

**THE EVOLVING SUBMARINE FORCE
OF THE CHINESE NAVY**

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Executive Summary

1. “Near-coast defence” was China’s naval strategy in the early years since the founding of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in 1949. It refers to defence of up to a dozen or so nautical miles of waters that extend seaward from China’s coastline.
2. The central task of the PLAN then was to support land-based defence by conducting counter-amphibious-landing operations and launching ambush and sabotage operations against the invading enemy’s logistical supply lines.
3. The PLAN’s submarine force played a central role in fulfilling such a task, particularly in leveraging its relative advantages against the opponent’s moments of vulnerability so that “the inferior side can fight and defeat the superior side”.
4. From the late 1980s to the early 2000s, China’s naval strategy has shifted from “near-coast defence” to “near-seas active defence and far-seas protection”. The new strategy has tasked the PLAN to develop into a “strategic service” that can operate independently and effectively in its own maritime operational space such as the South and East China Seas and the Yellow Sea.
5. The concept of “far-seas protection” requires the PLAN to develop capabilities that can safeguard the security of the expanding Chinese interests in the far-seas (beyond the near-seas) and overseas, including vital sea-lanes and “chock points” that shipping of critical resources and traded goods depends on, and Chinese investment, assets and personnel deployed overseas.
6. The PLAN’s submarine force, however, has become its Achilles heel after a more successful drive to modernise its naval surface and air combat capabilities under the new naval strategy.
7. The underdevelopment of the PLAN’s undersea warfare capabilities thus can be exploited by the more superior US Navy.

8. The PLAN has taken measures to provide remedies, including improving its anti-submarine warfare capabilities and developing infrastructure and technologies for building more advanced nuclear-powered attack submarines.
9. The transfer of up to eight nuclear-powered attack submarines from the United States and UK to Australia under an AUKUS agreement may exert more pressure on China to accelerate the development of its nuclear-powered attack submarines.
10. It appears that an undersea naval arms race has begun in Asia, which may present a critical challenge to the peace, security and stability of the Asia-Pacific region.