

Navy opens its hatches to China

Top Chinese admiral gets tour of San Diego bases, joint war games coming in '14

By [Jeanette Steele \(/staff/jeanette-steele/\)](#) 4:57 p.m. Sept. 13, 2013



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Adm. Jonathan Greenert, chief of naval operations, talks with Chinese Adm. Wu Shengli during a visit to the control room of the Los Angeles-class attack submarine Jefferson City. — *U.S. Navy*

The photos might be considered chilling: The head of China's navy getting an insider tour of a United States fast-attack submarine in San Diego Bay last week.

Why would the U.S. Navy open its hatches to the naval power that's not only modernizing but is developing long-range attack weapons and pressing territorial claims against American allies in Asia? A sailor in San Diego posed a similar question to the head of the U.S. Navy during a town-hall meeting.

Because China's maritime rise can't be ignored, said Adm. Jonathan Greenert, the U.S. Navy's top officer who hosted the Chinese contingent in San Diego and Washington, D.C., last week.

"China is a growing navy, and they are a large and very capable navy," Greenert said in an interview. "You can't just look at each other and say, 'You're here, I'm here, and leave me alone.' We must have a dialogue."

The U.S. Navy's leader told the sailor, "The way to move ahead is to get a consistent code of conduct out there. How will we talk to each other when we come across each other?"

That dialogue will reach historic levels next summer when the Chinese participate for the first time in the international Rim of the Pacific war games in Hawaii — something that at least one scholar says is a bad strategic and political move.

"RimPac is a multilateral exercise involving many of our closest allies, some of whom are having difficulty with China now," said Dean Cheng, fellow at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C., who believes the offer should never have been extended to China.

"China is not simply being an observer. They will get to watch — with an entire ship's worth of people and listening devices — the conduct of such operations of not just us but our allies."

In San Diego, China's Adm. Wu Shengli toured the aircraft carrier Carl Vinson and the fast-attack submarine Jefferson City and joined the littoral combat ship Fort Worth at sea. Finishing out a three-day stay, he visited the Marines at Camp Pendleton.

Scholars say these military-to-military relationships can't hurt but have had limited value in the past. The overriding premise is that when a crisis hits, an American admiral can get on the phone to a Chinese admiral and defuse tensions.

"For many years, until very recently, both countries have talked about the need for a better relationship, but the United States has been mostly dissatisfied," said Denny Roy, senior fellow at the East-West Center in Hawaii.

One of the reasons: a lack of true reciprocity, Roy said. The United States would show the Chinese "pretty good stuff" but not get equal back in return, he said. Also the Chinese use the military relationship — or specifically the withdrawal of it — to retaliate against something in the political realm they are unhappy about, such as the sale of arms to Taiwan.

Roy said there are signs that China is changing on that point.

"Most on the U.S. side in last couple years think the Chinese seem to be more sincere about improving mil-to-mil, as if accepting U.S. logic about the importance of it," he said.

There's much on the line, in terms of the balance of power on the seas.

The Chinese navy in September 2012 commissioned its first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, a refurbished flattop purchased from Ukraine. China landed its first jet fighter on the flight deck in November.

The U.S. Defense Department expects China to build multiple aircraft carriers over the next decade, with the first ready to sail in the latter half of this decade.

Already, China has Asia's largest seaforce, despite not having much of a naval tradition before recent decades.

The Chinese fleet includes 79 principal surface combatants, more than 55 submarines, and 55 medium and large amphibious ships, according to the 2013 Pentagon report on China's military growth, mandated annually by Congress since 2000.

The United States fleet has 285 warships, including 10 operating aircraft carriers.

China also has put a high priority on modernizing its submarine force, according to the Pentagon report. It has built three nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines, and up to five more may enter service before the decade is out.

One of China's most-discussed additions is the so-called carrier killer missile, the Dong Feng 21D.

First deployed in 2010, this ballistic missile can travel more than 900 miles and gives China the ability to attack large ships in the western Pacific, including aircraft carriers.

A Chinese newspaper in January reported that the missile "sank" a mocked-up aircraft carrier during war games in the Gobi Desert.

Because the U.S. Navy had not previously faced a threat from ballistic missiles capable of hitting moving ships at sea, some have called the DF-21D a game changer. It could effectively block U.S. access to the region even as the Pentagon executes the "pivot to the Pacific" announced in 2011.

But while China certainly aspires to be a world maritime power, some scholars believe its motives are largely defensive, not offensive.

Bernard Cole, author of books on the Chinese navy and a National Defense University professor, said China has Taiwan and its local seas in mind.

On Taiwan, the breakaway island nation protected by the United States, China's submarines could hamstring the American naval reaction in a crisis.

"Their thought was that if they could get a couple dozen submarines out at sea, we would be forced to slow down our intervention ... until we could find those submarines," said Cole, a retired Navy officer. "In the meantime, Taiwan would cave and come to the negotiating table."

Longer term, Cole said, China wants to exert control over the Yellow, East and South China seas by no later than 2050.

"Beijing believes those three seas are vital littoral waters and that they should be able to prevent unwelcome events from occurring," said the author of "The Great Wall at Sea."

Meanwhile U.S. ally Japan is in conflict with China over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. And the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea are claimed by China, Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines.

Roy of the East-West Center said he expects a continued buildup and modernization of the Chinese fleet in coming years.

The Pentagon estimates that China spends between \$135 billion and \$215 billion on its military, though actual numbers are tough to come by.

The United States base defense budget this year was much higher, at \$524 billion. But the automatic military spending cuts called sequestration will likely slice that budget by roughly 10 percent a year over the next nine years.

“Something important to keep in mind is that the Chinese do not accept the idea that they don’t need a blue-water navy because Americans can protect flow of commerce on the seas,” Roy said. “The question is, will the Chinese narrow the gap?”

Roy said the Chinese will almost certainly close the gap on fleet size. Quality is a different matter.

“If the United States remains committed to shelling out the resources it takes to have the world’s top navy, I think the United States can,” he said.

Or, “If the Chinese decide to focus on other things, that maybe a Great Britain-sized navy is good enough for them — then, in that case, expect the U.S. to stay on top.”

The U.S. Navy’s top officer said his counterpart, Wu, seemed pragmatic about his nation’s first outing at the American war games in Hawaii next year. Since 2012, the two nations have conducted at least two joint anti-piracy exercises off Africa.

“He studies us, and we know him and his agenda. And he’s been pretty clear on his agenda, it’s what common ground can we find,” Greenert said. “I have political leadership and you do, too, so what is the common ground we can reach.”

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