
The recent confrontation between the Chinese and Japanese navies over the disputed Senkaku Islands (or the Diaoyu Islands, for China) in the East China Sea has aroused serious concerns in the international community about security and stability in the Asian-Pacific region. Public debates and academic research in America focus on what these acts may mean for the United States, and how to best deal with the Chinese Navy in case of crisis or even a war in the Pacific. Among the key questions are: what kind of maritime interests and naval strategy does the People’s Republic of China (PRC) have? How modern is the People's Liberation Army (PLA, as China’s army, air, naval, and strategic missile services are collectively known), and how effective has it become in recent years in terms of doctrine, technology, and organization? How will the PLA Navy (PLAN) defend China’s eleven thousand miles of coastline and six thousand islands? There is a scarcity of information, since only a few recent works on the PLAN have been published in English.

As the leading scholar in the field, Dr. Bernard D. Cole offers a comprehensive and insightful assessment of the PLAN in a second edition of his essential book, The Great Wall at Sea. Cole bases his analysis on extensive use of Chinese publications, interviews, and online sources during ten years’ of research for the first edition and an additional ten years for this second edition. He focuses on Chinese naval reforms with an emphasis on the continuity and changes in PLAN doctrine, organization, force composition, capabilities, strategy, technology, readiness, and utility as vital instruments of national power. He pays special attention to the roles played by ideology, economy, international trade, energy resources, relations with Russia, personalities, and geographic setting. This second edition goes beyond discussing the Yellow Sea and the South and East China seas, and it follows China’s “dramatically increased energy demands” along the sea lanes to the Middle East and Africa “over which most of its imported oil travels” (xv). All of this provides the basis for this new edition to be a popular and critical source of new information.

In his introduction, Dr. Cole sets the stage for a better understanding of China’s naval reform and development by defining the PRC’s maritime geography, political condition, strategic context, and financial improvement. He persuasively discusses why the Chinese have “the idea that a great country should have a great Navy” (xix). Even though the PLAN has made some progress and the U.S. has reduced its “nearly six hundred-ship Navy of 1990” to “less than half that size in 2009,” the PLAN, according to the author, will not pose an immediate threat to the United States in the near future (xxii). Chapter 1 provides historical background on China’s navy from the Han (206 BC-220 AD), Song (960-1279), Ming (1368-1644), and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. The author examines Chinese naval modernization under both the Republic of China (ROC) and the PRC, and identifies some patterns “marked by notable consistencies” (18). Cole looks into China’s maritime territorial interests and its disputes with six neighboring countries over more than two dozen maritime territories. Cole points out that “Beijing’s inflexibilities” over its territorial claims are determined by its “increasing dependence on offshore energy resources” (42). In Chapter 3 the author continues the discussion of China’s maritime economic interests as a net energy importer with
increasing regional and global sea lines of communication (SLOCs). The PLAN, however, is not currently capable of “maintaining even a presence in these farflung SLOCs, let alone controlling them” (56). Chapter 4 examines the PLAN’s organization, reflecting also on its intentions and capabilities. Chapter 5 is an overview of the PLAN’s ships, submarines, aircraft, and weapons systems, as well as a measure for estimating how well the Chinese Navy might perform in different situations. Chapter 6 analyzes the PLAN’s training by telling two stories: on one hand, better-educated and intellectually more qualified personnel are “drawn for service in a navy that is increasingly dependent on sophisticated technology;” and on the other hand, short service terms and decentralized administration of training are hampered by a “progressive structure of education and training” (141). In Chapter 7 the author addresses the PLAN’s doctrine with an emphasis on its operations. The last chapter investigates China’s maritime strategy with nine factors that affect a nation’s development of maritime strategy. Cole concludes that Chinese maritime strategy attempts to “achieve near-term national security objectives and long-term regional maritime dominance” (187).

Dr. Cole has, in one volume, compiled masterful and comprehensive research on a vital and important subject. Although it is a military survey, it includes diachronic discussions to explore the reasons for change, the constraints on the implementation of reforms, and the outcomes of those efforts. Through its detailed narrative, this book captures the essence of successive generations of the PLAN while illuminating the themes and patterns of its development. It links Chinese naval efforts to “the nation’s economic development” and to “dependence on overseas trade” (190), which have been largely overlooked by other works in the field.

Cole also compares the PLAN with China’s other services and demonstrates that the Navy has had a lion’s share of the annual defense budget in recent years. Since 2000, the PLAN has commissioned more than thirty new submarines and is also developing four indigenous classes of submarines. The Chinese Navy has forces with the anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) system, including formidable Sizzler and Sunburn missiles. Some of these ballistic missiles will be able to carry nuclear warheads and provide a nuclear deterrence against any offshore threat or naval engagement. The PLAN is armed with wire-guided, wake-homing torpedoes and ship-borne air defense. The Navy has completed construction of the large Sanya naval base on Hainan Island. This southward base in the middle of the South China Sea, protecting the Gulf of Tonkin, provides the PLAN with a powerful position to deploy its warships and submarines into deep water, and increase “its capability to prevent formal Taiwan independence” (191). In the meantime, the PLAN also develops the implementation of “non-war” uses of force, such as naval escorts on shipping routes to Africa. The main mission of the PLAN consists of resisting seaborne invasion, protecting coast lines and sovereignty, and safeguarding maritime rights. Currently, naval training focuses on maritime blockage, anti-sea lines of communication, maritime-land attack, anti-ship operations, maritime transportation protection, and naval base defense.

Cole warns readers that “The PLAN will pose a serious obstacle to effective U.S. naval intervention in western Pacific conflicts—involving Taiwan, for instance…” (202). The American high command is apparently not certain about China’s intentions and its changing world views. As long as different views, suspicions, misunderstandings, and hostility