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**CHINA BETWEEN THE MAINLAND AND THE SEA.**

**MARITIME REBALANCING AND BEIJING'S REGIONAL SECURITY POLICY.**

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**ABSTRACT.** Since the late nineties Western literature on Chinese foreign and security policy has begun to analyse what is being referred to as “China’s turn to the sea”, i.e. China’s strategies and policies to expand its maritime capabilities. A decade later, however, there is no consensus in the literature as to what Beijing defines as its maritime interests and what maritime military capabilities China will ‘need’ to secure its regional maritime interests. In this paper I try to contribute to this debate through an empirical analysis of the maritime rebalancing of China’s security policy, considering some of the implications for China’s overall regional security policies. In the first part of the paper, I introduce the topic by selectively reviewing Chinese literature: during the last decade “China’s turn to the sea” has been debated not only in the West but above all in China, where much has been written on the comparative advantages of sea and land power. In the second part of the paper I turn to an empirical analysis of the maritime rebalancing in China’s

security policy. Firstly I discuss evidence of a maritime rebalancing in China's military doctrine, drawing on selected works by Chinese leaders and on Chinese secondary literature. Then I analyse how doctrinal evolution has been translated into organizational change within the two areas of force deployment and PLA's personnel allocation among services, drawing on data from the *IISS Military Balance*. Finally, in the third section of the paper I focus on the interaction between the maritime rebalancing in China's security policy and Beijing's regional security policy, examining the potential incongruence between these two policy areas.

## **Introduction.**

Since the late nineties Western scholars have debated on the shift in the strategic focus of China's foreign and security policy, from the mainland to the maritime peripheral areas. This debate has many interesting implications, both at the level of China area studies and at the level of International Relations theory. On the one hand Beijing's recent interest in the sea is an element of strong discontinuity in China's foreign and security policy, traditionally focused on the mainland and especially on China's northern and north-western border areas. On the other hand China could well be just part of a wider theoretical puzzle, since in the history of modern international politics many other continental powers have turned to the sea at some point in their rise. Although these and many other points have been discussed now for more than ten years, the academic debate on the topic is still far from a consensus, with diverging assessments of both Chinese maritime interests and capabilities.

In the meantime, it is also unclear how this geographic shift in China's strategic focus impacts on Beijing's current regional policy. To use David Shambaugh's words, since the mid nineties China has adopted a "new proactive regional posture" [Shambaugh, 2005a, p. 64], within the wider framework of a "new diplomacy" at the global level [Medeiros and Fravel, 2003], turning from a relatively passive attitude to an increasingly active and responsible role, both on regional and global issues. Which are the implications of China's maritime rebalancing for its regional policy? Are maritime rebalancing and the current regional policy two faces of the same coin? Or is there potential for incongruence among the two?

In this paper I try to contribute to this debate by empirically analysing the maritime rebalancing in China's security policy and then exploring its interaction with China's regional security policy. Two clarifications are required. First of all, in this paper I will use the word "(maritime) rebalancing" and not the word "turn (to the sea)", so frequently used in Western literature: while the latter implies a Chinese reorientation from the mainland to the sea with a radical change in China's geopolitical status, with the former I refer in more general terms to a review in the balance between the continental and the maritime side of China's foreign and security policy. Second, although there is strong evidence that the "maritime rebalancing" involves many

areas of China's external behaviour, in this paper I will focus on just one specific area: security policy.

I will start with a brief review of Chinese literature on the topic (section I), with a focus on competing interpretations of China's relations with the sea. Then I will move to the bulk of this paper, a two-step empirical analysis of the maritime rebalancing in China's security policy (section II): firstly I will analyse China's military doctrine since the late seventies (step 1) and secondly I will focus on the organization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), through an analysis of the PLA Ground Forces' (PLAGF) deployment and an analysis of personnel allocation among the three PLA armed services<sup>1</sup> (step 2). Finally, I will briefly outline the basic features of Beijing's current regional security policy and then focus on the interaction between the latter and the maritime rebalancing in China's security policy (section III).

## **I. The Chinese normative debate: the comparative advantages of sea and land power.**

As mentioned above, China's maritime rebalancing is a controversial topic in Western literature. What is less frequently noticed, however, is that this topic is a highly controversial one also among Chinese scholars. While the Western debate has a descriptive and explanatory aim, trying to find out the extent of China's maritime rebalancing and the reasons behind it, the Chinese debate has on the contrary a strongly normative approach: Chinese scholars discuss what China should do, which are China's national interests and which are the best ways to pursue them. In particular, over the last years Chinese scholars have been widely debating the relative advantages of sea and land power for China's rise, drawing on evidence from both Chinese and Western history. Within this debate a clear polarization has emerged, between supporters of sea power (a "maritime school") and supporters of land power (a "continental school")<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The three PLA armed services are the PLAGF, the PLA Navy (PLAN) and the PLA Air Force (PLAAF). The Second Artillery is not considered as a service: according to David Shambaugh, "(...) since its creation, the Second Artillery has been only a service arm (*bingzhong*) and is a half rank lower bureaucratically than the other services (...)" [Shambaugh, 2002, p. 166]

<sup>2</sup> Erickson and Goldstein [2009] use the word "faction", but I think the idea of a "school" is maybe more appropriate.

(1) According to the maritime school, past history clearly demonstrates the pre-eminence of sea power over land power. Zhang Wenmu, one of the most popular scholars in this school, analyses at length the rise and fall of the major Western and Eastern powers to conclude that command of the sea is the main explanation of it. Regarding Chinese historical experience, Zhang rejects the idea that the roots of the “century of humiliation” lay in China’s social and economic backwardness, maintaining on the opposite that the real reason is to be found in the late Qing dynasty’s neglect for seapower [Zhang Wenmu, 2009, pp. 19-44]. Similarly, according to Ni Lexiong history reveals a clear trend from land power toward sea power, in contrast with Halford Mackinder’s geopolitical theory. In this wider context also China has recently experienced a transition from a “continental rural country” (内陆农耕国家, neilu nonggeng guojia) to a “contemporary oceanic country” (现代海洋国家, xiandai haiyang guojia): the turning point was the programme of “Reform and Opening Up”, which reoriented China’s economy toward the external world [Ni Lexiong, 2007].

The maritime school argues that China’s national interests are now increasingly centred on the sea. On the one hand a strong maritime perspective is implicit in China’s traditional interest to territorial integrity: the purpose of national reunification, which mainly involves Taiwan and maritime disputed areas in the East and South China Sea, is essentially a maritime one. On the other hand, however, this maritime perspective is strengthened by new interests coming from China’s recent integration into the international economic system. According to Zhang Wenmu China’s national security has now to do not only with the traditional concept of “border security” (边界安全, bianjie anquan), but also with the new concept of “security borders” (安全边界, anquan bianjie), which means that China has now new interests falling well beyond its national territory. As he writes, “security borders means borders of interests and rights. Our security borders, and our military capabilities, should extend to where our interests and rights extend” [Zhang Wenmu, 2009, p. 91<sup>3</sup>]. In Zhang’s analysis these new interests falling outside China’s territory are mainly economic interests. First of all China has a national interest in the safe navigation along the sea lines of communication (SLOCs), in particular in the Strait of Malacca [ibidem, p. 98]; secondly, China has now a national interest also in the protection of those Chinese who live abroad and contribute to China’s economic development [ibidem, p. 90]. From this point of view, the Taiwan issue becomes even more crucial: while fulfilling national reunification remains a fundamental political objective

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<sup>3</sup> My translation (also for quotations in the following, unless otherwise specified)

falling within the traditional concept of “border security”, the control of the island is now becoming strategically important as the necessary premise for the projection of Chinese naval power in the South China Sea [ibidem, p. 165]. Rather predictably, the maritime school argues that China should modernize its navy as the most effective tool to protect both traditional and non-traditional interests. Indeed, for Zhang Wenmu a powerful navy is the essence of modern military power: as he writes by adapting Mao’s words to the new circumstances, “in the era of national development, no powerful navy means no state” [ibidem, p. 92]. More specifically, the priority is building a Chinese aircraft-carrier, considered not just as a common military ship but as a platform that brings together sea power, land power and air power [ibidem, pp. 96-97].

(2) As opposed to the maritime school, the continental school argues that China basically remains a land power and that, even if sea power should not be neglected, China’s foreign and security policy should keep its focus on the Eurasian landmass. It is in particular Ye Zicheng who has elaborated on this idea, proposing a “new land-power perspective” (新陆权观, xin luquan guan). According to this influential scholar, in history there have already been two theories of continental power: a first one in the pre-modern era (and with the Mongol empire as its highest example); and a second one in the nineteenth and twentieth century (the classical geopolitical theory of land power, made real by Russia first and by the Soviet Union later). The third continental perspective that Ye proposes has Chinese characteristics and is built on five elements: territory, as the place where human societies live and prosper; people, whose welfare should be the main purpose of governments; development, which is the most important political aim for China and for all the developing countries; Eurasia, the landmass where China is placed, together with Russia, India and Europe; and comprehensiveness, or developing in the same time sea power and air power drawing on the basis of a strong land power. [Ye Zicheng, 2007a; Ye Zicheng, 2007b, pp. 1-9].

Ye Zicheng systematically confutes the arguments of the maritime school, showing that Chinese national interests as defined by that school cannot be pursued through maritime capabilities. To begin with, Ye addresses China’s interest to energetic security: while Chinese energetic dependence on the SLOCs is a real problem for national security, it cannot be resolved by dispatching the PLAN to the Strait of Malacca or other chokepoints, because this would provoke negative reactions from regional powers thus further complicating the issue. On the opposite, the only way to resolve this problem is to reduce China’s energetic dependence on the SLOCs by increasing its energy imports from the continent: this requires a stronger “land to land” economic cooperation with China’s Central Asian neighbours [ibidem, pp. 281-284]. Second, for what

concerns the Taiwan issue, Ye maintains that although military (and especially naval) strength is crucial to deter Taiwan's independence, achieving the aim of peaceful reunification requires Beijing to persuade Taiwan's public opinion that reunification is in Taiwan's interest. To this aim the key for the mainland is to achieve new levels in economic, social and political development: or, in other words, Beijing should focus on the third of the basic elements of the "new land-power perspective" mentioned above [ibidem, pp. 284-293]. Finally, regarding the maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea Ye argues that strengthening China's military capabilities is not a solution, since significant progress can be achieved only through negotiations, as shown by the experience of the last years [ibidem, pp. 293-299]. In the end, Ye Zicheng is not against the development of China's sea power, but he argues that while strengthening its naval capabilities China should not forget its unchanging continental nature. In terms of military modernization, this means that a Chinese aircraft-carrier is a reasonable objective in the long term, when China will have the economic resources for such an expensive endeavour, but not in the short term, when China's priority is its successful economic development and, accordingly, the largest part of its economic resources should be devoted to this aim [Ye Zicheng, 2003, pp. 115-116].

Within this highly polarized debate between the maritime and the continental school there have been also some attempts at finding a middle ground. For example Li Yihu defines China as a power with "mixed maritime-continental geopolitical features" (海陆兼备的地缘特征, *hailu jianbei de diyuan tezheng*), since its sea-land ratio (an index built by dividing maritime areas by land areas) amounts to 31%, which means that China's "maritime territory" is 31% of China's "land territory"<sup>4</sup> [Li Yihu, 2007]. According to Li, since the beginning of the nineties this mixed geopolitical status has become increasingly evident: with the end of the Cold War, China's main geopolitical axis moved from the North-South direction (with threats to China's national security coming from the Soviet Union in the North and the United States in the South) to the East-West direction (with China's focus on Japan and its relation with the United States in the East and on Central Asia in the West, i.e. both a maritime and a continental focus). Li recommends that China promotes a balanced development of both its land and sea power: but, since over the last decades Beijing has neglected sea power, this means that at least in the short term China should focus on developing its sea power, strengthening its capabilities within the first island chain and in the same time building new capabilities for operations outside it. From this point of view, therefore, even if

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<sup>4</sup> But the index does not make any distinction between territorial sea, contiguous area and exclusive economic zone.

Li's conceptual premises are peculiar, his final recommendations are similar to those of the maritime school.

When analysing the Chinese debate, much of the Western literature has mainly focused on the maritime school, while only some more recent works have taken into account also the continental school's arguments (for example Holmes and Yoshihara [2005] and Erickson and Goldstein. [2009]). What is even less frequently noticed is that the two schools build on opposing grand-strategic premises and in particular on two opposing views of the current international context. On the one hand the continental school is in line with what could be called the "orthodox view" of the international context, i.e. the mainstream interpretation of the international environment that is shared within China's foreign policy elite and lays at the basis of China's current grand strategy. According to this view, the international context is still dominated by the two themes mentioned by Deng Xiaoping: peace and development. To be sure, in the late nineties China did face some challenges, coming from a more assertive U.S. policy creating tensions in the bilateral relation. Nevertheless, after 9/11 the U.S. China policy moved toward a more cooperative attitude, opening the way to stable and constructive relations between the two powers in the following decade. As a consequence, the international context that China is now facing is considered to be the most favourable since the founding of the People's Republic. In the same time, also the regional context offers unprecedented opportunities to Beijing: for the first time in centuries China does not have to face immediate threats to its northern and north-western frontiers, thanks to good relations with Russia and the neighbouring Central Asian states [Ye Zicheng, 2007b, pp. 87-93].

On the other hand, the maritime school draws on a radically different view of the current international context. The basic themes of nowadays international politics are not peace and development, but rather hegemonism and anti-hegemonism. Zhang Wenmu describes the current international context moving from an analysis of recent developments in the international capitalist economy. Private capital flows have produced an international competition not only among private companies, but also among states, since at stake is the access to those natural resources that are crucial for national development. As a consequence, the basic theme of current international politics is the competition between the developed countries, which are trying to preserve their hegemony in the use of natural resources, and the developing countries, which need natural resources to improve

their people's living conditions<sup>5</sup> [Zhang Wenmu, 2009, pp. 54-55]. In this context, since the end of the Cold War the United States has been consolidating its hegemonic position by acquiring a full control of the Indian Ocean, the aim of every hegemonic power since the Napoleonic wars. It is in this light that Zhang reads both the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq, as well as the U.S. strengthened security relations with Japan and the Philippines [ibidem, pp. 62-66]. This view of the current international context is clearly antithetical to the orthodox view discussed above. In this respect, the maritime school poses a challenge to the foundations of China's current grand strategy: indeed, it provides an alternative grand strategy, which over the last twenty years has already, repeatedly (although unsuccessfully) challenged the established grand strategy [Goldstein, 2005, pp. 146-159].

## **II. An empirical analysis: military doctrine and PLA organization.**

In this section I will move to the empirical analysis of the maritime rebalancing in one specific area of China's external behaviour: its security policy. As already mentioned, the analysis will be divided into two steps: first I will trace the maritime rebalancing in China's military doctrine since the late seventies; then I will trace the maritime rebalancing in the organization of the PLA since the early eighties.

### ***Step 1: maritime rebalancing in military doctrine.***

Any study of China's military doctrine has to face some challenges that is worth underlining at the beginning. First of all, there is the problem of sources: except for some generic references to the topic in China's defence white papers, no official document on military doctrine is available. For this reason I relied on both Chinese secondary literature and, to a lesser extent, on selected

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<sup>5</sup> By the way it is worth noting that, even if moving from a completely different perspective (a Marxist analysis of the international economic system), Zhang Wenmu deals with a recurrent topic in the Western literature of the nineties: the idea of a war for resources.

works by the Chinese paramount leaders. Secondly, the concept of military doctrine itself is not completely appropriate to describe Chinese thought on the use of military force: indeed, in the Chinese language there exists no exact equivalent of the word doctrine, let alone the distinction between basic and operational doctrine. In the following I will try to translate the Chinese thought into Western terminology drawing on David Shambaugh's analysis of how words and concepts are used in Chinese military thought [Shambaugh, 2002, pp. 56-60]. Finally, I will adopt the periodization used in Chinese secondary sources, which for every period in the history of the People's Republic define the military thought by attributing it to the paramount leader of the period. Accordingly, Chinese sources identify three stages in Chinese military thought since the late seventies: (1) Deng Xiaoping's military thought, (2) Jiang Zemin's military thought and, finally, (3) Hu Jintao's military thought. Of course this periodization is somehow artificial, since it attributes to single political leaders military doctrines that are necessarily a collective endeavour. Nevertheless I chose to maintain it because it emphasizes three important turning points: the late seventies, the early nineties and the beginning of the past decade. In the following I will briefly discuss Chinese military doctrine in these three periods, enucleating for each of them: a) the assessment of the international context; b) the basic doctrine (the functions that the armed forces are required to pursue and the type of war that they prepare to face); and c) the operational doctrine.

(1) Chinese military doctrine in the era of Deng Xiaoping was marked first of all by a new assessment of the international context. While in the era of Mao Zedong Beijing had always been convinced that a new world war was imminent, in the late seventies Chinese leaders began to reassess and downgrade this threat. According to Deng Xiaoping, a new world war could now be postponed: as he said in 1980, "(w)e believe (...) that world war can be put off and peace maintained for a longer time if the struggle against hegemonism is carried on effectively" [Deng Xiaoping, 1984, p. 225]. As a consequence, the international context was now described as dominated by the two themes of peace and development: as Deng said in 1985, "Nowadays among the real problems in the world, the global strategic problems, one is the problem of peace, one is the problem of economy or the problem of development." [Deng Xiaoping, 1993, p. 105].

For what concerns basic doctrine, in the late seventies and early eighties the PLA was required to protect China's interest to survival (生存, shengcun) and development (发展, fazhan). In particular, the armed forces were required to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, including the reunification of Taiwan to the mainland as well as the solution of the many territorial disputes on both land and sea. Although in secondary sources some general references are made

also to the protection of “oceanic rights and interests” (海洋权益, haiyang quanyi) [Zhang Yining, 2006, pp. 357-359], it seems however that the focus was still on China’s territory and that the concept of “rights and interests” was mainly used to imply the solution of the maritime territorial disputes. The PLA had to prepare to fight a “people’s war under modern conditions” (现代条件下人民战争, xiandai tiaojian xia renmin zhanzheng). As explained in secondary literature, this doctrinal concept implied both continuities and discontinuities with the era of Mao Zedong. On the one hand China still retained its traditional doctrine of “people’s war” (“The people’s war is our party’s and our army’s magic weapon to defeat the enemy” [ibidem, p. 362]). Although in the late seventies China was much stronger than it used to be, it was still in conditions of technological inferiority if compared with its main (potential) enemies: as a consequence it still had to rely on mass mobilization to compensate for the technological divide. On the other hand, the people’s war to be fought under “modern conditions” was a new one from many points of view. First of all, in terms of war morphology, the new international context dominated by peace and development implied a lower risk of total wars and, on the opposite, a higher risk of limited wars. Second, in terms of combat theatre, limited wars would be fought not deep into Chinese territory (as would have been the case with a total war), but in peripheral areas, especially in coastal areas. Finally, in such limited peripheral wars advanced technology would play a more important role, requiring China to devote more resources to the development of high-technology weapons [ibidem, pp. 363-364].

Regarding the operational doctrine, in the late seventies China reviewed the traditional concept of “active defence” (积极防御, jiji fangyu). This concept had been introduced by Mao Zedong as opposed to “passive defence”: “Active defence is also known as offensive defence, or defence through decisive engagements. Passive defence is also known as purely defensive defence or pure defence. Passive defence is actually a spurious kind of defence, and the only real defence is active defence, defence for the purpose of counter-attacking and taking the offensive” [Mao Zedong, 1975, p. 207]. In the late seventies the concept of “active defence” was adapted to the “people’s war under modern conditions” by altering the original balance between defence and attack. Since under the “new conditions” the war would no more be a long term-effort, the counter-attack should be launched immediately at the beginning of the war [Zhang Yining, 2006, pp. 361-362].

(2) Moving to the Chinese military doctrine under Jiang Zemin, the assessment of the international context was still marked by the definition of peace and development as the two main

themes of international politics. Nevertheless, the radical transformation of the international system at the end of the eighties, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition to unipolarism, implied also new challenges for China. As a consequence, although in the early nineties the international context was still considered as a peaceful and stable one, Beijing included also some new threats in its comprehensive assessment (“in the era of peace and development the world is not stable” [ibidem, p. 507]). First of all China perceived threats to its own political stability, with mounting Western pressure on its political regime and the growing internal forces of “terrorism, separatism and religious extremism”; moreover, China perceived containment attitudes by many Western countries, on the backdrop of the “China threat theory”, increasingly popular among Western public opinions; finally, the regional context entailed many elements of instability that posed potential threats to China’s territorial integrity [ibidem, pp. 507-516].

Regarding the basic doctrine, also under Jiang Zemin the PLA was required to protect both China’s interests to survival and development, but by the mid nineties such interests had acquired a clearer profile. On the one hand the Taiwan issue was now undoubtedly considered as the main threat to China’s territorial integrity. Since the beginning of the decade the Taiwanese internal political debate had experienced a turn toward autonomism: as a consequence, reunification through military force came to be seen in Beijing as a potential option. On the other hand, the interest to development was now more clearly defined as the set of Chinese economic interests overseas. China’s economic development had resulted in a growing dependence on foreign trade and especially in energy dependence on foreign sources (China became a net importer of oil products in 1993 and of crude oil in 1996). From secondary literature it seems that threats in the area of “energy security” were first perceived and included in the military doctrine exactly in this period. Maritime areas surrounding China came now to be seen in two different perspectives: on the one hand as a reserve of natural resources, which could be employed to sustain China’s economic development; on the other hand as a crucial hub of lines of communication, whose navigability was a key Chinese interest [ibidem, p. 525].

Within the basic doctrine, the early nineties saw a shift in the type of war that the PLA was required to fight: from Deng’s “people’s war under modern conditions” to a “limited war under high-technology conditions” (高技术条件下局部战争, *gao jishu tiaojian xia jubu zhanzheng*). This shift was not a radical change (as it had been the case with the shift from Mao’s “people’s war” to Deng’s “people’s war under modern conditions”), but rather a slight adaptation of Deng’s basic doctrine to technological innovation in the military sector: in particular, it was the display of

American military high technology in the 1991 Gulf War that had exerted a strong influence on Chinese doctrine. The new basic doctrine kept the doctrinal principle of the people's war [ibidem, pp. 568-570], but in the same time emphasized the importance of high technology. As stressed by Jiang Zemin, the main challenge brought by the new revolution in military affairs was informatization: "the high-technology limited war (that has been common) since the Gulf War shows that in contemporary warfare information technology has an extremely important function. Informatization is the distinctive feature of high-technology war. Indeed, the new revolution in military affairs is a military informatization revolution." [Jiang Zemin, 2006, p. 162]. The review of the basic doctrine had an impact also on the operational doctrine, where the traditional concept of active defence was adapted to face the challenges of high technology and in particular the use of informatics in warfare [Zhang Yining, 2006, pp. 565-566].

(3) Finally, also during the years of Hu Jintao China's military doctrine has undergone a significant review. To be sure, for what concerns the assessment of the international context continuity with the previous decades has prevailed. On the whole, the international environment is still considered as a stable one, with peace and development as its main themes. An ongoing multipolarization at the global level and the improvement of bilateral and multilateral relations with neighbouring countries at the regional level offer a favourable setting for China's economic development goals [Li Jinai, 2008, pp. 50-55]. As during the years of Jiang Zemin, however, this positive assessment of the international context does not mean that China perceives no threat: first of all there is the perception of a containment policy by the major Western powers; secondly, in East Asia there still exist many factors of regional instability, which could affect China's security; thirdly, the Taiwan issue is still considered as the main threat to China's "territorial integrity", while "terrorism, extremism and separatism" are still posing threats to its political stability; finally, China has to face new non-conventional threats, such as threats to its "economic security", "financial security" and "energy security" [ibidem, pp. 55-60].

Moving to the basic doctrine, in Hu Jintao's years there seems to be a stronger emphasis on the protection of China's economic interests as a core function of the PLA: "following the fast development of national economy and the continuous increase in the degree of its opening to the outside world, it is necessary that national defence does not take into account and protect only the interest to national survival, but also the interest to national development and especially the interest to national economic development" [ibidem, p. 89]. And, even more explicitly: "national defence activities must actively adapt to the continuously expanding needs of national development interests,

must protect national interests in the oceans, the outer space and the cyber space, as well as in foreign investments, foreign trade and in new areas of economic development” [ibidem, p. 89].

For what concerns the type of war that the PLA is required to fight, again there seems to be much continuity with Jiang’s years, even if the war is now defined as a “limited war under conditions of informatization” (信息化条件下局部战争, *xinxihua tiaojian xia jubu zhanzheng*). It is still a doctrine of people’s war, since its basic concepts have not changed: “The people’s war is a way of organizing war, the importance of its function has no necessary connection with the level of military technology. (...) Even if new high-technology weapons changed the morphology of war and the way to fight, in the final analysis the decisive factor of war victory or defeat is men and not weapons. (...) The great force of war still lays in the masses”. [ibidem, p. 101] However, the importance of high technology (and in particular informatics) is now stressed in even more explicit terms than during Jiang Zemin’s years: facing the challenges brought by the revolution in military affairs requires not only new weapons, but also new ways of organizing the armed forces (especially the integration between armed services) and a new doctrine [ibidem, pp. 60-69].

Some more significant differences with Jiang Zemin’s military doctrine can be found at the level of operational doctrine. While the concept of active defence is still retained, it seems to have undergone a major review, particularly for what concerns the balance between defence and attack. As noted above, this balance had already been altered in the eighties, when a first review of active defence changed the timing of counter-attack, anticipating it to the initial stage of the war; it seems that during Hu Jintao’s years a second review of active defence has occurred, this time regarding the depth of counter-attack. In order to avoid that a war in peripheral areas disrupts China’s national economy, in the initial stage of the war the PLA is required to counter-attack striking the enemy not just in China’s periphery but also where the enemy’s war effort originates (敌方的战争策源地和基地, *difang de zhanzheng ceyuandi he jidi*): “The attack does no more take place in the phase of strategic counter-attack within a total war, but it must be launched as soon as the war begins. In the war theatre we should not fight the enemy in the near sea, in coastal waters, deep in border regions or in connected areas, but we should make any effort to strike the enemy faraway, to bring the war where the enemy’s war effort originates, we should keep the initiative through active and effective successive attacks.” [ibidem, p. 108].

From this short analysis it can be concluded that there is evidence of a maritime rebalancing in China's military doctrine since the end of the seventies. The rebalancing has not taken the form of a radical and sudden change in military doctrine, but rather it was the final outcome of a slow process of evolution, with a gradual adaptation of all the main components of China's military doctrine. Three main steps can be found out within this process (summarized in fig. 1):

(a) In the late seventies and early eighties the doctrinal review under Deng Xiaoping was marked by a strong maritime rebalancing in the *basic doctrine*, for what regards the *type of war* that the PLA was required to fight. The shift from the concept of "people's war" to that of "people's war under modern conditions" was first of all a shift in the geographical implications of the military doctrine. Since in the new international context the risk of a total war fought deep into Chinese territory was low, the geographical focus of China's military doctrine moved from the core of China's territory to its peripheral areas. More specifically, this shift from the core to the periphery was basically a shift to maritime periphery [as argued by Godwin, 1997]. To be sure, in the eighties land peripheral areas remained high on China's national security agenda, since in those years continental border disputes still posed concrete threats. Nevertheless, China's interest to national economic development as formulated within the late seventies' doctrinal review directly implied that maritime peripheral areas acquired an unprecedented role in China's national security.

(b) In the early nineties the doctrinal review under Jiang Zemin moved a second step in the maritime rebalancing, still at the level of the *basic doctrine* but this time involving the *functions of the PLA*. On the one hand the evolving political situation within Taiwan brought a stronger doctrinal focus on potential military contingencies in the Taiwan strait; on the other hand the PLA was now explicitly required to protect China's economic interests. For this latter function the maritime areas surrounding China played an important role, because of both the resources they contain and the lines of communication they are crossed by.

(c) During the last years, the gradual evolution that in the two previous decades reshaped basic doctrine has translated into *operational doctrine*. Under Hu Jintao the concept of active defence has been refocused and the role of counter-attack has been increased. In case of a war the PLA is now required to protect China's economic development and political stability by keeping the fight far from Chinese territory. To this aim the PLA is required to counter-attack in the immediate beginning of the war by striking the enemy's interests faraway from China: as it is clear, this operational doctrine implies capabilities for a certain degree of power projection. It must be admitted that this recent evolution of the operational doctrine supports at least some of the points

made in Western literature by those scholars who underline discontinuity in China’s maritime rebalancing. In particular, there seems to be some evidence in support of Holmes and Yoshihara’s claims about China’s use of offensive tactics and operations to achieve defensive aims [Holmes and Yoshihara, 2008].

Paramount leader	Basic doctrine		Operational Doctrine	Step in maritime rebalancing
	Functions of the PLA	Type of war		
Deng Xiaoping	Protection of interests to survival and development. (basically, sovereignty and territorial integrity)	People's war under modern conditions	Active defence. (review I: counter-attack in the initial stage of the war)	Basic doctrine: type of war. (from the core of China's territory to peripheral areas)
Jiang Zemin	Protection of interests to survival and development (new emphasis on economic interests)	Limited war under high technology conditions	Active defence	Basic doctrine: functions of the PLA. (articulation of China's economic interests)
Hu Jintao	Protection of interests to survival and development	Limited war under conditions of informatization	Active defence. (review II: counter-attack faraway from Chinese territory)	Operational doctrine. (projection of power)

Fig. 1. Maritime rebalancing in China’s military doctrine since the late seventies

***Step 2: maritime rebalancing in the PLA’s organization.***

Generally speaking, military doctrine should be reflected in the organization of the armed forces and any significant change in military doctrine should result in organizational change of the armed forces. After finding evidence of a maritime rebalancing in China’s military doctrine over the

last three decades, my next step is to analyse the organization of the PLA to find out whether this doctrinal evolution produced a maritime rebalancing also at this level.

In an ideal world I would analyse the PLA's organizational change in three areas. First of all I would look at force deployment within the PLAGF, PLAN and PLAAF, to find out whether over the last three decades there has been a shift from the core of Chinese territory to its peripheral areas. Secondly, I would look at the PLA budget to find out whether a change in resource allocation among the three armed services has occurred: in this case, an increase in the relative resources devoted to the PLAN would be a clear indicator of a maritime rebalancing in the PLA organization. Finally, I would analyse the trend of PLA personnel and its allocation among the three armed services: once again, an increase in the relative amount of human resources devoted to the PLAN would be evidence in support of a maritime rebalancing in the armed forces.

Unfortunately, the world we live in is definitely not an ideal one. For what concerns my research, this implies that there are no (available) Chinese official data for any of the three areas mentioned above: no official data for force deployment, no official data for personnel allocation, and no (disaggregated) official data for the military budget. As a consequence, I will make use of other available data and adapt the "ideal world" research design to the "real world". This means, to begin with, that I have to drop one of the three areas of analysis introduced above: the PLA budget. To be sure, there exist some data on this area (even official ones), but unfortunately there is no way to disaggregate available data (both official and not) on the PLA budget by armed service, in order to analyse trends in the allocation of financial resources among them.

In what follows I will concentrate on the two remaining areas of analysis: force deployment and personnel. Before moving to this, however, it is necessary to make some more caveats on the data that I used. For both areas of analysis I relied on the *Military Balance*, the yearbook published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. Again, in the ideal world data would be collected using the same method for every issue and any change in method would be exhaustively explained. Also in this case, unfortunately, the ideal world is faraway from the real one and the use of data from the *Military Balance* brings many problems of its own. More specifically, there are three main problems that I had to face: first of all, there is a problem of data comparability, since the method for data collection has changed several times during the three decades I analysed; second, in some cases a change in the method for data collection or a rather drastic review in an estimate from one issue to the other are not explained in details, which creates doubts on the reliability of data reported in previous issues; third, material mistakes sometimes occur, such as incongruence when reporting

the same data on different pages. Of course making estimates on the military is a complicated task and this accounts for all of the shortcomings mentioned above: on the whole, the *Military Balance* remains an extremely important source for the study of China's military (indeed, the only source for some areas of research). What I would like to stress here is that data recorded in the *Military Balance* are most of the times estimates, sometimes not completely accurate, often reviewed from year to year: as such, they should be handled with care, and the same holds for the pages that follow.

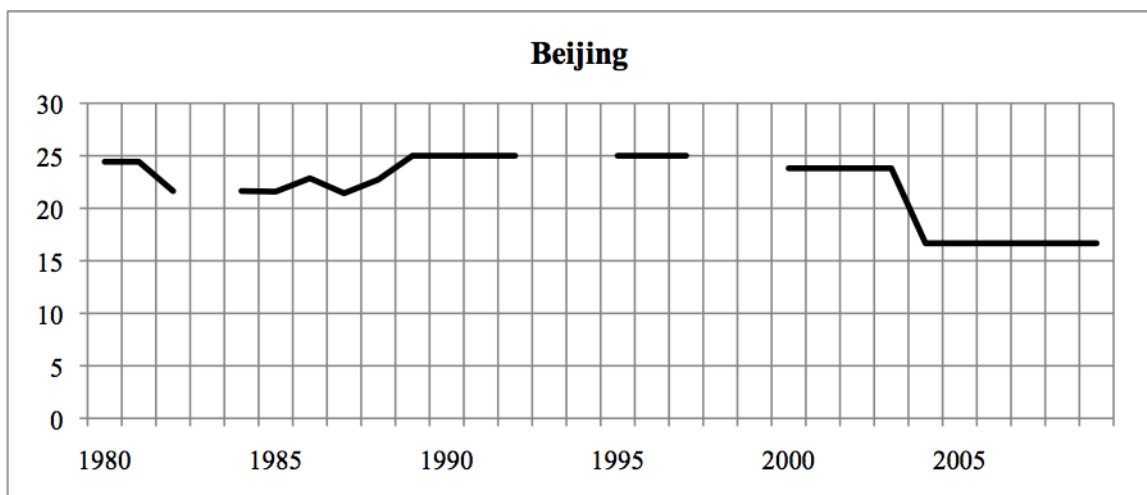
I will now move to the analysis of *force deployment*. Data reported in the *Military Balance* do not allow to study the PLAN and PLAAF force deployment, since for both these services data on force deployment are recorded only for a few years and with heterogeneous methods. Nevertheless, a study of the PLAGF deployment can still provide many interesting clues on the PLA geographical rebalancing. More specifically, in what follows I will use data on the PLAGF deployment to answer the two following questions: 1) has there been any change in the PLAGF deployment across the last thirty years?; in the affirmative, 2) is this change coherent with the doctrinal shift toward peripheral areas?

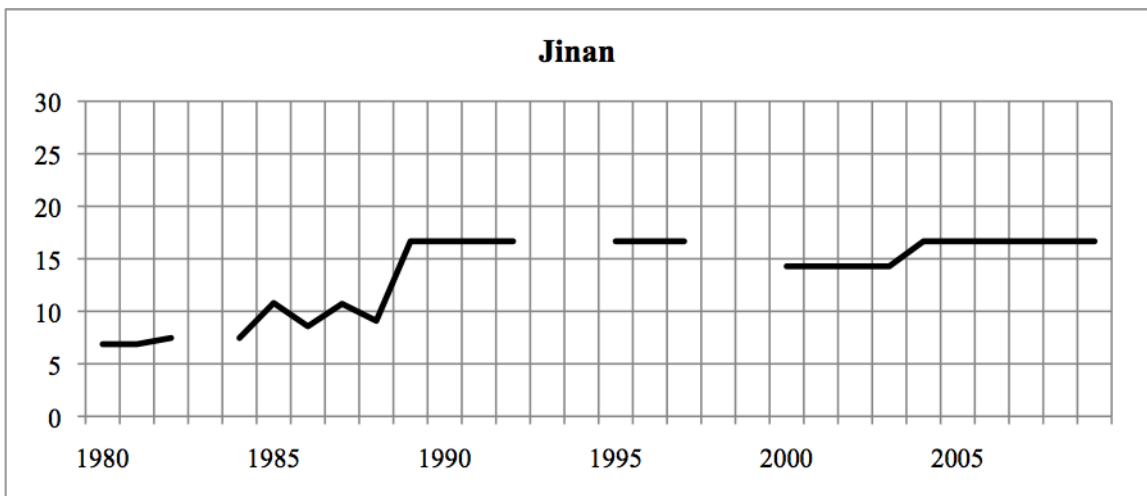
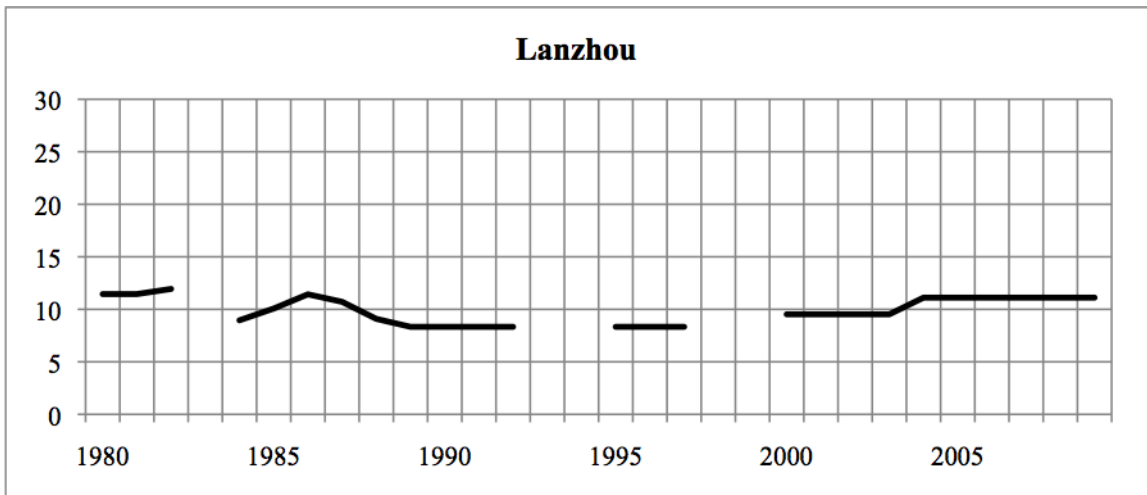
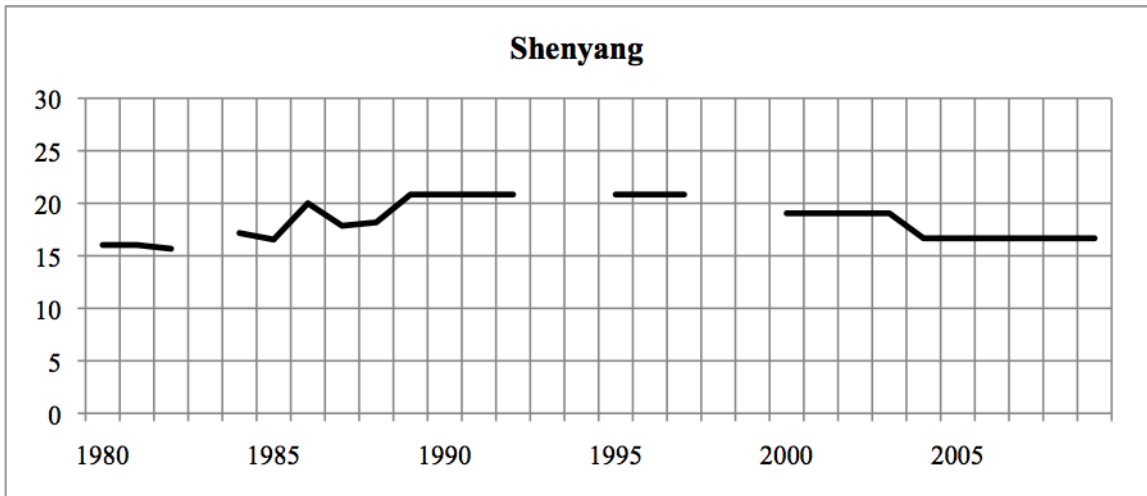
I have analysed the deployment of the PLAGF in the Military Regions from 1980 to 2009<sup>6</sup>. China's national territory is divided into Military Regions (大军区, da junqu; MR); every MR includes the territory of several provinces, is divided into different administrative levels and has a commander who is in charge of operations within the MR and is responsible to the General Staff Department of the Central Military Commission [Shambaugh, 2002, pp. 146-149]. This territorial organization, a legacy of the earlier Soviet influence on China's national defence system, is of great help in the study of force deployment. The MRs have changed over time in both number and borders: till 1985 they were eleven (Beijing, Shenyang, Lanzhou, Urumqi, Chengdu, Kunming, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Fuzhou, Nanjing, Jinan); in that year they were reduced to the current seven (Beijing, Shenyang, Lanzhou, Chengdu, Guangzhou, Nanjing, Jinan). The *Military Balance* records the PLAGF deployment per MR. Till 1985 it provides the number of divisions deployed in each MR: divisions are divided into Main Forces (PLAGF properly) and Regional Forces (basically the Militia). Since 1986, following a reform in the PLAGF structure, the *Military Balance* records the number of group armies deployed in each MR. As David Shambaugh wrote in 2002, "(t)he total

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<sup>6</sup> Some issues of the *Military Balance* were not available, so that data on the years 1983, 1994, 1998 and 1999 could not be included in this analysis.

strength of group armies varies (ranging between 40.000 and 90.000 troops), their force structure is configured differently, and they have different complements of weaponry. (...) Group armies are normally configured with two or three infantry divisions, one tank division and/or brigade, an anti-aircraft brigade, a communications regiment, an engineering regiment, and logistical support units” [ibidem, p. 155]. The fact that both the borders of the MRs and force structure within them have varied over the three decades I analysed implies the following problems: borders of the MRs to be compared change across time; the organizational unit of account changes across time (division first, group army later); the strength of the group armies changes over both time and space. To make data comparable I have used the following procedure: first I have aggregated the eleven MRs existing till 1985 into the present seven ones; then I have calculated the organizational units of account (divisions or group armies) deployed in each of them as a percentage of the total. This latter choice implies a point that it is worth underlining: I am not counting troops, but the organizational units (which may differ one from the other in number of troops). An example can help to clarify the procedure: for the year 1980 I have aggregated the existing eleven MRs into the present seven ones and then I have calculated the percentage of divisions deployed in each of them out of the total. The result is: out of the total 131 Main Forces divisions, 24,43% were deployed in Beijing MR, 16,03% in Shenyang MR, 11,45% in Lanzhou MR, 6,87% in Jinan MR, 9,92% in Nanjing MR, 19,85% in Guangzhou MR and 11,45% in Chengdu MR. A synthesis of PLAGF deployment data since 1980 to 2009 is shown in fig. 2.





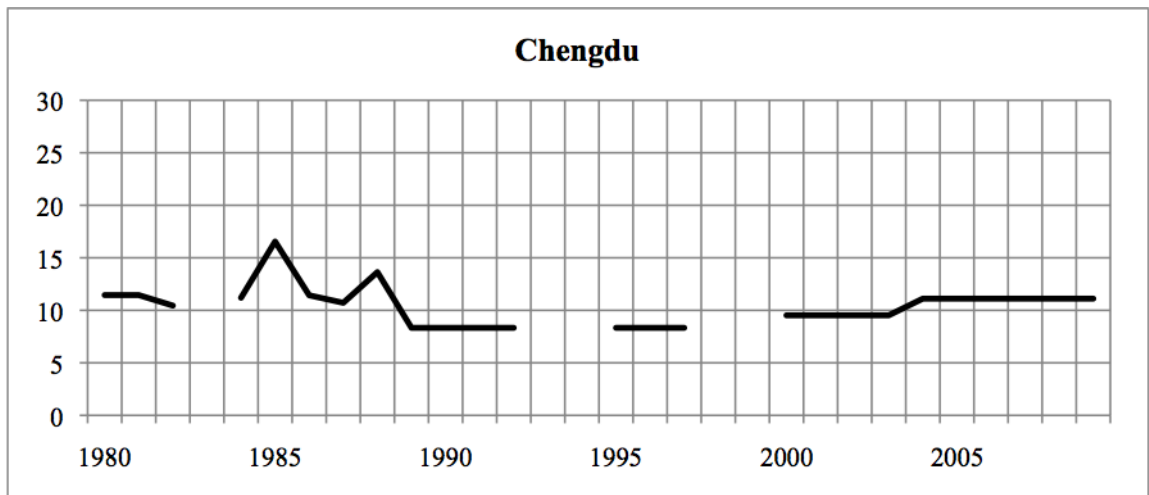
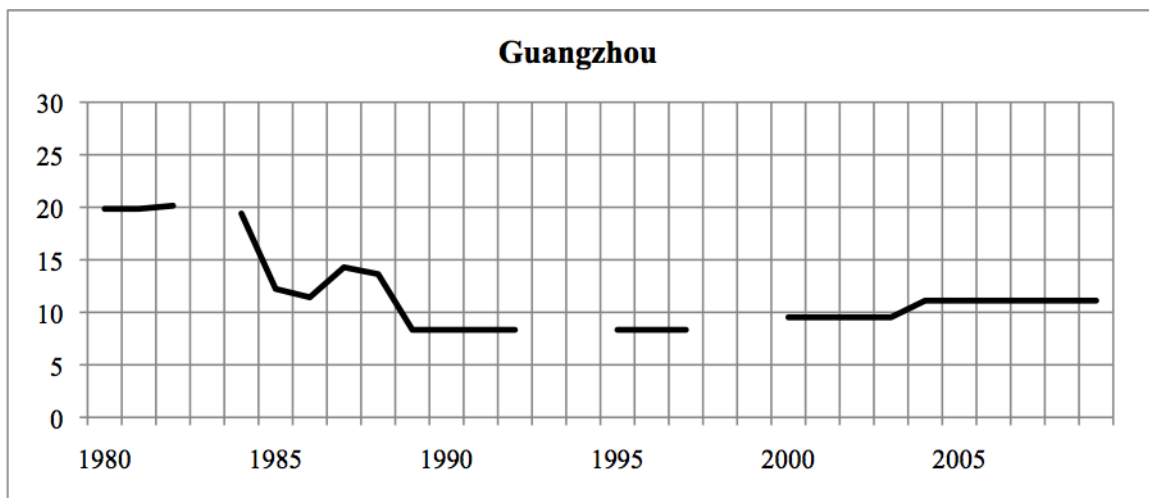
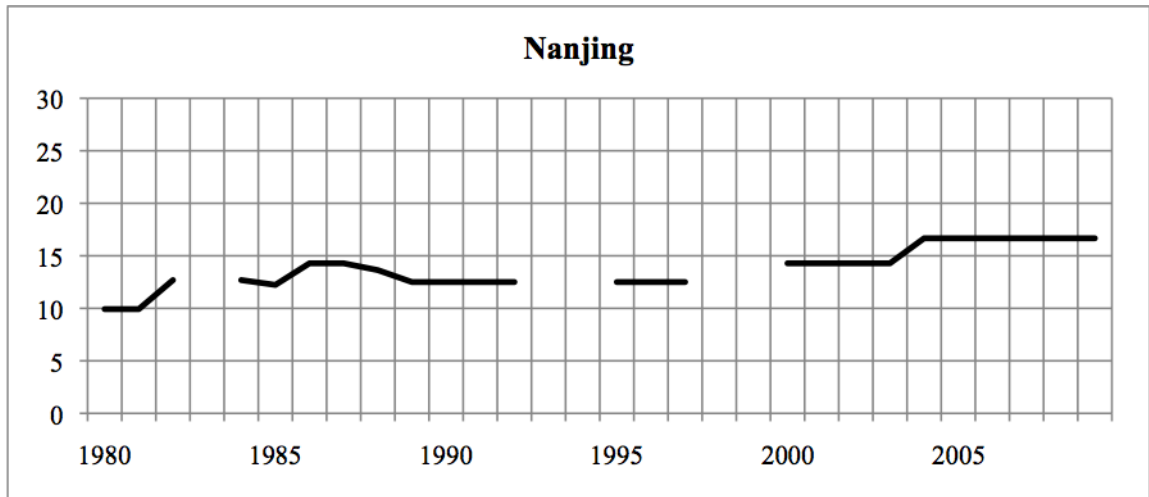


Fig. 2. Trend in PLAGF deployment by MR (percentage on the total)

A closer analysis of these data suggests the following comments:

1) Two MRs (Lanzhou and Chengdu) show a U-trend: the percentage of forces deployed is more or less the same at the beginning and at the end of the period (around 11% of the total), but a (percentage) drop occurred between the late eighties and the late nineties. In absolute terms, these two MRs saw a reduction of forces in the late eighties, some years before the other MRs: the U-trend is thus explained by the timing of demobilization, a key point to which I will go back in a while.

2) Two MRs (Beijing and Shenyang) experienced an opposite trend: a percentage increase between the late eighties and the late nineties and a drop in the last decade. While in the case of the Shenyang MR the percentage of forces deployed is almost the same at the beginning and at the end of the period (around 16% of the total), the Beijing MR saw a radical reduction (from 24,43% in 1980 to 16,67% in 2009). As it becomes clear looking at absolute numbers, this trend is again explained by the timing of demobilization: the reduction of forces in these two MRs began later than in the other ones, well after year 2000.

3) One MR (Nanjing) has significantly increased its share of total forces: from 9,92% to 16,67%. The increase was a gradual one across the whole period analyzed. Again, absolute numbers can help to understand this trend: in the Nanjing MR demobilization was somehow limited (from 5 group armies in 1986 to 3 in 2009) if compared to other MRs.

3) Finally, the trend of the two remaining MRs (Jinan and Guangzhou) is more difficult to explain. The Jinan MR has experienced a strong increase in relative terms (from 6,87% in 1980 to 16,67% in 2009) while, on the opposite, the Guangzhou MR has seen a parallel drop (from 19,85% in 1980 to 11,11% in 2009). In these two cases, however, there is a problem connected to MR redistricting: when in 1985 the MRs were reduced from eleven to seven, most of them were aggregated without any change in their previous borders (for example, the Urumqi MR was annexed to the Lanzhou MR). There was only one exception: the Wuhan MR was annexed to the Guangzhou MR, but its district of Henan was disaggregated and annexed to the Jinan MR. It could well be that the annexation of Henan (by the way, China's most populated province) accounts for both the relative decrease of the forces deployed in the Guangzhou MR and the relative increase of the forces deployed in the Jinan MR.

It is now possible to answer the two questions stated above:

1) Has there been any change in the PLAGF deployment? In 2002 David Shambaugh wrote that “(...) there has been no appreciable change in force deployments. China’s altered national security environment (...) has *not* resulted in the redeployment from one theater (and potential threat) to another. Forces remain essentially as they were deployed in the mid-1980s in the northern sector and since the mid-1970s in the southeastern and southwestern sectors” [Shambaugh, 2002, p. 149]. The picture emerging from the data discussed above, however, is different. It is still true that there is no evidence of a *redeployment* of forces among MRs: that is, there is no evidence of forces being moved from one MR to another. This, however, does not imply that force *deployment* has not changed over time: that is, it does not imply that forces remain deployed as they were three decades ago. On the opposite, what is clearly shown by data is that the process of demobilization has had an impact on the PLAGF deployment. Since the mid-eighties the PLA has undergone a protracted demobilization, with a first drastic reduction of personnel in the mid eighties and a second one at the beginning of the last decade. According to official records “(i)n 1985, 1997 and 2003, China announced that it would cut the size of the PLA by one million, 500,000 and 200,000 persons, respectively. By the end of 2005, China had completed reducing the PLA by 200,000 troops, and the PLA currently has 2.3 million troops” [Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2006]. Even if the exact proportion of troops reduction remains a highly controversial issue (for a detailed analysis, see Shichor [1997]), it is clear that demobilization was a massive process, with a huge impact on the PLA as an organization. From the data discussed above it is clear that demobilization has produced effects also on force deployment, since it has affected different MRs with both a different timing and a different impact. For what concerns the timing, some MRs experienced demobilization in the mid eighties (for example the Lanzhou MR and the Chengdu MR), some others only in these last years (the Beijing MR); for what concerns the impact, some MRs have seen a strong reduction of the forces deployed (again, the Beijing MR), while others have seen only a marginal reduction (the Nanjing MR). Writing in 2002 David Shambaugh could not catch changes in the PLAGF deployment, since the demobilization process was still ongoing (demobilization affected the Beijing and Shenyang MRs between 2003 and 2004): but now it can be seen that after two decades of protracted demobilization the landscape of the PLAGF deployment has changed.

2) If this is the case, are changes in force deployment coherent with the doctrinal shift toward peripheral areas? The data discussed above provide some evidence in support of a positive answer. From this point of view, what seems particularly interesting are the opposing trends in the Beijing MR and the Nanjing MR: as already noticed, the former experienced a strong reduction of

the forces deployed (in relative terms from 24,43% in 1980 to 16,67% in 2009, in absolute numbers from 8 group armies in 1986 to 3 in 2009), while the latter experienced an increase in relative terms (from 9,92% in 1980 to 16,67% in 2009) and substantial stability in absolute numbers (from 5 group armies in 1986 to 3 in 2009, on the backdrop of a massive demobilization process in other MRs). While at the beginning of the eighties the Beijing MR accounted for the highest number of the forces deployed, nowadays the global PLAGF deployment is much more uniform, with the Beijing MR accounting for as many group armies as the Shenyang MR, the Jinan MR and the Nanjing MR. As a consequence, it seems no more true that “Chinese ground forces remain predominantly and heavily concentrated around the capital and Bohai Gulf regions”, as Shambaugh wrote in 2002 [Shambaugh, 2002, p. 151]. On the one hand the reduction of the forces deployed in the Beijing MR is coherent with the doctrinal shift toward peripheral areas: if a total war fought deep into Chinese territory is no more considered as the most likely contingency, then there is no need to deploy a large part of the available ground forces in defence of the capital. On the other hand, the relative increase in the forces deployed in the Nanjing MR can give some idea on what is nowadays considered as a likely contingency. The Nanjing MR includes the long coastal area from Jiangsu and Shanghai to Zhejiang and Fujian, in front of the Taiwan Strait, so that this MR would be the first front in a Taiwan contingency: in accordance with the doctrinal evolution, the PLA is now focusing on contingencies in maritime peripheral areas that could extend to nearby coastal areas.

The second area of analysis is the PLA *personnel*. The *Military Balance* records PLA personnel data disaggregated by armed service, thus allowing a comparison among PLAGF, PLAN and PLAAF. The analysis of the PLAGF deployment has showed that organizational change in that area reflected the doctrinal shift toward peripheral areas. As a next step, a comparative analysis of personnel trends in the armed services allows to check whether organizational change was coherent with the doctrinal shift not only toward peripheral areas in general, but more specifically toward maritime peripheral areas. More precisely, through the analysis of personnel data I will try to answer the following question: is there evidence of a reduction in the pre-eminence of the PLAGF in terms of personnel allocation, as the doctrinal shift toward maritime peripheral areas would imply?

The analysis of PLA personnel data does not pose as many methodological problems as the analysis of force deployment. There are, however, some problems of comparability regarding data on the PLAAF, since it is not completely clear what they actually include: for the first years of the

period they include also the whole personnel of the Second Artillery; then, starting in 1990, a separate item is introduced for “Strategic Missile Forces”, while personnel data on the PLAAF continue to include some 40.000 troops of the “Strategic Forces”; finally, since 2008 personnel data on the PLAAF and on the Second Artillery seem to be completely disaggregated, so that the PLAAF does not include “Strategic Forces” troops anymore. A second problem regards the PLAN: beyond the aggregate data for the whole navy, the *Military Balance* records also disaggregated data for the PLAN Air Force, the Coastal Defence Forces and the Marines. Data of this kind can be very useful, since they may provide some clues about how the PLAN has adapted to the doctrinal shift. Unfortunately, however, these data do not seem as reliable as the aggregate ones: for example, for the first years of the period the *Military Balance* reports the item “Marines”, accounting for 38.000 troops, but in 1981 the item disappears and an identical number of troops is attributed to the Coastal Defence Forces; in later issues the item “Marines” is reintroduced and amounts to 56.000 troops, but in 1988 this estimate is reviewed to 4.500 troops. As evident, these data are not reliable enough to be included in the analysis and therefore I will focus only on aggregate personnel data.

I analysed data from 1977 to 2009; they are summarized in fig. 3.

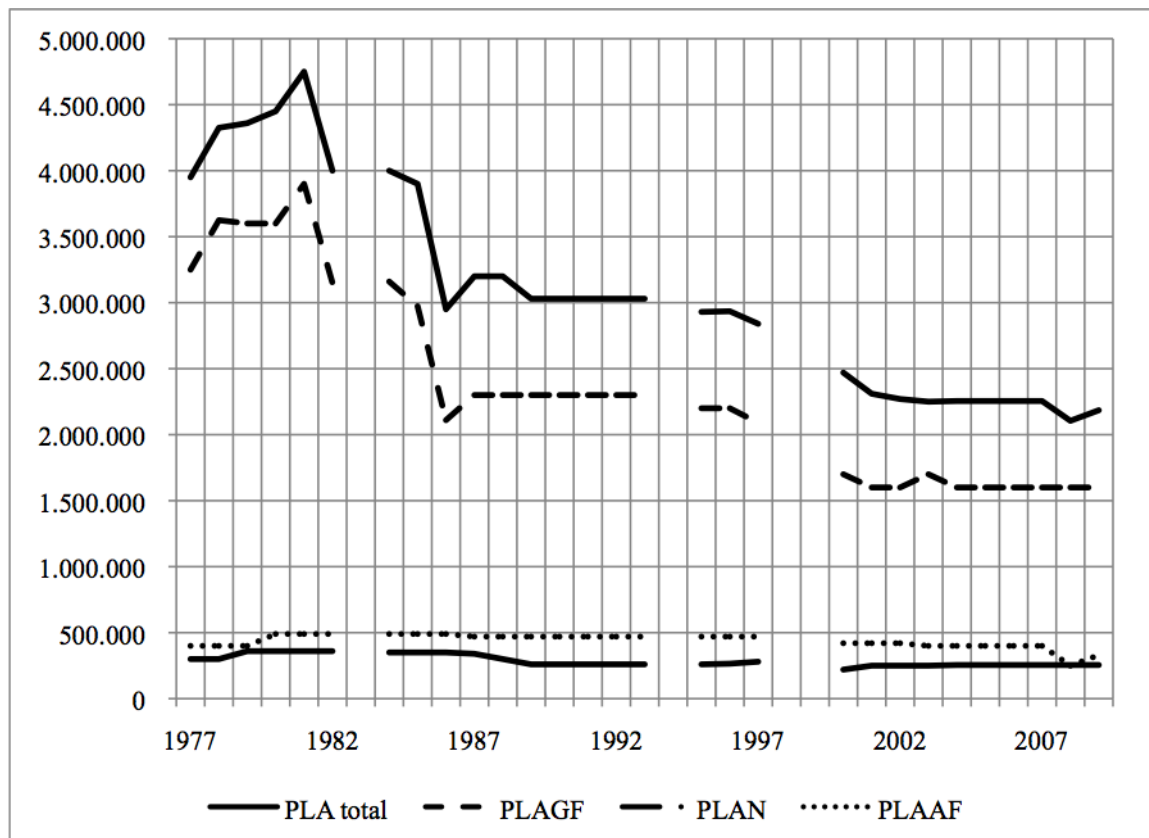


Fig. 3. PLA personnel by armed service

Moving from absolute numbers, in 1977 the total personnel of the PLA amounted to 3.950.000 troops, with the PLAGF personnel amounting to 3.250.000 troops, the PLAN to 300.000 and the PLAAF (including the Second Artillery) to 400.000. In the following years, however, the PLA personnel kept growing, to reach its peak in 1981: in that year the PLA total personnel amounted to 4.750.000 troops, and PLAGF, the PLAN and the PLAAF reached respectively 3.900.000, 360.000 and 490.000 troops. At the end of the period, in 2009, the picture was different: PLA total troops had been reduced to 2.185.000, with the PLAGF amounting to 1.600.000 troops and the PLAN and the PLAAF respectively to 255.000 and 330.000. Data on the PLAGF and on the PLAN have been stable since 2004, while data on the PLAAF have widely varied during the last three years (400.000 troops from 2003 to 2007, 250.000 in 2008): this has probably to do with the problem of the Second Artillery mentioned above, but it seems to impact also on the data on the PLA total personnel (2.250.000 troops from 2003 to 2007, 2.105.000 in 2008). Of course this volatility does not reflect real changes in the PLA troops, but just changes in the *Military Balance's* estimates: for this reason it would have been of much help if the editors had written a few lines to explain their review of the previous years' estimates.

Moving to percentage variations over time, in 2009 the PLA total personnel has been reduced by 54% on the peak of 1981, the PLAGF by 58,97%, the PLAN by 29,17% and the PLAAF by 32,65%. Again, data on the PLAAF should be handled with care since personnel reduction at the end of the period changes widely according to the chosen estimate: choosing the 2007 estimate personnel reduction in the PLAAF amounts to 18,37%, while choosing the 2008 estimate it amounts to 48,98%.

Finally, coming to the relative allocation of personnel among the three armed services, in 1977 the PLAGF accounted for 82,28% of the total PLA personnel, while the PLAN and the PLAAF accounted for 7,59% and 10,13% respectively. In 2009 the PLAGF percentage has reduced to 73,23% of the total, with the PLAN and the PLAAF growing to 11,67% and 15,10% respectively. Once again, data on the PLAAF are difficult to appraise: it would account for 17,74% and 11,88% of the total with the 2007 and 2008 estimates respectively.

Going back to the question formulated above, do these data provide evidence of a reduced pre-eminence of the PLAGF in personnel allocation? It is clear that the ground forces are still dominating the PLA in terms of personnel: they still account for little less than four fifth of China's armed forces personnel. As David Shambaugh wrote in 2002, the ground forces still "constitute the vast bulk of the PLA personnel" [Shambaugh, 2002, p. 154]. To be sure, personnel allocation is not the best indicator to catch changes in the "organizational balance" among armed services across "time", for two main reasons. The first reason has to do with "time": in the military, as well as in any other complex organization, personnel is a rather inelastic factor, that can be reshaped (both in quantitative and qualitative terms) only through long-term efforts. From this point of view, a significant change in the relative personnel allocation among the PLA armed services could well require more time than change in force deployment. The second reason, maybe the decisive one, has to do with "organizational balance": "under modern conditions" personnel allocation is not necessarily a good indicator of the influence of an armed service within the wider military organization. On the one hand not all the armed services are equally labour-intensive: of course the ground forces require much more manpower than both the navy and the air force. This is particularly true in the case of China, where both the concept of "people's war" and the (potential) use of the army for internal security require large ground forces. On the other hand, the increasing importance of technology in warfare has implied a shift of focus from the quantity of manpower to its quality: what is really crucial is the availability of well trained personnel, able to use high-technology weapons. As a consequence, the sheer number of troops cannot (or at least can no more) convey much information on the importance of an armed service within the wider military organization.

Yet, with all of these limits, data discussed above do provide some evidence of an increased role of the navy within the PLA. What data show is that, as already noticed for force deployment, the demobilization process started at the beginning of the eighties was not neutral: on the contrary its implications on the three armed services were different, once again, in terms of both timing and impact. For what concerns timing, fig. 3 clearly shows that demobilization in the PLAGF began five years before demobilization in the PLAN and in the PLAAF. In the PLAGF a first cut in personnel occurred in 1982 (-19,23% on the previous year), followed by a second reduction in the mid eighties<sup>7</sup> and by a last, drastic reduction around 2000. In the PLAN and in the PLAAF, on the

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<sup>7</sup> But the reduction in 1986 that is so evident in fig. 3 is only apparent, since the original estimate was reviewed and corrected in the following year, as explained in the 1987-1988 issue of the *Military Balance*

opposite, drastic personnel reductions begun only in the second half of the eighties: in 1988 in the PLAN (-11,76 on 1987 and in 1989 again -13,33% on the previous year) and in 1987 in the PLAAF (-4,08% on 1986); also in the PLAN and in the PLAAF a second round of personnel cuts occurred around year 2000. For what concerns impact, data discussed above show that personnel reductions were much stronger in the PLAGF than in the PLAN and in the PLAAF: while at the end of the period the PLAGF has been reduced to less than a half of what it used to be, the PLAN and the PLAAF have been cut of just one third (with the usual problems in appraising data on the PLAAF). As a consequence, the share of the PLAN and of the PLAAF personnel on the total PLA personnel has increased over these last thirty years, as shown in fig. 4.

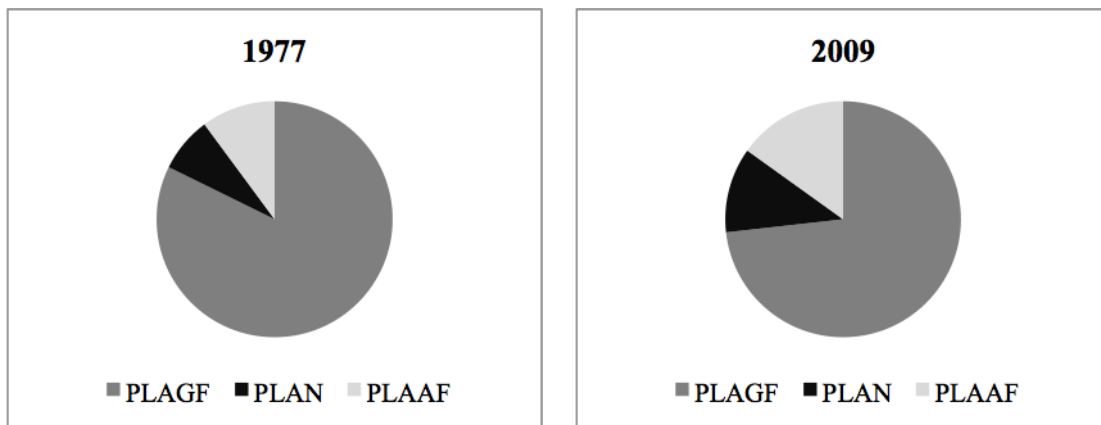


Fig. 4. Personnel allocation among PLA services

On balance it can be said that data on the PLA personnel seem to be coherent with the doctrinal shift toward maritime peripheral areas. One cannot expect personnel allocation to be the best indicator of a changing organizational balance within the PLA, yet data discussed above show that in the past three decades the PLAN (as well as the PLAAF) has increased its share of PLA personnel allocation. Even if change is not wide enough to provide clear evidence, nevertheless it can be concluded that, at the very least, trends in personnel allocation do not disconfirm the hypothesis of a maritime rebalancing in China's security policy.

### **III. Maritime rebalancing and China's regional security policy.**

To sum up, the two-step empirical analysis proposed in the previous section confirms the hypothesis of a maritime rebalancing in China's security policy. As a first step the analysis of doctrinal evolution has shown that a maritime rebalancing has occurred in basic and operational doctrine, with a gradual shift toward peripheral areas, and more specifically toward maritime peripheral areas. As a second step the analysis of organizational change has shown that both the deployment of the PLAGF and the allocation of personnel among armed services have adapted to doctrinal change. Indeed, while adaptation has been a very slow process, restrained by bureaucratic inertia, two decades of protracted demobilization have resulted into some significant changes: in the area of force deployment these changes support the hypothesis of a maritime rebalancing in China's security policy; in the area of personnel allocation changes provide a much weaker evidence, but in any case do not disconfirm the hypothesis.

After finding empirical support to the idea of a maritime rebalancing in China's security policy I will now move to an analysis of the interaction between this maritime rebalancing and China's regional policy. As already mentioned in the introduction, Beijing's regional policy consolidated in the mid nineties, within the wider framework of China's grand strategy. It is worth noting that the concept of "regional policy" tends to have different denotations in Chinese and Western literature: while Western scholars usually define it as Beijing's policy toward East Asia, in Chinese literature the concept refers to Beijing's policy toward the 周边国家, *zhoubian guojia* ("surrounding countries"), which "comprise East Asian states and neighboring countries like the Central Asian states, India, Mongolia, Pakistan and Russia" [Wang Jisi, 2004, p. 7]. In other words, Chinese and Western geopolitical codes define (and partition) the Asian space in different ways and this is reflected in the academic discourse, creating potential for misunderstanding. Taking as a reference this wider definition of "region", the current Chinese regional policy is marked by two basic traits: the improvement of bilateral relations with all of China's neighbouring countries, including those which were considered as enemies in the past; and Beijing's participation into regional multilateral fora, once perceived as a means to contain China but now seen as an instrument to strengthen China's leverage in the region [Shambaugh, 2005b, pp. 29-36]. On the one hand Beijing managed to significantly improve its relations with some of its traditionally more hostile neighbours, including India, Vietnam and Indonesia. While bilateral relations between China

and Vietnam are still colder than relations between Beijing and any other Southeast Asian state, nevertheless they have made unbelievable progress if compared to bilateral relations only twenty years ago: after re-establishing full state-to-state and party-to-party relations in the early nineties, the two former enemies signed an “Agreement on friendship, good neighbourliness and longstanding stability” in 1999, successfully resolved territorial disputes in the mainland and in the Gulf of Tonkin (but not disputes on the Paracel and Spratly islands, as well known) and even engaged in some forms of bilateral military cooperation, with joint military exercises [ibidem, pp. 34-35]. A second example of how Beijing focused on improving bilateral relations is Indonesia. Full diplomatic relations between the two countries were resumed in 1990, but it was only at the end of that decade that bilateral relations improved significantly, in large part thanks to Beijing’s efforts: first, in 1997, China offered financial support to Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries affected by the financial crisis; then, in 1998, Beijing did not interfere into the complicated Indonesian political crisis even on the backdrop of massive attacks on ethnic Chinese Indonesians; finally, after the 2004 tsunami, China provided support for both immediate relief operations and long-term reconstruction projects [Sukma, 2009]. On the other hand, China’s current regional policy is marked by an increasingly convinced participation into regional multilateral fora. First of all, and regarding China’s relations with Central Asia and Russia, Beijing was the major sponsor of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The Organization includes today China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (while India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia were granted the status of observers); it was created in 2001 drawing on the experience of the decade-long border negotiation among China and the four bordering former Soviet Republics and has gradually become the natural forum to deal with a wide range of regional issues, from border security and antiterrorism to economic cooperation. A second interesting example, this time regarding Southeast Asia, is China’s engagement with ASEAN. Beijing turned to Southeast Asia during China’s international isolation in 1989-1991 [Ba, 2003]; it begun by taking part in the ASEAN Regional Forum and, later, it “played a leading role in the formation in 1997 of the annual ASEAN Plus Three [i.e. China, Japan and the Republic of Korea] consultations” [Gill, 2005, p. 254]; in 2002, it signed the “Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea”, thus accepting for the first time a multilateral setting for the maritime territorial disputes in the area; finally, in 2003 it signed the “ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation”. In the field of economic cooperation, in 2001 China and ASEAN agreed to create a free trade area, that entered into force on January the 1<sup>st</sup> 2010, taking the lead in regional economic integration efforts among Northeast and Southeast Asia [Sutter and Huang, 2010]. The debate on the future East Asian regional architecture,

revived in the second half of 2009 by Japanese and Australian grand designs, has underlined once again the strategic relevance that Beijing attaches to its relation with ASEAN: “Beijing’s strategy is not to openly criticize any particular proposals on the table, while subtly steering the processes to its own purpose. [...] Beijing’s heart is still set on ASEAN Plus Three, and its energy is focused on ASEAN Plus China” [Wan, 2010, pp. 535-536].

As this picture shows, over the last fifteen years China has implemented a fairly successful regional policy. But how does the maritime rebalancing discussed in this paper interact with Beijing’s regional policy? Is maritime rebalancing coherent with this regional policy? The interaction between maritime rebalancing in China’s security policy and China’s regional policy is a complex one, that can be analysed from two contrasting points of view: (1) on the one hand China’s regional policy poses constraints on the maritime rebalancing in security policy; (2) on the other hand, however, the maritime rebalancing interferes with Beijing’s regional policy by impacting on the policy environment.

(1) First of all, China’s regional policy, within the framework of China’s grand strategy, poses a basic constraint on the maritime rebalancing. It is surprising that a large part of the Western literature on China’s so called “turn to the sea” does not take into account China’s grand strategy. But, if “[a] grand strategy is a political-military, means-ends chain, a state’s theory about how it can best ‘cause’ security for itself” [Posen, 1984, p. 13], then a country’s grand strategy is a fundamental element of reference for the study of any area of that country’s security policy. As logical, this principle holds also for the maritime rebalancing in China’s security policy, which should be connected to the ends and means as they are defined by China’s grand strategy and, at a lower level on the “geographical ladder of abstraction”, as they are defined by China’s regional policy. Beijing’s current grand strategy has been defined by Michael Swaine and Ashley Tellis as a “calculative strategy”, “a pragmatic approach that emphasizes the primacy of internal economic growth and stability, the nurturing of amicable international relations, the relative restraint in the use of force combined with increasing efforts to create a more modern military, and the continued search for asymmetric gains internationally” [Swaine and Tellis, 2000, p. 97]. In a similar way, but with reference to the label used in the official Chinese discourse, Avery Goldstein defines the current grand strategy as an “independent foreign policy”, a policy line which was gradually formulated during a long transition period from the mid eighties to the mid nineties and then fully consolidated in 1996. According to Goldstein, this strategy shows two basic traits: engagement in multilateral diplomacy; and the establishment of formal strategic partnerships with the major

international actors (Russia, the United States, France, Britain, Germany, the European Union and so on). As both definitions recognize, the aim of China's grand strategy is to assure a peaceful international environment, so that Chinese energies can be focused on developing Chinese economy and solving internal problems, strengthening the political regime and, in the same time, increasing China's status on the international stage. Of course these aims also underpin China's regional policy; incidentally, as Zhang Yunling and Tang Shiping write, "[b]ecause China is a regional power with very limited global interests, [...] China's regional strategy largely corresponds to its grand strategy." [Zhang Yunling and Tang Shiping, 2005, p. 48]. In the wider framework of a "calculative strategy", China's regional policy is aimed at maintaining a peaceful environment in China's periphery, provided that China's core interests (such as the interest to territorial integrity, including the reunification of Taiwan to the mainland) are not threatened.

Such a regional policy draws clear boundaries to the scope of China's maritime rebalancing: both the review of China's military doctrine and the organizational adaptation of the Chinese armed forces cannot be pushed so far that China's neighbours read them as signals of an hegemonic policy and react by building a counter-hegemonic coalition. In practical terms, this means that China's regional policy has since now decisively contributed to the gradual and incremental pace of China's maritime rebalancing, containing pressures in favour of a faster and wider naval build-up. Pressures of this kind have been rather strong at least over the last ten years and have been systematically exerted by a wide policy-coalition, made up by scholars from both civil and military research institutions and by opinion makers as well. As already mentioned, scholars from the maritime school are in favour of a wider naval modernization programme, focused on a first Chinese aircraft carrier as a means of power projection. Zhang Wenmu maintains that such a programme requires an overall reorganization of the defence industry, going back to the central planning system in this sector [Zhang Wenmu, 2009, p. 101]. That the current regional policy has till now constrained such a wider naval modernization programme is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the policy-coalition in favour of the naval build-up is also in favour of a radically alternative regional policy. As I have already mentioned when analysing the Chinese debate on the maritime rebalancing, scholars from the maritime school support an alternative grand strategy that over the last twenty years has repeatedly challenged the established one. Indeed, they support also an alternative regional policy, based on a more assertive stance both in Northeast and Southeast Asia. In the first sub-region the target is, of course, Japan: according (once again) to Zhang Wenmu, Japan poses one of the major challenges to China's security, since (supposedly) it has never explicitly recognised the one-China principle [ibidem, pp. 132-150]. In the second sub-region, the target are the Southeast Asian

countries with claims on the Paracel and Spratly islands. Arguments in favour of a wider naval build-up and a more assertive regional policy seem to be rather popular in China: *Global Times* (环球时报, Huanqiu Shibao), one of the most popular and widely read newspapers, has on its website a specific portal on the South China Sea (under the title “南海，我们的海”, “Nanhai, women de hai”, “The South China Sea, our sea”) with daily updates and comments from both the editorial staff and readers<sup>8</sup>. The same newspaper has also a portal on the project of China’s first aircraft carrier (“呼之欲出的中国航母”, “Hu zhi yu chu de Zhongguo hangmu”, “China’s aircraft carrier coming alive”)<sup>9</sup> and similar pages can be found also in the websites of other major newspapers, including the official *People’s Daily* (人民日报, Renmin Ribao). Although arguments in favour of a naval build-up and of a more assertive regional policy are so popular, however, Chinese authorities have till now persisted in the implementation of the current security policy: this has implied, in turn, a gradual and incremental pace in the maritime rebalancing.

(2) While China’s current regional policy has constrained the maritime rebalancing, resulting in the gradual and incremental pace of this process, this does not mean that the maritime rebalancing has not negatively affected China’s regional policy. On the opposite, even if gradual and incremental, China’s maritime rebalancing has contributed to a regional climate of reciprocal diffidence and suspect, especially in Southeast Asia; in other words, it has negatively impacted on the policy environment, making it more complicated for Beijing to implement its current regional policy. A useful indicator of the regional climate is given by data on arms expenditures, as provided by the database of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (fig. 5).

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<sup>8</sup> At <http://www.huanqiu.com/zhuanti/mil/nhzk/>, accessed on 27/8/2010

<sup>9</sup> At <http://www.huanqiu.com/zhuanti/mil/cv/>, accessed on 27/8/2010

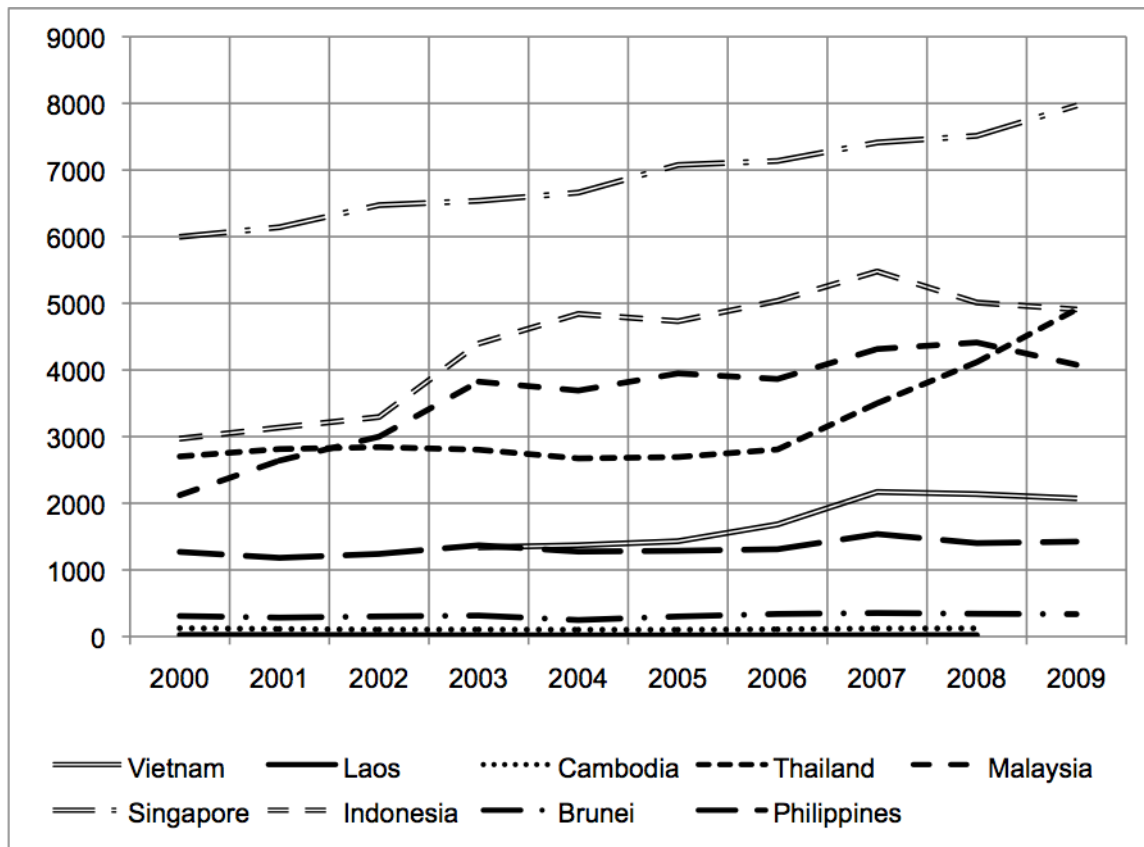


Fig. 5. Military expenditure of ASEAN countries, 2000-2009<sup>10</sup>

These data show a strong increase in military expenditures in all the major Southeast Asian maritime states: Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia. The only exception are the Philippines, whose military expenditures have remained stable across the last decade, as also military expenditures of Brunei, Cambodia and Laos. A complicated regional climate is confirmed also by data on arms transfers: according to the SIPRI *Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2009*, “[d]eliveries to South East Asia nearly doubled in 2005–2009 compared to 2000–2004. Deliveries to Malaysia increased by 722 per cent in 2005–2009 compared to 2000–2004, for Singapore by 146 per cent and for Indonesia by 84 per cent.” [Holtom, Bromley, Wezeman and Wezeman, 2010, p. 4].

<sup>10</sup> Expenditures are reported in millions of US dollars (constant at year 2008). I downloaded these data from the *SIPRI Military Expenditure Database*, accessed at <http://milexdata.sipri.org/> on 26/8/2010. I did not include Myanmar, since the SIPRI database does not provide data in US dollars for Myanmar, owing to extreme variations in the exchange rate. Some of the data reported here are uncertain or SIPRI estimates: for all the methodological issues related to the use of SIPRI data, see *Sources and methods for SIPRI military expenditure data*, at [http://www.sipri.org/databases/milex/sources\\_methods](http://www.sipri.org/databases/milex/sources_methods)

As these data suggest, Southeast Asia seems to be embroiled in a classical security dilemma; and, as it is typical of these situations, it is almost impossible to find out who is the “primum movens” in the arms race. Tensions around two Chinese naval operations in Spring 2010 can help to understand how complicated the situation is. According to a *IISS Strategic Comment*, in late March 2010 a few ships from the PLAN North Sea Fleet crossed the so called first island chain at Miyako Strait (south of Okinawa) and sailed through the Bashi Channel (between Taiwan and the Philippines) toward the South China Sea, where they held joint exercises with ships from the PLAN South Sea Fleet. A few days later, in early April, a second group of ships (this time from the PLAN East Sea Fleet) crossed the Miyako Strait and reached the Spratly islands. The two naval operations were noteworthy from two points of view: as the first PLAN operations in the Pacific Ocean beyond the first island chain; and as naval operations in the South China Sea involving all of the three PLAN Fleets (and not only the South Sea Fleet, as usual) [International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2010]. It may well be that, as reported, harassment of Chinese fishing vessels by the Vietnamese coastguard triggered the two naval operations: it is clear, however, that maritime relations among China and some Southeast Asian littoral states are embroiled in a spiral of diffidence and suspect.

This regional climate, in turn, provides an ideal opportunity for an American come-back to Asia. To be sure, the Bush administration had adopted some innovative initiatives in the continent, including the rapprochement with India [Kapur and Ganguly, 2007], a revived security cooperation with some Southeast Asian allies [Mauzy and Lob, 2007] and a first attempt at a multilateral coordination among its major allies in the Asia-Pacific [Chanlett-Avery and Vaughn, 2008]. Nevertheless, the foreign and security policy of the Bush administration was strongly focused on the so called Greater Middle East, so that its initiatives in Asia remained inconsistent and rather badly coordinated. On the contrary, the Obama administration has repeatedly signalled its focus on the Asian continent: firstly President Obama’s speech in Tokyo in November 2009 and later Secretary of State Clinton’s remarks at Honolulu in January 2010 tried to convey the idea that the United States is back to Asia [Cossa and Glosserman, 2010]. After some months of declaratory policy, some acts seem to support this revived interest in Asia: in March the United States signed with Vietnam a Memorandum of Understanding for cooperation in the civil nuclear field; in the meantime Washington strengthened its military cooperation with Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam through various kinds of joint military exercises; it also planned an upgrade in military cooperation with Indonesia, although the postponement of president Obama’s visit to Jakarta (from March to June, and then from June to November) has delayed the signature of the relevant agreement. Last

but not least, in June and July 2010 several comments by US authorities (first Secretary of Defence Gates, then Adm. Willard, Commander of the US Pacific Command, and, finally, Secretary of State Clinton, during the ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi) reaffirmed that the US has an interest in the free navigation in the South China Sea and in the positive solution of the maritime territorial disputes in the area. In particular, Washington stressed its preference for multilateral negotiations on the issue, a stance that is perceived by China as an interference in its relations with Southeast Asian states, as well as a form of support for Vietnam's attempts at internationalizing the issue. As these recent trends show, the introduction of the American variable in the Southeast Asian context is making the regional equation even more complicated. To sum up, China's maritime rebalancing, although gradual and incremental, is contributing to a tense regional climate: Southeast Asian countries' suspicions on China's intentions (and on each other intentions, as well), together with some signals of a US re-engagement in the region, are posing new challenges for Beijing's regional policy.

## **Conclusions.**

In this paper I have tried to contribute to the ongoing debate on China's maritime rebalancing through a two-step empirical analysis of the maritime rebalancing in one specific area of China's external behaviour, its security policy. Both the analysis of military doctrine and organizational adaptation support the hypothesis of a maritime rebalancing; nevertheless, no evidence has been found in support of some of the most extreme ideas debated within Western literature on the topic. To be sure, nothing in the empirical evidence discussed in this paper justifies the idea itself of a "turn to the sea" if this label is used to refer to a radical, revolutionary change in China's geopolitical orientation. On the contrary, change seems to have been gradual and incremental, flowing from the military doctrine to the PLA organization across three, long decades. In a first stage, at the beginning of the eighties, a preliminary maritime rebalancing occurred in the basic doctrine, with the shift from the "people's war" to the "people's war under modern conditions" and its focus on maritime peripheral areas; in a second stage, in the early nineties, the maritime rebalancing in the basic doctrine was completed through a review of the PLA's main functions and a clearer focus on the protection of Chinese (economic) interests abroad. In the same

time, the long demobilization process resulted not only in a slimming down of the PLA, but also in a slow adaptation of the military organization to this doctrinal evolution: in force deployment the focus gradually shifted from defence of the capital to defence of coastal areas, while in personnel allocation the PLAGF lost some ground in favour of the PLAN and the PLAAF. Finally, in the last years there have been signals of further doctrinal evolution, this time at the level of operational doctrine: it seems that the concept of “active defence” has once again undergone a review, with a stronger emphasis on counter-attack faraway from China’s territory and some interesting implications in terms of power projection capabilities.

In the last section I have focused on the interaction between the maritime rebalancing in China’s security policy and Beijing’s regional policy, as consolidated since the mid nineties. On the one hand China’s regional policy constrains the maritime rebalancing, containing growing pressures toward a wider and faster naval build-up; on the other hand, however, as gradual and incremental as the maritime rebalancing may be, it still negatively impacts on the East Asian regional climate, thus complicating the implementation of China’s regional policy. Beijing is aware of this challenge and is apparently trying to keep a balance between two opposing needs: going on with the maritime rebalancing in its security policy, as required by China’s new and growing interests overseas; and reassuring its neighbours on its intentions, in order to maintain a peaceful and stable regional environment. According to Liu Qing, whose focus is not only on East Asia but on the wider maritime region including also the Eastern sector of the Indian Ocean, Beijing has already adopted some measures to achieve this aim. It is gradually increasing transparency in its military affairs, through the publication of the defence white papers (now regularly released on a two-year basis) and through more frequent press releases from the Ministry of National Defence. In the meantime, Beijing is exerting (a certain degree of) restraint in its military activities, especially in the Indian Ocean, where it has repeatedly affirmed its principle of “not building naval bases abroad” (不在海外设立军事基地, *bu zai haiwai sheli junshi jidi*) and has (reportedly) exerted restraint in arms transfers to its friends. Moreover, Liu Qing suggests that Beijing should be more supportive of regional integration plans, in order to reduce misperceptions among neighbours and improve the regional climate [Liu Qing, 2010].

In the end, both the analysis of maritime rebalancing and of its impact on China’s regional policy suggest that the crucial point lays in China’s domestic politics. Over the last twenty years Beijing’s foreign and security policy has been decided by a large policy-coalition in favour of a “calculative strategy” at the grand-strategic level and in favour of a policy of engagement and

reassurance at the regional level. In the same time, a smaller but fierce alternative policy-coalition has supported a more assertive grand strategy and regional policy, as well as a faster and wider military build-up, especially in the naval sector. Till now the challenge posed by this alternative policy-coalition has been rejected, even in the 1999 critical juncture, when the US attack on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade triggered in Beijing a wide debate on China's grand strategy. Nothing assures, however, that this balance of forces among the two competing policy-coalitions will remain unchanged in the future: much depends on both the attitudes of China's public (especially the young generations) and the evolution of the global and regional contexts.

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