Admiral Michael McDevitt
“Building a Modern Navy: China and Maritime Power”
Critical Issues Seminar Series: Summary of Talk
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U.S. Navy Rear Admiral and Center for Naval Analysis Senior Fellow Michael McDevitt shifted the Critical Issues seminar series to questions of military power and transformation in China with his presentation “Building a Modern Navy: China and Maritime Power.” Throughout its long history China’s military has mostly focused on land-based operations and strategy. Along with reform and opening, however, China’s leaders have increasingly focused on building naval capacity to protect China’s increasingly global economic interests, which have created security interests that go beyond a focus on just the defense of China. This shift is unlikely to reverse and will mean that China’s political and over time its security interests will no longer be limited to its immediate neighborhood.

China’s military strategy throughout the imperial, nationalist, and pre-reform eras mostly focused on threats along its land frontiers, to the neglect of its maritime approaches. In other words its strategic outlook was “continental” rather than “maritime.” This does not mean that China did not use the oceans for trade, however. Maritime trade emerged during the Tang and Sung dynasties. A naval power projection capability emerged briefly during the Ming, with the legendary voyages of Zheng He, but these were discontinued because of their high costs and other strategic priorities. With large territorial expansions, China continued to neglect its maritime power during the Qing, a strategy that would ultimately prove costly in the 19th century. China’s inability to cope with enemies that could come from the sea resulted in its “humiliations” at the hands of the English, French, and Japanese. Nevertheless, the Nationalist and early PRC governments continued their land-based strategy throughout the first three-quarters of the 20th century.

The beginning of reform in 1979 and shifts in China’s strategic environment in the 1980s changed the balance between naval and land power strategy. On one side, economic development increasingly emphasized maritime trade. On the other, the decline of the Soviet Union impelled leaders to re-asses China’s strategic environment. In 1985 Deng Xiaoping declared that there was no longer a major threat of invasion from the Soviet Union and that China should instead focus on preparing for small war(s) on its periphery. This declaration allowed security planners to focus on China’s other borders and maritime interests, ultimately placing greater emphasis on Taiwan and China’s disputed island claims in the East and South China Seas.

Events during the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996 further convinced strategic planners of the need to focus on naval power. The US response to the events of the crisis demonstrated to the Chinese that military action against Taiwan would necessitate contending with the United States Navy if the U.S. government decided to intervene. This triggered a modernization focus on the navy, air force and Second Artillery.

A major component of this naval buildup is the counter-intervention concept that the United States has named Anti Access/ Area Denial (A2/AD). This approach seeks to defend China from attack from the sea by knitting together a large submarine force, land-based aircrafts carrying anti-ship cruise missiles, and, in the future, ballistic missiles that have the capabilities to hit moving ships. The objective is to defeat approaching forces before they get within range of striking China, creating a Chinese defense perimeter that stretches hundreds of miles to sea. This has created a security dilemma for the countries that live in the shadow of China. As Beijing’s security situation improves, theirs get worse.
The second focus of China’s strengthened Navy has involved peacetime and global missions. The main drivers for these missions are expanding global economic and political interests, including protecting Chinese workers abroad, securing the safe passage of oil imports, supporting UN-sponsored missions, and responding to foreign natural disasters. In addition to submarines for A2/AD, China is building many surface ships whose main mission is “peacetime operations” such as ensuring safe passage of trade ships and supporting China’s global interests. China’s anti-piracy deployments, which started in 2008, are the best example of the PLA Navy growing Indo-Pacific presence. They also have provided an opportunity for the PLA Navy to operate thousands of miles from home waters for extended periods of time. Since 1985 the PLA navy has transformed itself from a coastal defense force to one that can maintain warships in distant stations. This wide variety of peacetime and global missions were institutionalized by President Hu in 2004 and a subsequent 2009 PLA Defense White Paper provided further elaboration, dubbing them MOOTW (Military Operations Other Than War.)

From a coastal defense force to far seas navy, the PLA Navy has undergone significant reform and modernization since the beginning of China’s reform era. Placed in a historical context, the PLA Navy’s transformation from a coastal force unable to stop a major invasion to its current global force is remarkable. Ultimately, the Navy has reformed in conjunction with China’s market reforms and increased role in global political and economic affairs. As China’s interests have evolved so too have its demands for its armed forces. China’s navy will continue to maintain a presence in the South and East China Seas as well as along the entire Indo-Pacific littoral. This is a new reality that the United States and other Asian powers must accept and learn to live with.