

# **CHINA'S EVOLVING NAVAL STRATEGY**

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## Executive Summary

1. In the early years, the central mission of the PLA Navy (PLAN) was to defend twelve nautical miles of China's territorial waters extending seaward from the coastline, and 300 kilometers of its land territory that stretches inland from the coastline.
2. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the role of the PLAN was marginalized. This is because land forces were given priority in the earlier strategy of countering incursions of the coastline by Taiwan-based Kuomintang forces, and in the later strategy of "luring enemy in deep" against a possible Soviet invasion of China.
3. It was not until after Deng Xiaoping came to power in 1979 that naval strategy has been more fully articulated. The post-1979 "near-coast defense" strategy, for instance, requires the PLAN to counter amphibious-landing operations in a possible Soviet invasion of China. The PLAN's role in this strategy is purely defensive and supportive.
4. Because of such a strategy, the PLAN fleets consisted mainly of smaller ships that are vulnerable to air and sea attacks, or those that are highly dependent on land-based intelligence, command and control, air cover and firepower support for operations.
5. By 1987, a new strategy of "near-seas active defense" was endorsed. This strategy requires the PLAN to operate effectively and more independently in the near seas within and around the first island-chain, which stretches more than 200 nautical miles from China's coastline.
6. This strategy also involves diverse missions ranging from reunification with Taiwan, restoring disputed maritime territories, securing major sea lanes to nuclear deterrence.

7. The endorsement of this strategy can be attributed to the personal influence of the PLAN Commander Liu Huaqing, the support of the civilian leadership and the decline of the Soviet threat. The implementation of the strategy, however, was hampered by the lack of funding and advanced technologies, and the uncertainty over land-based threats. Only modest progress was made in capabilities.
8. It was not until after the 1996 Taiwan crisis that the PLAN has acquired a substantial number of surface and underwater operational platforms with improved anti-ship, air-defense and anti-submarine capabilities. These platforms are also heavier and more sustainable, more difficult to locate, and has better sensors and command and control.
9. A new strategy of “far-seas operations” has been advanced since 2004. This strategy requires the PLAN to develop the capabilities to operate effectively within and beyond the second island-chain, or project naval power up to and beyond 1,000 nautical miles from China’s territorial waters.
10. More availability of funding and better technologies, and vulnerability stemming from China’s growing dependence on major sea lanes for shipping raw materials and traded goods have been utilized by naval researchers to rationalize the new strategy. The PLAN is likely to acquire aircraft carriers in the coming years to support “far-seas operations.”