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## **THE XI JINPING ADMINISTRATION'S QUEST FOR MARITIME HEGEMONY**

***Hideaki Kaneda***

- After having advocated surviving, growing, and developing via the sea, China is at last revealing its ambition of gaining hegemony via the sea.
- China has revealed its interest in advancing from its home waters into deep waters, and it has been rapidly strengthening its naval capabilities with the aim of eventually surpassing those of the US Navy.
- There is only one prudent course for Japan to take: deter and contain China with the three arrows of a stronger defense, deeper alliances, and regional coalitions.

*The views expressed in this piece are the author's own and should not be attributed to The Association of Japanese Institutes of Strategic Studies.*

Not long after the founding of the PRC, China as a continental state was prompted by the Sino-Soviet split to recognize the economic and military importance of the sea and to actively advance seaward. The Sino-Soviet split that emerged in the 1960s compelled China to switch from land transport to/from the Soviet Union to maritime transport to/from the West in conducting foreign trade. On the instructions of Mao Zedong, China as a state began down the path of emphasizing sea transport and self-reliance, with the State Oceanic Administration being created in 1964 as an administrative agency subordinate to the State Council. This marked the first stage of “surviving via the sea.”

Following the failure of the Cultural Revolution and other preceding policies, remarkable economic growth was realized through Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and opening” policy. China needed to secure large quantities of energy and resources from abroad to further extend its power and, recognizing the need for overseas outposts along sea lanes and robust naval forces with blue-water capability to safeguard its maritime interests and marine transport/commerce; it adopted a national policy of building “Chinese-style sea power.” Then Commander of the PLA Navy Liu Huaqing, who enjoyed Deng’s trust, formulated a “near seas defense” strategy both to achieve a reunification with Taiwan by force and to protect the homeland and secure resources that set an absolute line of maritime defense along “the first island defense line” connecting the Japanese archipelago, the Nansei Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Borneo. This is the second stage of “growing via the sea.”

With the end of the Cold War alleviating the need for massive ground forces to be strung out along its border with the former Soviet Union, China was able to steer its steadily growing national resources into dramatically increasing its naval power. Continual double-digit growth in national defense expenditures (with the exception of FY2010’s 9.8% growth) in the two decades or so since the Cold War drew to a close has allowed China to move forward explosively in strengthening and modernizing its military capabilities with the primary emphasis on bolstering its naval power around the Anti-Access Area Denial (A2/AD) concept. Under the administrations of Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, China

gradually began projecting power toward the sea in a third stage of “developing via the sea” that lasted until the start of the Xi Jinping administration.

What form will China’s national maritime policy take under the Xi Jinping administration? In the name of making China a “strong sea power” and in pursuit of “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” as a national objective, Xi Jinping has taken an even more conspicuous stance than Jiang or Hu in aggressively seeking maritime hegemony, as apparent in such coercive hardline measures as the recent large-scale reclamation of reefs in the Spratly Islands and other waters in the South China Sea, the construction of airfields, harbors and other military facilities, the repeated incursions into Japanese waters around the Senkaku Islands and other waters, and the construction of maritime facilities near the Japan-China median line in the East China Sea. Undeterred by the risk of confrontation with Japan, the US and other regional maritime nations, Xi Jinping administration is looking to change the status quo by force, and there are fears that this hegemonic tendency might gain strength. In other words, Xi’s national maritime policy is not simply an extension of the third stage of “developing via the sea,” but appears to represent a new fourth stage clearly heading in the direction of “hegemony via the sea.”


This has been evidenced, even if unexpectedly, by China’s Defense White Paper released in May 2015 entitled “China’s Military Strategy.” This White Paper first states, under “Policy of Active Defense Strategy,” that “[i]n line with the evolving form of war and national security situation, the basic point for PMS [preparation for military struggle] will be placed on ...maritime military struggle and maritime PMS.” Then makes clear under “Building and Development of China’s Armed Forces,” that “[t]he traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests.” Finally, with a change in military posture from the traditional “army first, navy second” to “navy first, army second,” presents an unambiguous policy of giving the greatest emphasis to securing maritime interests. This distinctly indicates a policy of transforming China into a “strong sea power,” that is, of pursuing “hegemony via the sea.”

This policy is even more evident to build up individual services of the military. For the navy, Xi is working to break free of the Deng/Liu “near seas defense” strategy and switch over to a combination of “near seas defense and far seas protection.” As the US Navy did at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, China will pursue its national aim of building itself into a “strong sea power” by first establishing a solid hold on the “near seas,” that is, China’s near sea areas within its 1<sup>st</sup> island defense line, and then adopt a national (naval) strategy of pursuing “hegemony via the sea” through a continued power-backed development of the more distant “far seas.”

How, then, should Japan respond to China as a maritime hegemon? There is but one prudent move: counter China’s “hegemony via the sea” with a four-pronged approach, 自盟協立 (Ji-Mei-Kyo-Ritsu), that is, “strengthening self-defense, deepening Japan-US alliance, widening regional cooperation, for achieving solidifying status as a maritime nation.” Only when Japan has in its quiver the first three of these “arrows” can it solidly establish itself as a maritime nation.

It goes without saying that strengthening self-defense is the most important of these. The current National Defense Program Guideline calls for building a “dynamic joint defense force” supported by robust technical, intelligence, command and communications capabilities that emphasizes responsiveness, sustainability, resilience, and connectivity in both “hard” and “soft” aspects, and points to improving intelligence gathering systems and full-time surveillance capabilities, ensuring naval and air superiority and the ability to flexibly deploy ground forces, and reinforcing defensive security for the Nansei Islands as the keys to bolstering defense capabilities. While this is indeed the right direction, the gradual increase in defense funding allocated to enhancing defense capabilities has regrettably not kept pace with the substantial increases in defense spending by China and other neighboring countries, remaining at less than 1% of Japan’s GDP. The defense budget should be expanded at the very least to about 1.2%, on par with non-nuclear Germany, to make doubly certain that a dynamic joint defense force can be organized.

The next priority is to deepen the Japan-US alliance. Effectively countering China's A2/AD concept and its coercive maritime incursions has become an urgent issue for the alliance, and the Nansei Islands, inclusive of the Senkaku Islands, are expected to be the primary defense front. During the initial stages in which the Nansei Islands front would be exposed to pre-emptive and simultaneous saturated attacks by aircraft and cruise/ballistic missiles, while the US military stationed in Japan would be expected to fall back somewhat and, if the Self-Defense Forces can take the initiative during that time to firmly defend the Nansei Islands and allow units to regroup, strategic air forces, carrier battle forces and other military forces of the US could be concentrated in the area for comprehensive and thorough counterattacks that would include key sites and attack origins. Demonstrating the viability of such a response would likely serve as a deterrent to the potential adversary.

In widening regional cooperation, Japan needs to pursue closer security collaboration outside the Japan-US alliance through a maritime security coalition with willing maritime states in the region that share common values. In other words, it is critical that Japan broaden its circle of security cooperation via the sea, keeping the Japan-US alliance at the core, while collaborating in both foreign policy and national defense with maritime states and other actors in the region such as Australia, India, and ASEAN members. 

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