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Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission
Hearing on "China's Military and Security Activities Abroad"

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Thank you, Madame Chairperson and Members of the Commission, for the opportunity to address you today on the question of "China's Military and Security Activities Abroad."

With your permission, I will focus my remarks on China's growing naval role and the evolution of its maritime strategy in the broader context of its security activities abroad. At the outset, let me set the stage by noting that China's naval activities are a significant, but not the only, element in the changes occurring today in the Asian Maritime Domain. The Asian Maritime Domain (AMD) comprises the great arc moving southwest from the Bering Sea through the Bay of Bengal. In practical terms, it includes the Pacific Ocean reaches at least through Guam, as well as the western limits of the Indian Ocean, including the Arabian Sea.

The Asian Maritime Domain covers over 50 million square miles, nearly 60 percent of the world's population, and over 40 sovereign states. For the past four decades, it has also been at the center of global economic production. This region, including Japan, China, South Korea, Vietnam, and India, among other important economies, accounted for nearly a third of total global economic output, at least until the current economic crisis erupted last year.

During the past decade, moreover, the Asian Maritime Domain has also witnessed a host of security-related changes that point to an increasingly complex regional future. These changes include the rise of blue water naval forces now projecting power throughout the region, the emergence of the undersea realm as a key security and economic concern, the requirement of air-sea integration for reliable intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and battlespace operations, and the slow development of multilateral political organizations that may shape trading and security norms in the coming decades.

The Background to China's Evolving Maritime Strategy

Historically, China has been a continental power with extensive maritime networks. The size of its domestic economy, and the sophistication of its political and technological systems, in centuries past ensured that a dense web of maritime trade routes converged on China, stretching from India all the way to Japan, roughly the same as today's Asian Maritime Domain.

On this view, China's recent maritime expansion is a reversion to a more traditional regional role. As the recently released Defense White Paper puts it, the PLA Navy is "responsible for...safeguarding China's maritime security and maintaining the sovereignty of its territorial waters, along with its maritime rights and interests."¹ China's reliance on overseas markets for imports of raw materials and export of finished or semi-finished goods, has resulted in a strategic decision to build its naval capabilities beyond a brown-water force and towards a true blue-water orientation. The scope of China's recent naval activities suggest that they have achieved at least a first stage of this strategy, though they do not yet appear to have reached the capability for large-scale, extended overseas missions.

China's maritime strategy is also closely tied to its growing global political role. Few nations other than the United States have the capability of "showing the flag" on extended missions of any size. Yet, as Beijing deepens its diplomatic activity around the world, but particularly in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, a blue-ocean navy is a valuable instrument to be able to wield. As a rising power, the dispatch of PLA Navy vessels on goodwill port visits around the world, or off the coast of Somalia in recent anti-piracy operations, gives Chinese leaders' statements regarding their country's global role a credibility it would otherwise not have.

In addition to its defensive and political roles, the PLA Navy provides the Chinese leadership with the means to assert its claims to disputed maritime territory. China currently has several on-going territorial disputes with other Asian nations. These include disputes over the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands, with Japan; the Nansha Islands and Beibu Gulf, with Vietnam; and the Spratly Islands, with various ASEAN states. Driving much of the territorial disputes is the question of access to vast amounts of natural resources, including undersea oil and natural gas fields, and control over strategically important sea lanes of communication (SLOCs).

China's Growing Naval Role in the Asian Maritime Domain

The PLA Navy has steadily developed its capabilities and gained operational experience over the past decade. In particular, the past several years have witnessed more complex maritime deployments, each of which can be viewed as fitting into a larger strategy of developing a true blue-water and power projection capability.

The East Sea Fleet and the South Sea Fleet provide China with a non-littoral maritime presence in Asia. The East Sea Fleet, founded in 1949, is headquartered at Ningbo, and is responsible for the East China Sea, including defense of the Chinese homeland from the Shandong/Jiangsu provincial border to the Fujian/Guangdong provincial border.² Any PLA military operation against Taiwan would be supported by the East Sea Fleet,

¹ *Government White Paper 2009* (accessed http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2009-01/21/content_17162859.htm).

² www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/china/east-sea.htm.

including amphibious landings. The South Sea Fleet, founded in 1950, is charged with defense of the maritime area from China's border with Vietnam up to the Fujian region.

Both commands have developed an integrated fleet of destroyers (both foreign purchased and domestically produced), frigates, submarines, and support ships. Particular focus has been made on the submarine force, which contains nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, nuclear-powered attack submarines, and conventional submarines. Extensive networks of bases along the Chinese coast, including the new submarine base on Hainan Island, provide a dispersion capability plus redundant supply and communications points.³ Future procurement and development plans of the PLA Navy have received worldwide attention, namely China's expressed plans to build at least two aircraft carriers, and outfit a former Soviet carrier, with the goal of creating full-fledged carrier groups by 2015 that could dramatically expand the reach of China's air and naval power.⁴

China's modernization of the PLA Navy has been accompanied by a steady expansion of its maritime activities. Chinese naval vessels now make port calls throughout the world, not just in Asia, thereby demonstrating an ability to undertake extended, transoceanic voyages. For example, from July through October 2007, a PLA Navy guided missile destroyer and supply ship traveled to St. Petersburg, Russia, Portsmouth, England, Spain and France. In 2007 and 2008 alone, Chinese naval vessels made port calls in Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, as well as the European countries noted previously.⁵ These port visits provide political benefits for Beijing in Asia and around the world, simultaneously giving China a global presence and buttressing Beijing's portrayal of its "peaceful rise," yet also showcasing the strength and capabilities of the PLA Navy.

A subordinate, yet related, element of the regular global presence of Chinese naval vessels is China's interest in overseas ports and naval bases throughout the Asian Maritime Domain. This "string of pearls," as it is referred to, stretches from the South China Sea through the Bay of Bengal to the Arabia Sea. Working with countries such as Pakistan, Burma, and Bangladesh, China has helped build ports, bases, and surveillance facilities and received guarantees of use that provide it with a forward presence, unparalleled access to strategic SLOCs, and unimpeded ISR platforms. Again, the end result is to facilitate China's constant maritime presence in Asia and link it to a growing network of regional states that benefit from China's economic and military support.

Despite these on-going activities, China not surprisingly concentrates its maritime presence closer to home. The modernization of both the East Sea and South Sea Fleets has allowed the Chinese to institute regular patrols throughout the East and South China Seas, bringing them into proximity of Japan's Ryukyu Islands chain as well as coastal

³ "Sanya base to float Chinese naval ambition," *The Age* (Australia), May 26, 2008.

⁴ See, for example, "China at Sea," *Wall Street Journal Asia*, January 6, 2009; "China to start construction of first aircraft carriers next year," *Asahi Shinbun*, December 31, 2008;

⁵ *Government White Paper 2009* (accessed at http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/2009-01/21/content_17162779.htm).

Southeast Asia, the Philippines, and Indonesia. As noted earlier, most of China's maritime territorial disputes are in these two seas, and constant patrolling by the PLA Navy is a reminder that China's claims to these areas is unwavering.

Starting in 2005, the PLA Navy began patrols near the disputed Chunxiao/Shirakaba oil fields in East China Sea north of Taiwan. Aerial patrols by electronics warfare aircraft have also become commonplace in this area off the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands.⁶ As China increased its oil and gas exploration projects throughout the area, tensions with Japan have risen, despite a 2008 agreement to share exploration of a portion of the Chunxiao fields. The scale and complexity of Chinese patrols in the East and South China Seas continues to grow. From the initial 2005 patrol with but five warships, the Chinese Coast Guard in July 2008 sent out a fleet of over 60 vessels, including its most advanced maritime patrol ship, on a week-long voyage to the Chunxiao gas field. The operational experience gained from such voyages will lead to improved command and communications, logistical support, and ocean mapping capabilities of Chinese naval forces.

The experiences gained from a decade of regular patrols and international port visits has led to the third phase of PLA Navy evolution, the anti-piracy deployment off the Horn of Africa and Somalia. A three-ship flotilla of two destroyers and a supply vessel, replete with special forces, helicopters, and anti-ship missiles, departed China at the end of last December and has been engaged in escorting Chinese-flagged vessels through pirate-infested waters. This requires a level of operational, logistical, and communications sophistication in a potentially hostile environment that the PLA Navy has lacked until now. The experiences gained on this operational deployment will undoubtedly help the navy plan even larger, more complex international and regional missions in coming years.

Regional Reactions

China's naval modernization has not gone unnoticed by other nations, especially maritime ones, in Asia. As a result, the region is in the midst of a modest, yet potentially worrisome naval arms race. The PLA Navy is purchasing or building the most advanced platforms and weapons available, including supersonic anti-ship ballistic missiles, Aegis-equipped destroyers, and targeting systems. While the Chinese remain at least a decade behind the U.S. Navy, they are already outstripping most, if not all, other Asian navies. The Japanese Maritime Self Defense Forces (JMSDF) and Indian Navy are the next largest in Asia and the most concerned by the PLA Navy's growth. As a result, they have both embarked on naval modernization programs, including the purchase of Aegis-class destroyers, anti-ballistic missile systems, and greater anti-submarine reconnaissance platforms, among others.

Asian maritime nations feel the greatest threat from China's submarine force, which currently number approximately 55 vessels. From Jin-class ballistic missile submarines

⁶ Arthur S. Ding, "China's Energy Security Demands and the East China Sea," *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 3:3 (November 2005), pp. 35-38.

to Shang- and Yuan-class attack submarines, China's sub-surface forces pose a potentially devastating threat to the naval and commercial shipping fleets of other Asian nations. In response, India, Singapore, and Japan have joined with the U.S. Navy in the past on large-scale training exercises, such as the Malabar 07, which took place in the Indian Ocean. Japan continues to deepen its naval cooperation with the United States, while seeking to deepen relations with other maritime nations in the region, such as Australia and India.

The fear of a naval arms race is a real one in the world's most populated maritime region. Freedom of navigation and access to strategic waterways are the lifeblood of Asia's most economically advanced states. Since World War II, they have depended on the United States to patrol and secure the seas. Should they doubt the American commitment to maintaining naval supremacy they will be forced to make uncomfortable choices, ranging from trying to balance China to considering accommodating Beijing's maritime goals, whatever those may turn out to be. The result would almost certainly be a less stable Asian Maritime Domain, and one in which the United States would have less freedom of action.

China's Maritime Goals

The scale and scope of China's naval activities in the Asian Maritime Domain raises the question of Beijing's larger goals. China's maritime policy operates at several levels, each of which is self-reinforcing and tied into larger global strategy. A large part of the Chinese naval buildup over the past decade has been designed to allow the PLA Navy to act as a credible maritime force, from regional and global presence to operational capability. This then buttresses Beijing's desire to be seen as a major regional and international power, giving heft to its diplomatic and economic initiatives. Countries, whether in Africa or Southeast Asia, are more likely to pay attention to China's proposals if the diplomatic arm is backed by an active, credible, and recognized military.

Equally important, however, is the long-term result of a technologically advanced, operationally experienced, blue water PLA Navy. Like rising powers in the past, China's pursuit of a first rank navy is not merely a sign of its global prominence, but a key element of its ability to project national power where and when it sees fit. That does not mean that the Chinese leadership has yet decided how it will employ its navy a decade hence, nor that it has decided to challenge the United States for naval mastery in Asia, even if such a goal were realistic. These are political decisions that become possible only if the navy is of a size and quality to allow for such discussions.

Numerous questions must be answered before China's naval strategy can be fully articulated. Whether the force remains largely defensive in nature or, as seems the case, moves increasingly into an offensively-based orientation is obviously of paramount importance in divining Beijing's long-term intentions and perception of the international environment. In addition, whether the PLA Navy begins to provide public goods in the Asian Maritime Domain, as the U.S. Navy has done for decades, joined in recent years by elements of the Japanese Maritime Self Defense Forces and Australian Navy, will

indicate the role that China seeks to play in the region. Finally, how China seeks to interact with other naval forces in the region, particularly India and Japan, will show not merely its strategic thinking, but its larger political calculations for the Asian region. The United States must also consider the degree to which China shares information, reciprocates the U.S. outreach, and helps us and others in the region understand its long-term goals and intentions. These, of course, are just a sampling of some of the questions American planners and analysts need to begin considering.

Thank you for the opportunity today to offer these thoughts on the growth of China's maritime presence in Asia. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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