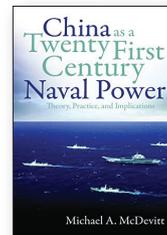


BOOK REVIEW:

China as a twenty-first century naval power: theory, practice, and implications

by Michael A. McDevitt

Naval Institute Press: Annapolis, Maryland; 2020; 320 pp.; ISBN 9781682475355 (hardback); RRP 80.99.



In this book, Michel McDevitt has made a distinguished and reasoned contribution to our understanding of China's 21st century naval power. As he points out, China's warships are not 'coming', they are already 'here', and require that all defence planners become familiar with, above all else, the rationale for this dramatic transformation of the People's Liberation Army–Navy (PLAN) from a motley collection of 20th century relics into a modern naval force to rival and to challenge any other.

Rear Admiral Michael A. McDevitt USN (Ret'd) is a senior fellow at CNA, Arlington, Virginia, where he focuses on United States security issues in East Asia, strategy, war planning and naval operations worldwide. During his 34-year naval career, McDevitt held four sea commands, including a carrier battle group in the Pacific. He concluded his active-duty career as Commandant of the National War College in Washington, D.C.

In charting why and how China, a nation traditionally noted for its emphasis on land power, has decided to become a great naval power, McDevitt has traced the development of an awareness of the maritime dimension and its importance to the nation's existence among the senior echelons of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) – whose navy it is – and has identified two key concerns for Chinese strategic planners.

The first key concern is that of control of the near seas – in Chinese terminology the 'First and Second Island Chains', broadly encompassing the waters between the Chinese east coast and the Japanese home islands, Guam, Palau and eastern Indonesia to Singapore. Having modernised its industrial capacities, logistics and transportation networks to make it a great exporting nation (which also implies a major importing nation), the Chinese leadership fears that this status could be placed in jeopardy by the actions of a foreign naval power – specifically the United States and its allies. This unlikely scenario motivates the Chinese to build up their capabilities to resist and prevent its fulfilment in all modes of warfare. The CCP has yet to reveal just how many ships, aircraft and other military systems it believes it needs to secure this area.

The second key concern is what McDevitt terms 'SLOC anxiety'. To all trading nations the security of sea lines of communications is of paramount importance. Regardless of its success or otherwise in defending its near sea approaches, China's economy is also vulnerable to interdiction of its shipping at sea. This, too, is an unlikely scenario, but it is real enough to worry the Chinese into expending vast sums in preparation for their

defence. China already possesses the world's largest distant-water fishing and merchant marine fleets, the former a very useful adjunct to naval power and the latter a sure source of logistics and other support to deployed naval forces. But defence of merchant shipping against attack on the world's oceans where China does not have a preponderance of sea and air power, is a significant challenge. The 'nightmare' scenario for Chinese planners is that both eventualities occur at once.

The resulting increase in the numbers and sophistication of Chinese warships, backed by a strong coast guard and fishing fleet, and a revamped military command structure, has been part of a careful and well-thought-out strategic plan extending back into the 20th century. When President Xi Jinping declares that China will be a world-class power by 2050, he is already talking from a position of strength in defence capabilities. From being a naval force that rarely strayed beyond its home waters in the 1990s, Chinese warships and task groups can now be routinely encountered across the world's seas. By hull count, the CCP already commands the world's largest navy.

The book is divided into eight chapters. It begins with a discussion of Chinese maritime ambitions and then works through the transition of the PLAN to 'blue-water' capability to the development of China's plans for defending its sea approaches, and its options for occupying Taiwan and controlling the South China Sea. A study of its options and problems for Indian Ocean operations are then discussed and the main text concludes with observations on maritime power and the role of the PLAN in exercising it. McDevitt points to acknowledged shortcomings in PLA capabilities for fighting 21st century warfare, but observes that none of its possible opponents, including the United States, has any combat experience in that environment either.

Two interesting appendices outline the development of China's Coastguard – the world's largest, and under military command – and the Maritime Militia, closely associated with the large Chinese fishing industry. Both are important in China's assertion of its maritime 'rights'. There is a comprehensive list of notes (both Chinese language and western) and a bibliography.

Without resort to either naval jargon or dramatics, Michael McDevitt has written a concise but well-argued text of value to anyone interested in China and its progress towards becoming a great maritime power. His book is highly recommended for careful study.

Ian Pfennigwerth