seas component of a maritime strategy. Although not under PLAN control, elements of the Chinese Coast Guard are maritime assets, which can be integrated into the near seas component of a new maritime strategy.

Beijing might choose to use deterrence and dissuasion as strategic approaches to implementing a new maritime strategy that includes both near and far seas components. Deterrence is most applicable to Chinese navy operations in the near seas, while dissuasion is a logical approach in the far seas. Chinese interests and goals suggest near seas defense will remain the most important element of China's maritime strategy. The incorporation of far seas defense into China's current maritime strategy would enable the PLAN to more adequately protect national interests and to achieve the goals identified in this strategic framework.

China has considered operating in the far seas for more than a decade. In 2002, President Hu stressed the need for the PLAN to “make the gradual transition to far-seas defense, enhancing far seas maneuvering operations capabilities.”<sup>18</sup> His guidance and the direction repeated in the 2013 Defense White Paper that the PLAN safeguard the security of international SLOCs make operationalization of far seas defense capabilities a near-term PLAN requirement. How the PLAN will attempt to do so may be discerned by evaluating PLAN operations and exercises in the Western Pacific from 2004 to 2014. This period is broken into 2- to 3-year increments for analytic purposes.

### **Enhancing Fundamentals: 2004–2006**

During this period, three primary factors influenced the development of PLAN capabilities and tactics to execute near seas active defense and new historic missions. First, geopolitical events surrounding issues with Taiwan, Japan, and Hong Kong intensified PLAN requirements to become more familiar with waters that could be used during potential future contingencies. Second, President Hu reemphasized President Jiang Zemin’s “informatization” concepts, which influenced the PLAN tactical approach to both of these missions. Third, President Hu’s 2004 announcement of PLA new historic missions required the PLAN to enhance its ability to operate at greater distances from the PRC coast. These three factors contributed to PLAN enhancing maritime skills as prerequisites for future PLAN operations in the Western Pacific.

### **Geopolitical Building Blocks: Improving PLAN Operational Range**

Taiwan’s President Chen Shui-Bian was reelected in March 2004. This election included a nationwide consultative referendum in which Taiwan’s voters were asked questions about relations with China. Beijing strongly criticized this referendum, viewing it as a step toward future Taiwan independence. Beijing’s concerns that Taiwan was drifting toward greater independence held direct implications for the PLA’s responsibility for Taiwan contingencies. Analysis of the 2004 PLA exercises at Dongshan Island helps illustrate PLAN efforts to signal PRC resolve to Taipei and enhance its own capabilities to execute near seas active defense.

The PLA carried out an amphibious training exercise at Dongshan Island in July and August 2004, the ninth iteration of amphibious training there since 1996. The exercise was intended to enhance PLA joint combat capabilities and to “demonstrate their determination to crack down on Taiwan independence.”<sup>19</sup> It reportedly consisted of 18,000 personnel from all three military services, which was a significantly smaller number than the 100,000 who participated in the 2001 Donghai VI exercise.<sup>20</sup> The 2004 Dongshan exercise focused on air superiority, reportedly a change

from previous iterations.<sup>21</sup> The establishment of temporary air superiority would be a necessary prerequisite for an amphibious assault against Taiwan because amphibious forces are vulnerable to attack from the air.

The PLAN played a significant role in the 2004 exercise. Ships from all three fleets reportedly participated, requiring them to cross fleet and theater boundaries.<sup>22</sup> Hong Kong press highlighted the participation of both submarines and *Sovremenny*-class destroyers,<sup>23</sup> which are equipped with the SA-N-7 Gadfly surface-to-air missile. They could play a key role in PLA establishment of air superiority in a potential conflict with Taiwan, which helps to explain their inclusion. Not only does the incorporation of all three fleets help to facilitate cross-fleet coordination and standardization, it also allows fleets to operate outside of normal operating areas and at ranges farther from their home ports. Such capabilities are necessary for a Taiwan contingency and also help to enhance PLAN near seas active defense capabilities.

A May 2004 long-range navigation training event that included elements of all three fleets also illustrates how the PLAN has worked to improve its near seas active defense capabilities. A flotilla of eight ships and submarines from all three fleets moored in Hong Kong in early May 2004 for a 3-day visit.<sup>24</sup> Participating units included *Luhai* DD-167, *Luhu* DD-112, *Jiangwei I* FF-541 and 542, *Jiangwei II* FF-566, *Jiangwei II* FF-567, and *Song* SS-314 and 324.<sup>25</sup>

Although these ships were reportedly on their way to an exercise in the South China Sea, the timing of the visit is particularly noteworthy. It occurred just days prior to the May 20 inauguration of President Chen Shui-bian in Taiwan and 4 days after Beijing announced it interpreted the Basic Law as ruling out universal suffrage for Hong Kong—both events that garnered high levels of attention in Beijing. Although there was no official suggestion by mainland authorities that the port visit was intended to be a “signal,” this did not stop both Taiwan and Hong Kong press from perceiving it as such. The rarity of ship visits to Hong Kong coupled with the timing of key events in Hong Kong and Taiwan certainly suggest PRC signaling of its resolve on Taiwan and Hong Kong issues. This port call provides another example of the PLAN deploying elements of all three fleets for coordinated training, which helps to improve PLAN logistics, command and control, and crew proficiencies in numerous basic skill sets germane to near seas defense operations.

Another example of China using the PLAN for signaling involves naval operations in the vicinity of the disputed Chunxiao (called Shirakaba by Tokyo) natural gas field. This field is located beneath the East China Sea, straddling the Japan-China median line. Both China and Japan have equipment in place to extract gas from it, but the area has been an irritant to Sino-Japanese relations for years because of mutual fears of poaching resources. Japan protested

Chinese activities at the field in 2004 and 2005 because Japan claimed its resources were being “stolen.”<sup>26</sup> The PLAN was observed operating advanced destroyers in the vicinity of the disputed fields twice in 2005.

According to Japanese press reporting, in January 2005 a Japanese Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF) P-3 maritime reconnaissance aircraft spotted two *Sovremenny*-class destroyers sailing near the disputed Chunxiao gas fields. According to the article, “this was the first sighting of the Chinese navy’s most advanced destroyers in waters under Japanese surveillance.”<sup>27</sup> The following September, just prior to bilateral talks on the disputed fields, Japan’s Defense Agency again spotted PLAN ships sailing in a clockwise direction in the waters around the Chunxiao fields. The formation consisted of a *Sovremenny* destroyer, two frigates, and an intelligence collection ship.<sup>28</sup> The timing of this naval activity just prior to Chinese talks with Japan suggests PRC signaling. More importantly, however, this training enabled the PLAN to familiarize itself with unfamiliar waters, which could be used in a future Japan contingency, thereby expanding PLAN near seas active defense capabilities.

**Figure 1. 2004–2006 PLAN Signaling**



### **Building Blocks: Improvements in Informatization**

The transition of the Central Military Commission chair from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao in September 2004 appears to have influenced PLAN emphasis on furthering its “informatization” capabilities. *Informatization* “is a ‘concept . . . that describes the process of moving toward greater collection, systematization, distribution, and utilization of information.’”<sup>29</sup> It incorporates theories of information warfare, joint operations, informatized operations and command, and informatized support.<sup>30</sup>

Informatization was introduced as a concept in 1997, but it was not until 2002 that it became part of the PLA’s Military Strategic Guidelines.<sup>31</sup> In 2002, President Jiang Zemin referred to informatization as being both necessary for modernization and a key enabler for integrated joint operations.<sup>32</sup> President Hu Jintao continued Jiang’s emphasis on informatization in 2006, stating, “Local wars under informatized conditions are confrontations between systems of systems, and their fundamental operational mode is integrated joint operations.”<sup>33</sup> Informatization continued to be integrated and evolve after Jiang Zemin handed off power to Hu Jintao, as reflected in PLAN training and exercises in support of near seas active defense.

Examining press articles that highlight informatization during the 2004–2006 timeframe illustrates its integration with near seas active defense. For example, a November 2006 Xinhua press agency article reported a new informatized command system in the Chinese East Sea Fleet that significantly increased the navy’s combat capabilities.<sup>34</sup> The article describes a system located at a shore-based command post that integrates data on a common display about sea states, air, surface, and subsurface contacts, as well as detailed reporting from forces afloat. The article highlights that it is the first time the PLAN incorporated “electronic marking of operational situations and digital transmission of intelligence information instructions.” The system described is similar to the U.S. Navy’s Global Command and Control System–Maritime, first installed on Navy ships in 1999. Its incorporation in the PLAN suggests that electronic linking of ships in a common network is a PLAN requirement for near seas active defense missions and for ships operating farther from China in support of new historic missions.

### **Building Blocks: Improvements in Logistics**

President Hu Jintao’s new historic missions required the PLAN to enhance its capability to protect China’s expanding national interests by operating farther from the Chinese coast. As a result, the PLAN pursued improvements in logistics capabilities during the 2004–2006 timeframe to support such operations. A series of press reports in October 2006 highlighted PLAN

incorporation of the “active maintenance” concept during the trans-Pacific deployment of the *Luhu*-class destroyer *Qingdao* on a visit to the United States and Canada.

Active maintenance involves the ship’s crew carefully evaluating and running diagnostics on the myriad of systems and equipment aboard *Qingdao* prior to departing port to identify materiel weaknesses and then, while at sea, using “advanced at-sea monitoring and measurement as it strives to nip malfunctions in the bud.”<sup>35</sup> According to the articles, the PLAN “active maintenance” system is a replacement for “after the fact maintenance,” which occurs after something malfunctions. The articles indicate “active maintenance” had been incorporated across 12 classes of ships by the end of 1996. Practices such as “active maintenance” contribute to the PLAN ability to operate farther from homeport in support of near seas and far seas defense.<sup>36</sup>

### **Initial Steps into the Western Pacific: 2007–2009**

Over the next 3 years, the PLAN built on capabilities demonstrated during the 2004–2006 timeframe and expanded its operations beyond the first island chain into the Western Pacific. Examining Western Pacific operations, training for the PLAN’s first counterpiracy task group to the Gulf of Aden, and reading the January 2009 edition of the *Outline of Military Training and Evaluation* (OMTE) provide insight into the continued evolution of near seas active defense, as well as some of the first glimpses into PLAN development of far seas defense capabilities.

### **Expansion of PLAN Operating Areas**

During the period 2007–2009, the PLAN continued to train and exercise in areas supporting future contingency operations, particularly expanding operations into the Philippine Sea beyond the first island chain as part of the evolution of near seas active defense. One example of Philippine Sea operations was a weeklong “campaign-level naval exercise,” which included PLAN operations east of Taiwan, just north of the Philippine archipelago.<sup>37</sup> According to Hong Kong media reports, the exercise “simulated a ‘pincer attack’ on Taiwan as well as a naval blockade.”<sup>38</sup>

The exercise reportedly involved PLA Air Force assets from the Nanjing and Guangzhou Military Regions as well as PLAN assets from the East and South Sea Fleets, including PLAN *Sovremenny* destroyers and *Kilo*-class submarines. Live firing of cruise missiles was conducted.<sup>39</sup> Official Chinese press reporting of the exercise stated that it focused on operating within “complex electromagnetic and severe weather conditions” and allowed operators to hone techniques and combat tactics and rehearse joint operations.<sup>40</sup> Operating east of Taiwan familiarizes the PLAN with waters where it might execute various contingencies under the concept of near

seas active defense. Moreover, the execution of this exercise may have served as a PRC signal of its concerns about Taiwan's political trajectory.<sup>41</sup>

The November 2007 exercise east of Taiwan followed two other noteworthy North Sea Fleet PLAN deployments to the Philippine Sea in 2007 (see table 1). The first deployment started on April 28 when a flotilla of five frigates and destroyers and a supply ship departed Qingdao.

**Table 1. 2007–2009 PLAN Operations in the Western Pacific**

Approximate Date	Fleet	Surface Ships	Strait/Channel
April–May 2007	North Sea Fleet	5 PLAN ships	East: Miyako West: Bashi
May 2007	North Sea Fleet	4 PLAN ships	East: Miyako West: Bashi
November 2007	East Sea Fleet	Unknown number <i>Sovremenny</i> DDG	East: Not reported West: Not reported
October 2008	East Sea Fleet	<i>Sovremenny</i> DDG <i>Jiangkai I</i> FF-529 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF <i>Fuchi</i> AOR-886	East: Tsugaru West: Miyako
November 2008	North Sea Fleet	<i>Luzhou</i> DDG <i>Jiangwei II</i> FF <i>Fuqing</i> AOR <i>Tuqiang</i> ATA-721	East: Miyako West: Miyako
June 2009	North Sea Fleet	<i>Luzhou</i> DDG-116 <i>Jiangwei II</i> F-527 <i>Jiangwei II</i> FF-528 <i>Fuqing</i> AOR-881 <i>Tuqiang</i> ATA-721	East: Miyako West: Miyako

*Key:* DDG: destroyer; AOR: auxiliary oiler replenishment; F, FF: frigate; ATA: bulk carrier  
*Sources:* “China Deploys Naval Fleet in the Water off Taiwan’s East Coast,” *Asahi Shimbun*; “China Show of Strength,” *Asia Times*; “PLA Exercise Makes Pincer Attack on Taiwan,” *Ming Pao*; “Chinese Vessels Pass Tsugaru Strait from Tsushima,” [中国海軍新型艦など対馬から津軽を通過], *Asagumo* [朝雲], October 23, 2008; and Sato Ken [佐藤賢], “PLA Naval Activities Becoming Brisker; Going From Coastal Waters into the Pacific; Missions Becoming Diversified, Including Disaster Relief” [中国海軍、活動活発に、近海から太平洋へ、災害救助など、任務も多様化], *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* [日本経済新聞], November 17, 2008; “Four Chinese Vessels Spotted off the Coast of Okinawa, A Russian Nuclear Submarine Spotted off the Soya Cape” [沖縄沖に中国艦4隻、宗谷岬沖に露の原潜], *Asagumo* [朝雲], November 6, 2008; and “Chinese Vessels Drilling in the Pacific?,” [太平洋側で訓練か], *Asagumo* [朝雲], July 2, 2009. *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment—China and North-east Asia* was used to cross-reference PLAN ship names and hull numbers cited in press reporting to identify NATO class name and fleet subordination of PLAN ships. The annual Japanese Defense White Paper was also used to cross-reference press reporting with PLAN transits of chokepoints near Japan.

Two destroyers and a supply ship passed through the Miyako Channel, passing east of Taiwan and then back west through the Bashi Channel, where they joined the two frigates west of Taiwan. The flotilla then returned to Qingdao on May 11.<sup>42</sup> In the second exercise, a flotilla of four North Sea Fleet destroyers and a frigate departed Qingdao on May 18. They took the same route as the first flotilla and returned to Qingdao on May 27.<sup>43</sup> These exercises were monitored by military forces from several nations, which created a “true and complex maritime navigation and air electronic environment.”<sup>44</sup>

Chinese military papers described several of the training objectives and achievements of these North Sea Fleet deployments. New breakthroughs were made in aspects of electronic warfare, information warfare, and coordinated operations, while the exercise was an opportunity for the PLAN to conduct “combat” in unfamiliar waters and to “break through the submarine blockade.”<sup>45</sup>

Japanese and Russian commentators described the deployments as training for Taiwan contingencies. Primary objectives were disrupting the U.S. dispatch of forces stationed in Okinawa and Guam in support of Taiwan, and for the PLAN to become more familiar with Taiwan’s major east coast naval and air bases.<sup>46</sup> By transiting along strategic approaches the U.S. Navy might use to intervene in a Taiwan contingency, the PLAN expanded its operating areas and familiarized itself with locations that could be used to deny or delay the ability of the U.S. Navy to intervene.

The PLAN continued to expand its operations in the Western Pacific in 2008. Rather than relying exclusively on the Miyako Channel to access the Philippine Sea, the PLAN began to use different straits to reach waters beyond the first island chain (see figure 2). On October 19, 2008, a *Sovremenny* destroyer, two frigates, and an oiler sailed east through the Tsugaru Strait while circumnavigating Japan.<sup>47</sup>

Then on November 2, a *Luzhou* destroyer, a frigate, an oiler, and an ocean-going tug transited the Miyako Channel to the Philippine Sea. This marked the first time a *Luzhou* DD had been observed operating in the Philippine Sea.<sup>48</sup> The Miyako Channel was again used when a *Luzhou*-class destroyer, two frigates, an oiler, and an ocean-going tug sailed to the Philippine Sea in June 2009.<sup>49</sup> Observations by the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Forces indicated the PLAN vessels remained close together but appeared to conduct “seemingly separate maneuvers.”<sup>50</sup>

These Western Pacific operations enhanced the PLAN ability to operate in unfamiliar waters and helped to develop logistics and command and control systems. They also illustrated an emphasis on diversifying the types and classes of ships that deploy to the Western Pacific. The



Figure 2. 2004–2009 PLAN Western Pacific Chokepoint Transits



execution of these operations further enhances the PLAN ability to execute near seas active defense and improve capabilities that are also germane to new historic missions.

In addition to operations in the Western Pacific, the PLAN continued to improve interoperability with other services for Taiwan contingencies. From September 3–6, 2007, the PLAN participated in an exercise called Lianhe-2007 (Joint-2007).<sup>51</sup> The exercise was organized by the Jinan Military Region and conducted in the vicinity of the Shandong Peninsula. According to Chinese television reports, the objective was to explore standardized methods for organizing joint operations during an emergency and coordinating under conditions of informatization.<sup>52</sup> Xinhua press agency reported the exercise goal was to “enhance joint intelligence acquisition, joint command and control, joint fire power strikes, joint electronic confrontation, joint actions of forces, and joint support and reinforcement.”<sup>53</sup> Hong Kong reporting, however, indicated the exercise focused on the second wave of landing operations

and the final stage for “liberating Taiwan,” with all PLAN targets having actual Taiwan place names and ship pennant numbers.<sup>54</sup>

If those reports are accurate, the exercise is notable because it illustrates increasing realism in PLAN training as well as improvements in interoperability with other services. When this exercise is juxtaposed with more frequent deployments to the Western Pacific, however, it suggests a continued evolution and improvement in PLAN capabilities to execute near seas active defense more generally, as the lessons learned are applicable to several potential missions in the near seas.

### **Counterpiracy Deployments**

PLAN counterpiracy deployments to the Gulf of Aden began in December 2008 and are part of its new historic missions to protect Chinese maritime interests.<sup>55</sup> These far seas missions require the capability to replenish at sea, conduct intra-task force resupply, perform long-distance navigation, demonstrate formation-keeping with competent seamanship, and operate in all weather conditions—skills that are also applicable to near seas missions.<sup>56</sup> While these deployments enhance PLAN capabilities to operate in the far seas, they contribute little to the navy’s ability to defend China. The lessons the PLAN learns from these deployments, however, contribute to basic proficiencies it must master as a prerequisite to defending China in the far seas.

Briefly highlighting some of the PLAN training events used to prepare for these far seas missions illustrates how these skills are applicable to far seas defense missions while also enhancing PLAN near seas active defense capabilities.

Improving PLAN logistics capabilities is one of the most important requirements for executing missions in the far seas. In July 2008, the Chinese military newspaper highlighted the PLAN successfully resupplying two different classes of ships simultaneously.<sup>57</sup> The article described refueling ships stationed aft and abreast of the supply ship in an “informatized” environment. The capability to resupply different classes of ships allows the PLAN to dispatch and resupply mixed classes of ships to the Gulf of Aden. It also provides for greater flexibility of PLAN contingency operations in the near seas.

Another example of PLAN far seas mission training that is relevant to near seas contingencies was a December 2008 antiterror exercise by an East Sea Fleet helicopter regiment. Exercise objectives were maritime patrol, salvage, cross decking via helicopter, firefighting, and freeing hostages.<sup>58</sup> The exercise had direct applicability to skills the PLAN needed to master for its upcoming counterpiracy deployment to the Gulf of Aden, but counterterrorism training is also

germane to a myriad of possible contingencies in the near seas, such as an oil platform take-down or a terrorist attack against a ship near China's coast.

Similarly, the PLAN conducted a proof-of-concept deployment to Pakistan in 2007 to participate in multinational exercise Peace 07. The East Sea Fleet ships that participated in the exercise deployed to Pakistan without replenishing food stores, although they did take on fuel.<sup>59</sup> Press reporting on the deployment indicates it was a test to see how the crew would fare during a long deployment. While such knowledge is useful in preparing for protracted deployments such as counterpiracy missions, it also helped the PLAN learn how long its crews can go without provisioning, thereby enhancing understanding of wartime requirements for contingencies in the near seas.

### **2009 Outline for Military Training and Evaluation**

One of the ways the PLAN improved its near seas active defense capabilities during this period was through joint training with the other services. The 2009 OMTE published by the PLA General Staff Department on January 1, 2009, emphasized interoperability.<sup>60</sup> Examples of PLAN participation in joint interoperability exercises during this period include Joint Operation 2009, an exercise involving all three services as well as the People's Armed Police and local governments that included military-civilian integration.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, the Vanguard-2009 exercise was dedicated to advancing joint capabilities and included observers from all services. This exercise reportedly marked the "first time" the PLAN engaged in joint operations planning, joint command control, joint intelligence processing, and joint combat decisionmaking under conditions of "informatization."<sup>62</sup> PLAN exercises and training in response to OMTE requirements help it to improve its near seas defense capabilities by enhancing interoperability with the other services.

### **Normalization of Western Pacific Deployments: 2010–2012**

The PLAN continued to bolster its confidence in executing blue water operations in the Western Pacific during the 3-year period from 2010 through the end of 2012. Not only did the PLAN further diversify the straits used to access the Western Pacific, it also continued mixing the classes of ships that participated in blue water training. The increase in the number of ships dispatched to the Western Pacific meant that ship captains with various levels of expertise were operating in the vicinity of foreign navies, which resulted in ships inadvertently violating international norms, standards, rules, and laws.

Frequent deployments to the Western Pacific during this 3-year period contributed to growing international angst over PLAN lack of transparency, as well as concerns about the messages PLAN naval operations were sending. The combination of increased frequency of Western Pacific operations and foreign pressure appears to have influenced PLAN transparency. By the end of 2012, the PLAN appeared much more confident in its Western Pacific operations, to a point where official Chinese press reports viewed PLAN deployments to the Western Pacific as “normalized.”

### Increased Frequency of Western Pacific Deployments

The PLAN diversified access routes to the Pacific Ocean from 2010 to 2012. While the Miyako was the most frequently used channel, the PLAN also used the Osumi Channel and the Yonaguni Channel for the first time (see figure 3). The diversification of access routes to the

**Figure 3. 2010–2012 PLAN Western Pacific Chokepoint Transits**



Pacific provides navigation options for the PLAN as it routinizes training for near seas active defense in the Western Pacific.

Three PLAN ships, including a *Luzhou*-class destroyer, transited east through the Osumi Channel in April 2012. According to the 2013 Japanese Defense White Paper, this transit was the first use of the Osumi Channel by the PLAN since a *Ming*-class submarine transited it in November 2003.<sup>63</sup> Four PLAN vessels transited north through the Yonaguni Channel in October 2012 and as they transited back into the East China Sea passed within 80 kilometers of the largest of the Diaoyu Islands.<sup>64</sup> The use of the Yonaguni Channel came one month after Japan nationalized these islands, suggesting this particular transit was a signal of Chinese displeasure over Japan's actions.

The PLAN conducted what at the time was its largest deployment of ships and submarines to the Western Pacific in April 2010. The flotilla of eight ships and two submarines from the Chinese East Sea Fleet transited the Miyako Channel with the submarines surfaced and the Chinese national flag flying.<sup>65</sup> The scope of this deployment alarmed many in Tokyo, prompting the Japanese Defense Minister to state that he “would decide on measures to take after closely evaluating whether the act had some intent directed toward Japan.”<sup>66</sup>

Whether this deployment should be perceived as a “signal” is open to interpretation. While it was the largest exercise for the PLAN in the Philippine Sea, it followed a series of deployments to that sea by groups of four to six surface ships. The increased number of ships coupled with the inclusion of two submarines appears to have been more of an evolutionary step of PLAN Philippine Sea deployments than a deliberate signal.

Exercise complexity continued to increase during this period. Whereas Philippine Sea deployments during 2007 through 2009 involved single-dimensional (that is, surface ship against surface ship) exercises, those conducted from 2010 through 2012 evolved into being multidimensional (that is, a more complex exercise where a surface ship must address threats from the air, surface, and subsurface). The April 2010 deployment of East Sea Fleet units to the Philippine Sea included two diesel submarines. Approximately one year later, a flotilla of 11 PLAN units including two submarines deployed through the Miyako Channel to the Philippine Sea (see table 2).<sup>67</sup> Inclusion of submarines allows the PLAN to rehearse disciplines of antisubmarine warfare and antisurface warfare in unfamiliar waters.

The PLAN also added an airborne dimension to its exercises, as helicopter flight operations were observed during several of the deployments to the Western Pacific.<sup>68</sup> Training with helicopters enhances several disciplines, including antisurface and antisubmarine warfare, command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C4I), and logistics. In addition to more frequent use

Table 2. 2010–2012 PLAN Operations in the Western Pacific

Approximate Date	Fleet	PLAN Vessels	Strait/Channel
March 2010	North Sea Fleet	Six vessels, including <i>Luzhou</i> DDG	East: Miyako West: Bashi
April 2010	East Sea Fleet	8 surface ships 2 submarines	East: Miyako West: Miyako
July 2010	North Sea Fleet	<i>Luzhou</i> DDG Unidentified FF	East: Miyako West: Miyako
June 2011	East Sea Fleet	11 vessels, including <i>Sovremenny</i> DDG <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF Unidentified ASR Unidentified AGI 2 submarines	East: Miyako West: Miyako
November 2011	North Sea Fleet	<i>Luzhou</i> DDG <i>Luhu</i> DD <i>Jiangwei II</i> FF <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF <i>Dadie</i> AGI <i>Fuqing</i> AOR	East: Miyako West: Miyako
January 2012	North Sea Fleet	<i>Luhu</i> DD-113 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-538 Unidentified AGI	East: Osumi West: Miyako*
February 2012	East Sea Fleet	<i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-549 <i>Jiangwei II</i> FF-521 <i>Jiangwei II</i> FF-522 <i>Jiangwei I</i> FF-542	East: Miyako West: Miyako
May 3, 2012	East Sea Fleet	3 vessels, including <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-530 <i>Dongdiao</i> AGI-851	East: Osumi West: Miyako
May 2012	South Sea Fleet*	5 vessels, including <i>Luyang</i> DDG <i>Yuzhao</i> LPD	East: Bashi* West: Bashi*
June 2012	North Sea Fleet	3 vessels, including <i>Luzhou</i> DDG	East: Osumi West: Miyako*
October 2012	North Sea Fleet	7 ships, including <i>Luhu</i> DD-112 <i>Luzhou</i> DDG-116	East: Miyako West: Miyako
October 2012	Not reported	2 <i>Luyang</i> DD 1 <i>Jiangkai</i> FF 1 unidentified ship	East: Miyako* North: Yonaguni

**Table 2. 2010–2012 PLAN Operations in the Western Pacific, cont.**

Approximate Date	Fleet	PLAN Vessels	Strait/Channel
November– December 2012	East Sea Fleet	<i>Sovremenny</i> DDG-136 <i>Sovremenny</i> DDG-139 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-529 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-525 <i>Fuqing</i> AOR-882	East: Miyako North: Yonaguni

\*Not specified in press sources, but assessed based on location.

Key: DD, DDG: destroyer; AOR: auxiliary oiler replenishment; F, FF: frigate; ASR: submarine rescue ship; AGI: auxiliary general intelligence; LPD: amphibious transport dock

Sources: “Chinese Fleet’s Flag Waving in Miyako Channel is Not Act of Intimidation,” *Tokyo Mainichi Daily News*; *The Defense of Japan*, 2012, 2013, and 2014 editions; “Chinese Navy Ships Pass Through International Waters Near Okinawa,” Kyodo World Service, July 4, 2010; “11 Chinese Naval Ships Cross High Seas Between Okinawa Islands in 2 Days,” Kyodo World Service, June 9, 2011; “News Watch 9” [ニュースウォッチ9], NHK, television program, June 22, 2011; Joint Staff Office, Japan Ministry of Defense [防衛省統合幕僚監部], “Concerning the Movements of Chinese Naval Fleets” [中国海軍艦艇の動向について], November 23, 2011; Yin Hang, “PLA Navy ‘Qingdao’ and ‘Yantai’ Warships to Set Sail for Training Mission,” *PLA Daily*, January 30, 2012; “Three Chinese Warships Sail Through Kagoshima Strait,” *Yomiuri Shimbun*; “PLA Sorties Threaten Encirclement,” *Taipei Times Online*, February 9, 2012; “Chinese Navy Fleet Passes Through Osumi-kaikyo Strait,” CCTV Online, May 3, 2012; “7 Chinese Warships Sail off Okinawa Pref. Island Amid Senkaku Spat,” Kyodo World Service, October 4, 2012; Wang Xiaodong, “Navy Completes Military Exercise in the Pacific,” *China Daily*, November 1, 2012; “Japan Claims Three Chinese Warships Sail Toward Okinawa; Chinese Defense Ministry Responds That It Is Justifiable and Legal” [日本称中国三艘军舰向冲绳方向行驶 中国国防部回应: 正当合法], China News Agency [中国通讯社], October 23, 2012; “Chinese Navy to Conduct Blue Water Training Regularly,” *People’s Daily*, December 14, 2012; “Beijing Opens Up Over Naval Manoeuvres,” *South China Morning Post*, November 29, 2012; *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment—China and Northeast Asia*.

of helicopters in exercises, the PLAN integrated unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) into at least one of its exercises in the Philippine Sea.<sup>69</sup> Depending on how they are employed, UAVs can enhance all warfare disciplines. Conducting exercises with helicopters, UAVs, and submarines highlights the continued evolution of PLAN capabilities to execute near seas active defense.<sup>70</sup>

### Learning by Being More Transparent

As the PLAN sent more ships to the Philippine Sea for training, it frequently interacted with JMSDF ships and aircraft. The force routinely provides information about these interactions up the chain of command, enabling the Japanese Defense Ministry to quickly report when there are interactions of interest to the Japanese populace. While the majority of defense ministry reports simply detail the location of Chinese ships or what they are doing while operating

in the vicinity of Japan, there are periodic reports of Chinese ship captains or helicopter pilots violating international norms.

In contrast, the PLA spokesmen remained relatively tight-lipped on PLAN activities unless circumstances necessitated an official response. From 2010 through 2012, reports of poor PLAN behavior frequently put Chinese official spokesmen on the defensive because they found themselves responding to allegations or criticism without the opportunity to shape the public affairs response to Japanese published reports. Moreover, the lack of Chinese reporting about its frequent deployments to the Philippine Sea perpetuated concerns about PLA operations because it demonstrated a lack of Chinese transparency. China's slow response to Japanese criticism following close helicopter approaches to JMSDF ships in 2010, as well as persistent Japanese press reports of Chinese ships transiting near Japan's islands, may have prompted a change in the way the PLAN reports its activities; by the end of 2012, the PLA was releasing information much more frequently on Chinese exercises in the Philippine Sea.

Two close PLAN helicopter approaches to JMSDF ships during the April 2010 deployment of PLAN vessels to the Philippine Sea prompted official Japanese criticism of Chinese operations. The first incident occurred when a PLAN helicopter came within 90 meters horizontally and 30 meters vertically of the JMSDF destroyer *Suzunami* on April 8.<sup>71</sup> Two weeks later, on April 21, a PLAN helicopter circled the JMSDF destroyer *Asayuki*, closing to 90 meters horizontally and 50 meters vertically.<sup>72</sup> The similarities and close succession of the two incidents prompted a Japanese official demarche in which Tokyo demanded Beijing acknowledge them and take action to prevent similar future incidents.<sup>73</sup>

China's response to these incidents came from the Chinese defense ministry spokesman, who stated on April 22 that "military training on the waters of the high seas complies with international law. . . . Relevant parties should not make subjective conjectures and wild guesses, much less take any drastic action to track and disturb . . . the Chinese naval vessels which are in regular training."<sup>74</sup> The "subjective conjectures and wild guesses" statement referenced Japanese press reports suggesting the PLAN deployment of eight ships and two surfaced submarines to the Philippine Sea was saber rattling directed at Japan.

These two helicopter interactions illustrate PLA delays in responding to Japanese criticism. Following the first incident on April 8, Japanese media reported PLAN actions as "provocative," with no official Chinese response. Following the second incident, numerous Japanese press articles criticized Chinese activities. The official Chinese Ministry of National Defense response came one day after the second helicopter interaction, but simply referencing Chinese compliance with international law did little to assuage Japanese concerns.



Japanese media reported more actively on the PLAN deployments to and exercises in the Western Pacific as those events became more commonplace. During the period 2010 through 2012, the Japanese media reported on almost every Chinese deployment and exercise in the Western Pacific. China lagged behind Japanese reporting, however, perpetuating the perception of a lack of Chinese transparency. Japanese press began reporting on the PLAN's June 2011 deployment of 11 ships to the Philippine Sea on June 8.<sup>75</sup> One day later, China's Ministry of National Defense issued a press release saying the PLAN would conduct training in the Western Pacific from mid- to late July.<sup>76</sup> Chinese unofficial media even noted that the timing of China's press release "came after some Japanese media published reports expressing fears over recent moves by Chinese navy vessels in international waters close to Japanese territory."<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, the Japanese defense ministry published photographs of six PLAN vessels transiting the Miyako Strait on November 23. Later that day, the Chinese defense ministry stated it would be conducting drills in the Western Pacific as part of "an annual, planned routine drill. It is not directed at any specific country and is keeping with relevant international laws."<sup>78</sup> The quick Chinese response to Japanese press reports suggests the PLA had a statement prepared for release knowing that Japan would be reporting on the military activity, and may indicate the PLA was becoming more savvy in its public affairs posture.

The media battle over perceptions of Chinese transparency and the continued slowness in Chinese press reporting about its exercises continued until late 2012. The PLA appears to have changed its public affairs approach in November 2012. Rather than waiting for Japanese media reports about its activities, the PLA began to announce PLAN exercises in the Western Pacific prior to PLAN ships reaching the Miyako Channel.<sup>79</sup> At a November 29, 2012, news conference, for example, the Ministry of National Defense spokesman stated, without apparent Japanese press prompting, "Five warships of the East Sea Fleet . . . sailed through the Miyako Strait into the Western Pacific and carried out blue water training on November 28, 2012."<sup>80</sup> Hong Kong's press recognized this apparent shift in the PLA public affairs posture, saying the official statement by the PLA was "a rare departure from past practice that suggests Beijing is improving its military transparency."<sup>81</sup> This apparent PLA shift to more openly commenting on PLAN activities continued into 2013 and 2014, with the PLA providing more timely reporting on deployments to the Western Pacific.

PLA "transparency" is a double-edged sword. While official Chinese press provided few details about PLAN deployments to the Western Pacific from 2007 through 2012 and appeared to wait to report on its activities until Japanese reports surfaced, the PLA has reported more liberally since the end of 2012. This change has had the effect of *appearing* to indicate a dramatic

increase in PLAN navy exercises and operations in the Western Pacific starting at the end of 2012. Looking at the trend of PLAN deployments to the Western Pacific since 2007, however, suggests a more gradual evolution of its deployments (see tables 1 and 2). Japan's control over the public affairs narrative coupled with perpetuation of perceptions of a Chinese threat and lack of PLAN transparency appear to have been key factors in prompting more open Chinese reporting.

### **Stepping Stones Toward Far Seas Defense: 2013–2014**

The PLAN increased the frequency and complexity of its deployments to the Western Pacific from 2013 through 2014. During this 2-year period, it integrated fixed-wing aircraft into Philippine Sea exercises and executed the first Western Pacific exercise that simultaneously involved all three fleets. Not only did the PLAN “normalize” its Philippine Sea deployments, it also conducted its first surface ship deployment to the Indian Ocean outside of Gulf of Aden counterpiracy operations. The Indian Ocean does not fall under the near seas defense rubric, which could suggest the deployment represents nascent PLAN efforts to apply the lessons learned from its routinized operations in the near seas to development of a far seas defense capability. In addition, the PLA appears to have refined how and when it published press articles on major Western Pacific deployments by the end of 2014.

### **Normalized PLAN Deployments to the Western Pacific**

PLAN officials were claiming they had “normalized open-sea training” by the end of 2012.<sup>82</sup> The frequency of PLAN deployments to the Western Pacific suggests the navy leadership's growing confidence in its ability to execute deployments as well as in enhanced PLAN capabilities.<sup>83</sup>

For instance, fixed-wing PLAN aircraft were integrated into operations in the Philippine Sea in 2013–2014. In July and September 2013, a Y-8 surveillance aircraft and an H-6 bomber flew within international airspace over the Miyako Channel; two Y-8s and two H-6s flew the same route over 3 consecutive days in October 2013, and one Y-8 and two H-6s flew the same route in March 2014.<sup>84</sup> During a mid-December 2014 “Ocean Going Exercise,” four iterations of PLAN H-6 maritime strike-capable bombers and both Y-8 and Y-9 reconnaissance aircraft flew south of Okinawa as part of a multifleet exercise in the Western Pacific.<sup>85</sup>

Each time the aircraft flew to the Philippine Sea, Chinese surface combatants were conducting exercises in the area (see table 3). While details of the interaction between ships and aircraft were not reported in the press, aircraft–surface ship operations were likely conducted.

(Continued on page 28)

Table 3. 2013–2014 PLAN Operations in the Western Pacific

Approximate Date	Fleet	Surface Ships	Strait/Channel
January–February 2013	North Sea Fleet	<i>Luhu</i> DD-113 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-538 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-546	East: Miyako West: Bashi
March–April 2013	South Sea Fleet	<i>Yuzhao</i> LPD-999 <i>Luyang II</i> DDG-170 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-569 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-572	East: Bashi West: Bashi
April 2013	South Sea Fleet	<i>Luyang II</i> DDG-170 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-572	East: Bashi West: Miyako
May 2013	East Sea Fleet	<i>Jiangwei II</i> FF-566 <i>Jianghu I</i> FF-559 <i>Fuchi</i> AOR-886	East: Miyako West: Bashi
May–June 2013	North Sea Fleet	<i>Luhu</i> DD-113 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-547 <i>Fuqing</i> AOR-881	East: Miyako West: Osumi
July 2013	North Sea Fleet	<i>Luzhou</i> DDG-115 <i>Luzhou</i> DDG-116 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-546 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-538 <i>Fuqing</i> AOR-881	East: La Perouse West: Miyako
27 August–10 September 2013	East Sea Fleet	<i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-548 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-549	East: Miyako North: Yonaguni
October 2013 Exercise Mobility-5	North Sea Fleet	<i>Luzhou</i> DDG-116 <i>Luzhou</i> DDG-115 <i>Luhu</i> DD-113 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-547 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-538	East: Miyako West: Miyako
October 2013 Exercise Mobility-5	East Sea Fleet	<i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-529 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-530	East: Miyako North: Yonaguni
October 2013 Exercise Mobility-5	South Sea Fleet	<i>Luyang I</i> DDG-168 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-570 <i>Fuchi</i> AOR-887	East: Bashi West: Bashi
December 2013	South Sea Fleet	<i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-570 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-571 <i>Fuchi</i> AOR-887	East: Bashi* West: Bashi*
January–February 2014	South Sea Fleet	<i>Yuzhao</i> LPD-989 <i>Luyang II</i> DDG-171 <i>Luyang I</i> DDG-169	South: Sunda North: Lombok East: Bashi West: Miyako

Table 3. 2013–2014 PLAN Operations in the Western Pacific, cont.

Approximate Date	Fleet	Surface Ships	Strait/Channel
February–March 2014	East Sea Fleet	<i>Luyang II</i> DDG-150 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-548 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-549 <i>Fuchi</i> AOR-890	East: Miyako North: Yonaguni
May–June 2014 Training Cruise	North Sea Fleet	<i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-550 <i>Daxin</i> AXT-81	East: Miyako North: Indonesian Straits
June 2014	East Sea Fleet	<i>Jiangwei II</i> FF-528 <i>Jiangwei II</i> FF-565 <i>Fuqing</i> AOR-881	East: Miyako West: Osumi
July 2014	North Sea Fleet	<i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-546 <i>Jiangwei II</i> FF-527 <i>Fuchi</i> AOR-889	East: Not reported West: Miyako
December 2014 Ocean Going Exercise	North Sea Fleet	<i>Luzhou</i> DDG-116 <i>Luhu</i> DD-112 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-538 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-546 <i>Fuchi</i> AOR-889	East: Osumi West: La Perouse
December 2014 Ocean Going Exercise	East Sea Fleet	<i>Luyang II</i> DDG-151 <i>Sovremenny</i> DDG-138 <i>Jiangwei II</i> FF-521 <i>Jiangkai II</i> FF-548 <i>Fuchi</i> AOR-886 <i>Dongdiao</i> AGI-851	East: Miyako* West: Miyako
December 2014 Ocean Going Exercise	South Sea Fleet	Not reported	East: Bashi* West: Bashi*

\*Not specified in press sources, but assessed based on location.

Key: DD, DDG: destroyer; AOR: auxiliary oiler replenishment; F, FF: frigate; ASR: submarine rescue ship; AGI: auxiliary general intelligence; LPD: amphibious transport dock; AXT: navigation training ship  
Sources: *The Defense of Japan 2014*; Yu Li, “Chinese Fleet Returns After Training in West Pacific,” CCTV Online, February 16, 2013; Zhao Lei, “Navy Begins Patrol-Training Mission,” *China Daily*, March 20, 2013; “(Update 2) 2 Chinese Warships Patrol near Senkakus,” Jiji Press, April 17, 2013; “Chinese Navy Continues High-Sea Training,” *PLA Daily*, April 15, 2013; “East China Sea Fleet Successfully Completes High-Sea Training Mission,” *PLA Daily*, May 22, 2013; “PLA Navy Fleet Enters W Pacific for Training,” Xinhua, May 27, 2013; “Chinese Warships Sail to West Pacific for Open-sea Training,” *PLA Daily*, July 16, 2013; Li Xiaokun, “China Sails Through ‘First Island Chain’”; “PLAN Taskforce Enters Western Pacific for Training,” *PLA Daily*, August 29, 2014; “China Active in East China Sea,” NHK, September 10, 2013; Andrew Berglund, *Maneuver-5 Exercise Focuses on Improving Distant Seas Combat Capabilities* (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission [USCC], December 16, 2013); “UPDATE 1: 5 Chinese Naval Vessels Sail Outside Japanese Waters Near Okinawa,” Kyodo World Service, October 29, 2013; Japan

Joint Staff Office [統合幕僚監部], “Trends of China Naval Vessels” [中国海軍艦艇の動向について], December 23, 2013, February 8, 2014, December 4, 2014, December 13, 2014, December 14, 2014, and December 25, 2014; *China’s Navy Extends Its Combat Reach to the Indian Ocean*, Staff Report (Washington, DC: USCC, March 14, 2014); “PLAN’s Open-Sea Training Taskforce Completes Training Mission,” *PLA Daily*, March 12, 2014; “Chinese Navy Starts Distant Water Training,” *China Daily*, May 1, 2014; Li Tang and Gao Yi, “Navy: Routine Patrol Coverage of the Long Sea Frontier”; “Chinese Warships Tailed After by Japanese Ships and Planes Again,” *PLA Daily*, June 24, 2014; Zhang Tao, ed., “Why PLA Keeps Low Profile about Exercise in Western Pacific?”; and *Jane’s Sentinel Security Assessment—China and Northeast Asia*.

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Such training allows the PLAN to improve exercise realism and enhances tactical disciplines germane to both near and far seas operations such as anti-air warfare, anti-surface warfare, and C4I. Such disciplines are especially important to PLAN operations in the far seas due to the diversity of threats as compared to training in the near seas where the PLAN routinely interacts with the same Japanese or U.S. Navy platforms.

### **PLAN Strategic Messaging**

Several PLAN deployments to the Western Pacific during 2013–2014 were notable due to their apparent strategic messaging. Two ships, *Jiangkai II* FF-572 and *Luyang II* DDG-170, departed Sanya and transited the Bashi Channel in April 2013. The two ships had just returned from a deployment to the Philippine Sea a week previously, so this transit followed a quick one-week turnaround. According to the official Chinese press, the two ships then passed west through the Miyako Channel and operated near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands on April 17.<sup>86</sup> That date coincided with the anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Shimomoseki, which marked the end of the Sino-Japanese War and China’s forced ceding of Taiwan and its adjacent islands to Japan. Japan maintains that this agreement included the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. The atypical route of these ships, coupled with their short turnaround in homeport, indicates that the operation was a signal to Japan of China’s resolve on the island dispute.

Then, during a late August 2013 deployment to the Philippine Sea, two East Sea Fleet ships reentered the East China Sea through the Yonaguni Strait, which is in close proximity to the Diaoyu/Senkakus. The timing of the transit, which coincided with the 2012 anniversary of

Japan's nationalization of the Senkakus, seems again to be a signal of China's resolve. While the Yonaguni Strait had been used previously by the PLAN, it is not the normal route when transiting from the Philippine to the East China Sea (see figure 4).

A third likely signal to Japan came from PLAN utilization of the La Perouse Strait following a bilateral exercise with the Russian Navy. Five PLAN ships transited east through the La Perouse Strait and circumnavigated Japan rather than using a direct route and transiting back through the Sea of Japan to their North Sea Fleet homeport following the Vladivostok-based exercise.<sup>87</sup> This deployment illustrates an expansion of SLOCs used by the PLAN to access the Western Pacific; more significantly, Chinese Navy officials referred to the transit as “cutting the

**Figure 4. 2013–2014 PLAN Western Pacific Chokepoint Transits**



first island chain into little pieces.”<sup>88</sup> What all three of these deployments have in common is that the ships did not follow their normal routes to or from the Philippine Sea, suggesting that future route deviations could serve as indicators of Chinese naval strategic messaging.

### **Evolving PLAN Deployments: From Near Seas Toward Far Seas Defense**

Perhaps the most notable western PLAN deployment during this 2-year period was its Mobility-5 exercise in October 2013. This was the first time the navy conducted coordinated combat drills in the Western Pacific involving ships from all three fleets and PLAN fixed-wing aircraft.<sup>89</sup> According to the PLAN South Sea Fleet commander, the exercise focused on:

*Building the capability of distant-sea combat systems under conditions of informatization. In this exercise, importance was attached to exploring major and challenging problems related to the building of distant-sea combat systems, reconnaissance and early warning, target identification and guidance, long-distance defense penetration conducted by aviation forces, and vessel-aircraft coordination in carrying out ocean-based anti-submarine operations.*<sup>90</sup>

A focus of the exercise was “back-to-back” drills in which opposing forces did not know the plans or intentions of the opposing force.<sup>91</sup> PLAN officials state they want to use back-to-back training in exercises because “troops should be trained according to how wars are fought.”<sup>92</sup> While this concept is a notable improvement in exercises—Mobility-5 was more complex than previous PLAN exercises in the Philippine Sea—it was also the first time all three fleets came together in the Philippine Sea for an exercise, suggesting the PLAN continues to work toward improving its near seas defense capabilities.

Another noteworthy event during this period involved three PLAN ships deploying in January 2014 through the South China Sea into the eastern Indian Ocean, considered to be the far seas.<sup>93</sup> The three ships departed Sanya on a 23-day patrol, during which they sailed nearly 8,000 nautical miles operating near the Paracel Islands, Spratly Islands, and James Shoal and passing through the Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar straits<sup>94</sup> (see figure 5). While the ships were in the Indian Ocean, *Yuzhao* LPD-989 simulated an electronic warfare attack and drilled against notional “enemy” airplanes and submarines.<sup>95</sup> In addition, the three ships “carried out more than 10 combat-realistic training tasks, including the anti-pirate, joint search and rescue, anti-nuclear and anti-chemical contamination, and damage control tasks.”<sup>96</sup>

Figure 5. 2013–2014 PLAN Indian Ocean Chokepoint Transits



Chinese press covered this deployment extensively, referring to the operation as a “combat readiness patrol.” This terminology is important because it is normally reserved for PLAN patrols in the near seas. A combat readiness patrol that included antisubmarine warfare training in the Indian Ocean suggests the PLAN is beginning to extend its combat capabilities out from the near seas and operationalize a far seas defense doctrine.

A third noteworthy deployment during this period was the simultaneous deployment of elements from all three fleets to the Western Pacific for a tri-fleet exercise in December 2014. This was the second time all three fleets exercised together in the Western Pacific; the purpose was to “improve the navy’s abilities of long-range maneuver, far sea defense combat, remote command and control, reconnaissance and early-warning, and test and enhance the performance of weaponry and equipment.” The deployment consisted of a mix of destroyers and frigates and included surface, air, and underwater training.<sup>97</sup> In addition to the integration of long-range PLAN fixed-wing aviation in this exercise, the inclusion of underwater training suggests this was a three-dimensional exercise including the participation of PLAN submarines.<sup>98</sup>

The importance of this exercise is that it perpetuated several of the trends observed in previous PLAN Western Pacific exercises and that it has implications for how the PLAN will operationalize far seas defense. The exercise continued to emphasize combined frigate and destroyer surface action groups transiting through diverse chokepoints. Similarly, the coordination between



elements of all three fleets further enhanced standardization of multidiscipline training across the PLAN. In addition, the inclusion of fixed-wing aircraft demonstrates growing PLAN confidence and proficiency in integrating its aircraft into exercises several hundred miles from the PRC coast. While these disciplines are germane to PLAN operations in the near seas, they also suggest how the PLAN will operate in the far seas.

Although the location of the exercise was not specified, PLA press referred to it as being in the Western Pacific. The Japan Joint Staff Office reported PLAN aircraft flew south of Okinawa to an area northeast of the Philippine island of Luzon.<sup>99</sup> These aircraft were likely part of the exercise, and their reported location suggests the exercise occurred in the near seas. This makes the PLA reference to the exercise objective of improving PLAN “far sea defense combat” noteworthy. It suggests Western Pacific exercises are a laboratory to enhance PLAN capabilities and tactics for future far seas defense missions.

### **China’s Western Pacific Transparency Strategy**

By the end of 2014, China appeared to have refined its Western Pacific transparency strategy. Although the PLAN continued the trend of increasing transparency on its major Western Pacific deployments, it began to calibrate its volume of reporting on Western Pacific exercises to mitigate concerns over Chinese military capabilities. Increased transparency regarding the December 2014 exercise was evidenced by Chinese military press publicizing PLAN intent to deploy ships from all three fleets to the Western Pacific days before the ships had reached sensitive chokepoints, as well as PLA press specifying this exercise was the *final* (emphasis added) PLAN training of the year.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, PLA press immediately confirmed Japanese reports identifying specific PLAN ships or aircraft transiting to or from the Western Pacific.

Conversely, the Chinese press deliberately withheld some details about this exercise. For example, PLA press did not identify which South Sea Fleet units participated in the tri-fleet exercise. Because Japanese press did not publish any articles identifying the participating units, the Chinese press did not draw undue attention to this exercise by publishing articles highlighting specifics of South Sea Fleet participation. Similarly, the Chinese press limited reporting on this exercise by withholding reporting on tactical details of the exercise “based on diplomatic considerations.” Chinese military press amplified the rationale to limit reports, stating:

*The surrounding situations around China have become increasingly complicated, the China-Japan, China-Philippines and China-Vietnam relations are highly sensitive, and there is also the more important U.S. factor behind them. Analysts*

*held that China's decision to carry out this exercise without publicity is based on considerations for national interests, so that there will be no excuse for other countries to hype up the "China threat" theory.<sup>101</sup>*

Explicitly limiting publicity about this Western Pacific exercise suggests China's "transparency strategy" had evolved from how China first reported about its deployments to the Western Pacific starting in November 2011.

By the end of 2014, China's transparency strategy appeared to be to preempt Japanese reporting on significant PLAN exercises in the Western Pacific by announcing the exercise prior to PLAN deployments and subsequently to limit PLA reporting to confirmations of Japanese factual reports (such as the identification of specific PLAN ships). If Japanese media does not report on the details of the exercise or participating units, the Chinese press will follow suit and withhold information to mitigate potential regional concerns over PLAN Western Pacific exercises. Should the Japanese press publish stories about PLAN exercises that may be considered alarmist or indicate a growing Chinese threat, China would counter these reports through the official military spokesman or in PLA press. By the end of 2014, the PLA believed its evolving Western Pacific exercise transparency strategy was achieving the desired result of reducing Japanese press hype over PLAN deployments through the first island chain.<sup>102</sup>

### **Indicators of a Maritime Strategy that Includes Far Seas Defense**

Chinese official press reports indicate how the PLAN intends to operationalize far seas defense. PLA transparency has improved as a result of its expanding operations, which helps alleviate perceptions of a Chinese threat, while also highlighting PLAN operations to its domestic audience. In particular, China appears to have learned to be prepared to shape the public affairs narrative about its deployments by disseminating its public affairs message early in a deployment to mitigate potential foreign concerns. The Chinese press frequently reported on the operational and tactical details of the January 2014 three-ship deployment to the eastern Indian Ocean and its 2013 Mobility-5 exercise and calibrated its reporting on details of the Western Pacific December 2014 exercise.

Reporting similar to that observed during the 2013–2014 deployments is an example of the press coverage that the PLA will employ during future far seas defense missions. More regular references to PLAN ships conducting "combat readiness patrols" in the far seas will indicate the operationalization of far seas defense, but the PLAN is likely to withhold tactical details about these deployments to mitigate regional concerns.

Another indicator of far seas defense operationalization comes from examining the trend of PLAN deployments to the far seas. The navy's approach to its Western Pacific operations between 2007 and 2014 was gradually to increase their number, frequency, and complexity, in part to increase the number of ship captains with experience in the Western Pacific and the far seas. PLAN lessons from combat readiness patrols in the Western Pacific and its Gulf of Aden deployments are applicable to combat readiness patrols in the far seas, but there is no replacement for actual experience gained by more ship captains conducting combat readiness patrols in the far seas.

Increased emphasis on PLAN logistics is another indication the PLAN is beginning to operationalize far seas defense missions. Surface ship deployments to the Western Pacific since 2007 frequently have included a logistics support ship. While the PLAN has demonstrated a capability to deploy for weeks at a time to the Western Pacific without oiler support, more frequent deployments to the far seas will require additional logistics support capabilities. An aggressive logistics ship-building program would further indicate increased far seas defense operations.<sup>103</sup>

Fixed-wing reconnaissance aircraft have been integrated into several Western Pacific PLAN deployments since 2013. While aircraft may provide intelligence support for PLAN ships operating in the near seas, PLAN operations in the far seas are beyond the operational range of mainland-based aircraft. Space-based reconnaissance assets can fill this potential Chinese intelligence gap. Increased numbers of Chinese satellites would be another indication of PLAN far seas defense operationalization.

Just as the formal implementation of near seas defense in 1993 necessitated PLAN modernization to develop platforms and capabilities to operate further from shore, far seas defense capabilities will require restructuring, reallocation, and continued force modernization. PLAN missions in the near seas can range from a simple security patrol in the Yellow Sea to a mission as complex as supporting a Taiwan contingency or even a limited conflict with Japan over the Diaoyu/Senkaku issue. The diversity and importance of near seas requirements suggest the PLAN will allocate the majority of its naval fleet to support near seas defense.

Far seas missions will be even more diverse, possibly including SLOC protection, counterpiracy, reconnaissance, operating at strategic chokepoints, and force projection. Far seas missions require larger combatants able to sustain heavier seas for protracted periods of time. One potential PLAN approach might be to use smaller combatants and patrol boats to fulfill routine near seas missions, thereby freeing larger PLAN combatants to pursue more frequent far seas operations. Since 2012, the PLAN has been undergoing an aggressive construction program of *Jiangdao*-class light frigates, which are well equipped for missions in the near seas within the first island chain to include security

patrols in the near seas, Diaoyu/Senkaku Island patrols, or Spratly Island patrols.<sup>104</sup> One indicator the PLAN has decided to pursue more frequent far seas defense missions might be these smaller combatants assuming some of the mission requirements from larger combatants.

Another indicator of PLAN operationalization of the far seas defense is the construction of icebreakers. China's distant strategic economic interests may drive it to develop additional

**Table 4. Evolution of PLAN Western Pacific Deployments**

	2004–2006	2007–2009	2010–2012	2013–2014
<b>Western Pacific Deployments</b>	None	Single fleet (2–12 ships, submarines)	Single fleet (2–12 ships, submarines)	Multifleet (2–10+ ships)
<b>Sea Lines of Communication/ Strait Chokepoints</b>	Taiwan	Tsugaru Miyako Bashi Taiwan	Osumi Miyako Yonaguni Taiwan Bashi	Yonaguni La Perouse Osumi Miyako Gashi Taiwan Indonesian Straits
<b>Discipline</b>	Logistics, naval fleet tactics, techniques, and procedures	One-dimensional (surface) (scripted)	Multidimensional (surface, submarine, air) (scripted)	Multidimensional (surface, submarine, air) (back to back)
<b>Location</b>	Near seas	Western Pacific	Western Pacific	Western Pacific Indian Ocean
<b>Air Integration</b>	Air defense	Air defense	Unmanned aerial vehicle/helicopter	Fixed wing
<b>Informatization</b>	Command and control/ common operating picture	All exercises and deployments Lianhe-2007	All exercises and deployments	All exercises and deployments Mobility-5
<b>Signaling</b>	Chunxiao (Japan) Dongshan (Taiwan) Hong Kong	Taiwan	Taiwan Senkaku (Japan) Scarborough (Philippines) James Shoal (Malaysia)	Taiwan Senkaku (Japan) Scarborough (Philippines) James Shoal (Malaysia)

icebreaker capabilities to support increased Chinese commercial shipping through the Arctic Northern Sea Route. The Northern Sea Route as an avenue for goods or resources between Europe and China shortens the distance by several thousand nautical miles, thereby cutting down the expense of trade. The Arctic waters will become more navigable for Chinese commercial shipping as the polar ice cap continues to melt. China currently has the largest conventionally powered icebreaker in the world, the *Xue Long*, and is building a second icebreaker of similar size.<sup>105</sup> A further increase in China's icebreaker-building program or subordination of the *Xue Long* to the PLAN might suggest that China is more actively pursuing far seas defense capabilities in the Arctic.

## Conclusion

The PLAN continues to refine and enhance the capabilities and tactics necessary to execute China's near seas active defense strategy. At the same time, there is a political impetus for the PLAN to operationalize far seas defense capabilities as part of an emerging new maritime strategy. The normalization of PLAN operations in the Western Pacific, along with years of counterpiracy deployments to the Gulf of Aden as part of the new historic missions, has given the PLAN the requisite experience, confidence, and proficiency to defend China through the operationalization of far seas defense capabilities.

Table 4 summarizes the evolution of PLAN deployments to the Western Pacific since 2004. This table demonstrates a deliberate and methodical approach to normalizing PLAN Western Pacific deployments. It traces PLAN progress from single fleet and single-dimensional scripted exercises in the Western Pacific to multifleet coordinated, unscripted training involving submarines, surface ships, UAVs, and fixed-wing aircraft. It illustrates a gradual increase from a few ships conducting deployments to as many as 12 ships and submarines deploying simultaneously. The table also summarizes PLAN trends in signaling and the steady expansion of chokepoints used by PLAN ships to access the near seas and highlights the growing complexity of informatization over time. Following normalization of Western Pacific deployments at the end of 2012, the PLAN began to expand its combat readiness patrols into the Indian Ocean far seas.

The strategic framework that underpins China's near seas active defense strategy suggests the PLAN will extend operations to the far seas to protect Chinese national interests. Near-term incorporation of far seas defense is consistent with PLAN stated goals, assumptions, and objectives, making it a timely addition to China's current maritime strategy. Operating in the near seas to defend China will continue to be the most important role for the PLAN, but over time

the PLAN will allocate additional resources to the far seas to protect economic and military interests. Evaluating the characteristics of how the PLAN normalized its Western Pacific deployments serves as a model for how it will integrate the concept of far seas defense into its existing near seas defense maritime strategy.

A review of the composition of surface action groups deploying to the Western Pacific since 2007 indicates a majority of the deployments included a mix of destroyers and frigates. Destroyers provide the PLAN with potent anti-air warfare and anti-surface warfare capabilities, while the frigates complement the destroyer's anti-surface capabilities. Both destroyers and frigates leverage embarked helicopters to enhance their anti-submarine capabilities. This suggests the operationalization of far seas defense will consist of the deployment of surface action groups that provide maximum flexibility to address ever-changing mission objectives. As compared to missions in the near seas, far seas missions must have greater mission flexibility because of the transit distances associated with operating farther from China. This mix of platforms deploying together to the far seas will likely include a submarine. In September 2014, the PLAN deployed a submarine to the Indian Ocean, suggesting that nuclear submarines capable of remaining submerged throughout a deployment are a viable adjunct of far seas missions; recent reporting indicates a second PLAN submarine conducted a port visit to Sri Lanka in November 2014.<sup>106</sup>

PLAN operations in the near seas over the last decade have included political signaling, suggesting the PLAN will be used for this mission as part of a strategy that includes far seas defense. Signaling includes PLAN ships operating in the vicinity of China's interests and simultaneously publicizing these operations.

The PLAN has signaled Taiwan to influence domestic elections, Japan over disputed territory, and Hong Kong over domestic policies. Future PLAN operations in the far seas may well operate closer to foreign sovereign territory when the PRC wants to signal displeasure over a policy counter to China's interests. Examples might include PLAN operations in the vicinity of India to signal PRC displeasure over competing land border claims, operations north of Australia should Beijing see Canberra's China policy as unduly critical, or combatant operations in closer proximity to Guam or other U.S. territories in the central Pacific to signal displeasure over U.S. policies toward China.

The PLA-wide emphasis on informatization over the last decade suggests PLAN far seas missions will operate with enhanced C4ISR capabilities. PLAN ships deploying to the far seas will possess robust communications capabilities and will be linked through relatively rapid information flow across and up the chain of command. In addition, when ships deploy to the far seas, they will conduct various multidiscipline drills in accordance with OMTE training

requirements. While the majority of these training drills are likely to be exclusively focused on navy-specific disciplines, OMTE emphasis on joint training suggests some far seas missions could include training with PLA Air Force assets conducting long-range coordinated training.

Just as the PLAN incrementally expanded the complexity and scope of its operations in the Western Pacific over the last decade, it is likely to gradually increase the frequency of far seas combat readiness patrol deployments. Such an approach would suggest that over the next 5 to 7 years, we are likely to see an increase in mixed-platform PLAN surface action groups rehearsing a myriad of combat warfare disciplines during deployments to the far seas, such as antisubmarine, antiair, and antisurface warfare exercises. These combat readiness patrols may include deployments along various strategic SLOCs in the Pacific, chokepoints in the Indian Ocean, and perhaps even to the northern Pacific to support China's Arctic commercial interests.

Over the last decade, the PLAN has taken numerous routes to access the Western Pacific, and the Chinese press has highlighted the PLAN "shattering" of the first island chain through use of multiple SLOCs and chokepoints. In addition to transiting through chokepoints in the near seas, the January 2014 three-ship flotilla that operated in the eastern Indian Ocean transited the Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar Straits. Operations within SLOCs or near strategic chokepoints are consistent with PLAN guidance to protect China's economic interests, which must use SLOCs for China's imports of oil and other commodities. Hence, future far seas operations likely will regularly patrol along SLOCs and near strategic chokepoints.

Patrolling along distant sea lines of communication or near strategic chokepoints achieves two objectives. It helps to protect Chinese economic interests that transit strategic straits and has a deterrent effect of placing Chinese combatants along potential routes that could be used by the U.S. Navy to intervene in a conflict involving China. In addition to more routinized operations in the far seas lines of communications of the Malacca, Makassar, and Lombok straits, China's interest in the use of the Northern Sea Route could drive far seas operations to the Northern Pacific. In addition, far seas defense missions may prompt the PLAN to station ships along strategic approaches traditionally used by the U.S. Navy in the Pacific to deny or delay U.S. intervention in contingencies involving China.

Indications that the PLAN is aggressively looking to operationalize far seas defense missions include *Jiangdao* light frigates assuming a greater responsibility for missions traditionally assigned to larger PLAN combatants within the first island chain, construction of icebreakers, active reporting on distant sea operations in official Chinese press, a gradual increase in the frequency of deployments, additional space-based reconnaissance assets, and the PLAN enhancing its logistic capabilities.

The volume of data on Chinese navy operations and exercises continues to grow. Each PLAN exercise or deployment yields new insights into capabilities the PLAN is working to master and raises questions of China's strategic intent. Patterns and implications begin to emerge when deployments to the Western Pacific are methodically examined over time. These patterns help our understanding of how the PLAN will operationalize far seas defense and may help to clarify the intent of its deployments. China is likely to pursue far seas defense missions over the next several years and may integrate far seas defense into its existing near seas defense strategy, yielding a new maritime strategy altogether. While each flotilla deployment will add to the "data glut" as identified by Admiral Becker, understanding how these deployments fit into a PLAN model for operationalizing deployments to unfamiliar waters may help to close the corresponding "information deficit" on China's maritime strategic intent.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, “Why Spying on China Isn’t Enough,” *The Diplomat*, September 23, 2014, available at <<http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/why-spying-on-china-isnt-enough/>>.

<sup>2</sup> According to the memoirs of Liu Huaqing, China’s navy commander from 1982 to 1988, “all the sea areas beyond the ‘near seas’ are ‘middle and far seas’ [*zhongyuanhai*, 中远海].” Therefore, the sea areas and maritime space beyond the outer rims of the second island can be interpreted as the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) definition of “far seas.” This large expanse of ocean stretches from the northwest Pacific to the Indian Ocean. See Liu Huaqing [刘华清], *Liu Huaqing’s Memoirs* [刘华清回忆录] (Beijing: PLA Press [解放军出版社], 2004), 434, as cited in Nan Li, “The Evolution of China’s Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From ‘Near Coast’ and ‘Near Seas’ to ‘Far Seas,’” *Asian Security* 5, no. 2 (May 2009), 144–169.

<sup>3</sup> 近海 is often translated as “offshore.” But “offshore” does not convey the relative distance the Chinese term intends to express. Just as the Near East, Middle East, and Far East are translated as 近东, 中东, and 远东, near seas, middle seas, and far seas are translated as 近海, 中海, and 远海. Near seas defense is couched in the notion of “defend actively, operate in the near seas” [*jiji fangyu, jinhai zuozhan*, 积极防御, 近海作战]. See Nan Li, 144–169.

<sup>4</sup> Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), *A Modern Navy with Chinese Characteristics* (Washington, DC: Office of Naval Intelligence, 2013), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Huo Xiaoyong, ed., *The Science of Service Strategy* (Beijing: National Defense University Press, 2006), 242, as cited in Thomas Bickford, Heidi A. Holz, and Frederic Vellucci, Jr., *Uncertain Waters* (Alexandria, VA: CNA Corporation, 2011), 28–29.

<sup>6</sup> Liu Huaqing, *Liu Huaqing’s Memoirs*, 432, 434, 437, as cited in Nan Li, 150.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> David M. Finkelstein, “China’s Military Strategy: An Overview of the ‘Military Strategic Guidelines,’” in *Right-Sizing the People’s Liberation Army: Exploring the Contours of China’s Military*, ed. Roy Kamphausen and Andrew Scobell (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007). See also Nan Li, 144–169.

<sup>9</sup> Finkelstein.

<sup>10</sup> Xu Qi, “Maritime Geostrategy and the Development of the Chinese Navy in the Early Twenty-First Century,” trans. Lyle Goldstein and Andrew Erickson, *Naval War College Review* 59, no. 4 (Autumn 2006), 47–67, as cited in Bickford, Holz, and Vellucci, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Some argue the 1995–1996 Taiwan crisis drove PLAN modernization efforts. While the crisis was likely was a factor in PLAN modernization, the Main Strategic Direction predated the crisis and likely served as an initial catalyst for modernization.

<sup>12</sup> ONI, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>14</sup> Bickford, Holz, and Vellucci, 17.

<sup>15</sup> Information Office of the State Council, People’s Republic of China, *China’s National Defense in 2006* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, December 29, 2006); *China’s National Defense in 2008* (January 20, 2009); and *China’s National Defense in 2010* (March 31, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Information Office of the State Council, People's Republic of China, *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council, April 16, 2013), sec. 2.

<sup>17</sup> "China and Northeast Asia: China > NAVY," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment*, September 24, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> See Ye Xinrong and Zuo Liping, "Strategic Reflections Regarding the March of the Navy from the Near Seas to the Far Seas," *Military Art Journal*, no. 10 (2004), 30–33, as cited in Nan Li, 144–169.

<sup>19</sup> See "Military Drill on Fujian's Dongshan Island with 20,000 Officers and Soldiers" [福建東山島2萬官兵軍演], *Ming Pao* [明報], June 16, 2004; and "An Anti-Taiwan-Independence Military Exercise Starts on Dongshan Island with the Aim of Seizing Air Supremacy" [反台獨軍演東山島開操練制空攻堅], *Tai Yang Pao* [太陽報], July 16, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> "Dongshan Island Unusually Calm on Eve of War Exercise" [軍演前夕東山島異常平靜], *Wen Wei Po* [文匯報], July 3, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> "An Anti-Taiwan-Independence Military Exercise Starts," *Tai Yang Pao*.

<sup>22</sup> "Large-Scale Armed Police Participation in Taiwan Strait Military Exercise; Focus on Airborne Landing Training, Raising Three-dimensional Combat Capabilities" [武警大規模參與臺海軍演重點演練機降 提升立體戰力], *Hong Kong Shang Pao* [香港商報], July 3, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> "An Anti-Taiwan-Independence Military Exercise Starts," *Tai Yang Pao*.

<sup>24</sup> Marcal Joahilho, "PLA Plans Biggest Naval Visit," *The Standard*, April 23, 2004.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

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