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Research Report

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Title of Research:

China's Sea Power as a Strategic Paradigm

Purpose of Research: (200 words)

The purpose of this research is to analyze the factors at play behind China's decision to build a navy and adopt sea power as a strategic paradigm since the founding of the PRC. Because China has long been perceived as a continental power, and more specifically the PRC which inherited the guerilla traditions of the Chinese Red Army, Beijing's decision to spend scarce economic resources in a branch of the armed forces where its experience was almost nonexistent and the technology gap with other powers colossal, is indubitably surprising. Considering the question from the vantage point of today, China's success in domestically building its own navy leads many researchers to take the well-foundedness of this policy for granted. However, during the period running from 1949 to 1979, this policy was constantly questioned and came under attack from various corners of the PLA's military apparatus and political factions. By showing the importance of sea power in terms that go beyond simple military needs – quest for diplomatic prestige, association of a navy to the idea of modernity, etc. – this research provides a new angle on what is commonly called navalism. It also brings new perspectives on the outcomes of such policy, particularly on its repercussions on the East Asian security environment.

Content/Methodology of Research: (400 words)

This research covers three distinct periods. The first period runs from 1949 to 1962, the second period from 1963 to 1979, and the last period from 1980 until today. To each period, this research has one corresponding part. Each part include three chapters, for a total of nine chapters excluding the introduction. For each period, this research provides a detailed analysis of the evolution of the Chinese navy and the concrete policies that were taken by the political and naval leadership. Subsequently, the two other chapters seek to analyze the reasons behind the Navy's growth (or the lack of it) during the said period. One chapter deals with realist factors such as external threats and China's security environment. The other chapter pays a closer look at domestic and ideational factors such as the power play between the various military factions regarding which doctrine China should adopt regarding its defense policy, or which beliefs did naval leaders uphold regarding the navy.

For this reason, this research relies on a constructivist theoretical framework, particularly on the works done on non-military factors and their impact on military policies and doctrines. It confronts this constructivist framework to a realist framework based on threats and rational assessments to offer the conclusive evidence that a realist perspective cannot explain why China decided to build a large navy. I argue that at the very least until 1980, China's decision to build a navy was a gamble that could not be explained away by needs for security, particularly at a time when China's security was relying on other means such as its vastly more important land force and air force, as well as its efforts to build a nuclear weapon.

This research also relies on historical sources. The Matsushita Foundation Research Grant was particularly helpful in this regard. It enabled me to do a research trip to Washington D.C. to collect documents pertaining to U.S. intelligence regarding the Chinese navy, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s. I conducted research at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) facility in Maryland, as well as the Naval Academy's Nimitz Library which keeps two collections of interest to me – the Swanson collection and the Muller collection. This research also relies on memoirs written by former commanders of the Chinese navy, which also provides a first-hand account (albeit

less reliable than archival documents) on the decision process and the factors that came into play.

Conclusion/Observation (200 words)

Research conducted in Washington D.C. was very conclusive. Materials held in various archives (mostly NARA, the Naval Academy Nimitz Library) keep a wealth of declassified documents, notably Naval Intelligence Reports written by naval attachés. The period covered by these documents mainly runs from 1949 to the 1960s, which represents the first part of my argumentation – namely that by the 1960s, China’s naval policy was well under discussion and that the decision to build a large navy does not date back to the 1980s. This source of information provided this research with the following benefits.

First, it offered information related to facts and events that are not mentioned by Chinese sources, or that these same sources were probably unwilling to disclose.

Second, when U.S. intelligence sources and Chinese sources cover an overlapping topic, it allowed us to see the discrepancy that have at times existed between U.S. perception of the Chinese Navy and the reality on the ground. A good example is the Cultural Revolution. Previous research done by Bruce Swanson or David Muller, also relying on the same U.S. intelligence sources, give an incomplete account of the situation of the Chinese navy during the Cultural Revolution.

Third, the wealth of archives and records held at NARA opened several new research leads that I intend to pursue in the future.