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## A GERMAN - AMERICAN PARTNERSHIP

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## 'Russia and China and the Maritime Dimension: Red Lines and Risk Calculus?'

### Context of Sino-Russian maritime Cooperation

Since 2012 Russia and China have undertaken increasingly frequent and more complex exercises (e.g. combined air defense, anti-submarine, amphibious operations, passing through key straits) within an expanded geographical range (2015 Mediterranean, 2017 Baltic Sea, 2021 Sea of Japan) designed to counter and limit US maritime dominance. This is part of an overall expansion in military cooperation between the two. China has the world's largest navy (battle force of 355 ships and submarines) but Russia enjoys an operational and technological lead in several areas, such as submarines, mine warfare and use of long range bombers at sea.

### Russian Maritime Approaches

Russia adopts the concept of an integrated military strategy. Rather than a separate naval strategy we should talk of operational art in the naval domain and naval policy which supports the military strategy. 'State Policy on Naval Activity' highlights the duties of the Russian navy to prevent the U.S. (the Russian navy's benchmark) and allies from achieving naval superiority in the world ocean, limiting Russian access and territorial claims and mitigating missile threats from the sea to Russian land targets

### Core missions:

1. Defend nuclear-powered, ballistic missile-carrying submarine (SSBN) patrol areas and maritime approaches to ensure strategic deterrence (calibrated second strike nuclear retaliation and escalation management) and prevent strikes against critical targets in the homeland.
2. Conduct conventional and nuclear strikes to degrade critically important military and economic adversary targets.
3. Naval diplomacy – defend Russian interests, maintain presence intimidate and negotiate from strength, project status of great power. Soviet legacy large ships better suited for this role than they are warfighting.

**Russian Naval Perspective – four zones:** Russia is able to conduct ops in all four zones and distribute ships according to rank depending on fleet's mission and threat environment

1. **Coastal – defended by** coastal vessels, small landing craft and patrol boats with the objective of sea control (i.e. can use sea for own purposes). Borei and Yasen class nuclear subs of Pacific and Northern Fleets can deploy and enter patrol areas in the Far Sea and World Ocean.
2. **Near Sea** (up to 1000 km from the Russian coast) deployments include corvettes, guided missile boats and minesweepers, for example, in the Black Sea, Baltic, Barents. Here Russia seeks sea control.
3. **Far Sea** (up to 2000 km from the Russian coast) deployments include nuclear powered and diesel electric submarines, carriers, cruisers, destroyers, large/medium landing ships, large/light frigates, and heavy corvettes. From Iceland to Norway and the North Sea, the Aegean and East

Mediterranean, the Russian navy seeks sea denial (i.e. spoil the use of the sea for NATO) and reduce the military and economic and command and control potential of the adversary. As an example, a joint Russian-Chinese three-day naval exercise 'Naval Cooperation' (held since 2012) formed a flotilla with five Chinese ships in the Sea of Japan, October 14-17, 2021.

4. **World Oceans** (all sea beyond 2000 km from Russia's coasts) is protected by nuclear powered submarines, carriers, cruisers, destroyers, large landing ships and larger frigates. In this zone the objective is to demonstrate Russia's great power status by 'showing the flag' and power projection. Physical presence can have strategic effect. Demonstration of credibility a fundamental part of deterrence. As examples, ships from Russia's Black Sea Fleet take part in Aman 2021, Arabian Monsoon 2021 drills, counter-piracy exercise in the Gulf of Aden. Pakistan's Zulfikar participated in the Main Naval Parade in St Petersburg July 2021. Pakistani vessels were also present in joint China-Iran-Russia naval exercises.

#### **Naval Policy and Prioritization:**

1. **Atlantic and Arctic** – strengthen military potential and presence, ensure survivability of nuclear deterrence and inter-theatre mobility.
2. **Pacific** – balance of power and good relations with China. Fleet upgrade as regional arms race.
3. **Indian Ocean** – maintain periodic naval presence.

#### **Sensitivity and Risk**

- **Operational advantages** in Barents and Baltic Sea, can prevail in small military clash, close to borders, with well-prepared Russian forces that are quickly mobilized, involve hybrid threats and coup-like attacks with limited objectives. Black Sea and Arctic more unstable than Baltic and Barents.
- **Marketing:** Ability to launch land attack cruise missiles from ships (e.g. Caspian flotilla to Syria) illustrates the navy's contribution to an integrated military strategy and helps sell the function of the navy to a land-warfare centric General Staff and ensures funding.
- **Limited expeditionary range** (Syria) capability but not World Ocean passed Suez and South America. Russia disadvantaged in a prolonged non-nuclear conflict with NATO.

#### **Chinese Maritime Approaches:**

- **Unprecedented emphasis is placed on the PLA Navy (PLAN) in the Xi era**, as its integrity is linked to the future of the state: "Historical experience tells us that countries that embrace the sea thrive, while states that spurn the sea decline." (Xi Jinping, July 30, 2013); "We must strive to build the People's Navy into a *world-class navy*." (Xi Jinping, April 12, 2018).
- **China seeks a leadership role on the global stage and to that end naval power is critical.** Xi Jinping seeks to "build the PLA into a world-class military...a powerful military on par with that of a world power...in order to provide strategic support for China as it moves towards the center of the world's stage." (National Defense University Strategic Research Department).
- **Aspirations of global leadership are reflected in a shift in China's 'rights-stability' calculus** - protecting what it understands to be its maritime rights as set against the maintenance of stable relations with neighbors: "China must weigh the two big picture issues of stability maintenance and rights protection." (Xi Jinping, July 2013). In the past stability was privileged, now both are in "dynamic equilibrium". As Zhang Haiwen, State Oceanic Administration, noted: "In the past, China's big aim was a stable periphery. Everything else yielded to stability. In my view, for 10-20 years stability maintenance held the dominant position. But in recent years, China has balanced

this out, meaning that stability maintenance and rights protection are now in a dynamic equilibrium.”

- **China adopts a grey zone approach to protecting ‘maritime rights’**, using the PLAN as a back-stop and deploying its Coast Guard and militias on the front line, able to undertake non-lethal measures such as bumping, water cannons, cutting cables, seizing equipment. The Coast Guard reported to the People’s Armed Police which in turn was subordinated under the Central Military Commission (CMC), highlighting a militarization of China’s law enforcement agencies under Xi.
- **PLAN is aware of its own weaknesses and limitations.** President Xi has stated: “Internationally we are basically undefended and without any effective options. If we encounter some great risk, we can evacuate our nationals, but our ability to secure our citizens and legal persons is very limited. You talk about weaknesses—this is a very big weakness. We must...gradually increase overseas security support capabilities, protect the security of our citizens and legal persons located overseas, and protect our financial, oil, mining, shipping, and other overseas commercial interests.” (Xi Jinping, December 2015). In an article titled “Eliminate the Harms Caused by a Long Period of Peace, Make Solid Efforts to Prepare for War” a Chinese academic analyst noted: “Not fighting a battle in many years has caused some officers and soldiers to suffer from different degrees of ‘peace disease.’”
- **The role of PLAN is to protect China’s “overseas Interests”** and these include: 1. Energy and resources; 2. Strategic sea lines of Communication; 3. Institutions, personnel, and assets abroad. To that end we see anti-piracy operations and evacuation of citizens from war zones, but what else might we expect? As a general trend, these overseas interests are expanding in terms of importance, number and geo-strategic range: “Today, our country’s interests are continuously expanding and requirements for the Navy are continuously expanding. Our capabilities must therefore continuously improve...China is export-oriented, so our military strategy cannot just focus on protecting our homeland.” And: “Wherever our merchant ships sail, Chinese warships should be present. Wherever our overseas interests extend, the People’s Navy should be there too.” (*People’s Daily*, 2018).
- **China’s maritime interests expand.** According to an article titled “Scientific Compass for Achieving the Chinese Nation’s Dream of Becoming a Maritime Power”: “China’s global maritime interests are continuously expanding. China not only possesses sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdictional rights over 3.0 million km<sup>2</sup> of maritime space. It also has broad maritime rights/interests in the polar regions, deep sea, and other ocean areas.” China’s naval strategy is also updated: “Today, the Navy is accelerating its transformation towards ‘near seas defense, far seas protection, oceanic presence, and polar expansion.’” (*People’s Navy*, July 13, 2018)
- **Looking to the future, the PLAN plans to do more:** “When our major overseas interests are threatened, the Navy must be able to quickly cross the ocean barrier. Operating from the sea, it must be able to conduct military operations against key enemy targets in the littorals or on land. It must be able to deter, contain, and smash enemy operations, ensuring the security of China’s important overseas interests.” (“On the Navy’s Strategic Positioning in the New Era”, *National Defense*, May 2018).
- **One indicator of Chinese intent will be the role of marine amphibious expeditionary forces:** “Safeguarding the security of China’s overseas development interests urgently requires that China build the PLAN Marines into a force that can conduct amphibious operations overseas...and possesses rapid-response and independent operational capabilities to deal with crises. When necessary, it must be able to maintain long-term deployments in waters crucially

related to China's overseas interests and it must ensure that it can respond rapidly and take decisive action once there is a problem." (*People's Navy*, January 2017).

### **Sino-Russian Maritime Cooperation: Current and potential future?**

- **Current:** Arctic understandings. PLAN patrols the Aleutian Islands (2021) and Sea of Japan which is en route to the Arctic. It actively seeks to develop knowledge of the Arctic and carries out acoustic experiments using hydrophones for sound propagation which would enable potential future military operations in the Arctic. While China is revisionist in the Indo-Pacific it is status quo in the European theatre – Russia is the opposite. Thus Putin calls for “peaceful negotiation” with regards to Taiwan, China does not recognize the annexation of Crimea and its presence in the Arctic mitigates Russian militarization.
- **Future:** Indicators in the maritime domain of a potential future shift from functional axis to deeper partnership could include, for example: 1) Chinese warships pay port visits and dock in Sevastopol during a period of heightened Black Sea tension; 2) Russia and China conduct a maritime exercise off the coast of Taiwan.

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**Disclaimer:** This summary reflects the views of the authors (Dmitry Gorenburg, Graeme P. Herd and Ryan D. Martinson) and are not necessarily the official policy of the United States, Germany, or any other governments.