

**Mao's Army Goes to Sea: The Island Campaigns
and the Founding of China's Navy,**
by Toshi Yoshihara, Georgetown University Press,
2022, pp. 158

*Himadri Bose**

Mao's Army Goes to Sea: The Island Campaigns and the Founding of China's Navy delves into Mao's initial efforts to build a naval force, tracing the development of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) between 1949 and 1950. It highlights how a group of individuals with no maritime experience managed to create an operational navy in just 18 months. Despite their lack of expertise, this nascent force undertook complex amphibious assaults, achieving significant victories in some cases while facing crushing defeats in others. Yoshihara, a distinguished scholar of the PLAN and Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments offers fresh perspectives through his extensive use of Chinese sources.

The requirement to take the war to the sea originated from the quest to comprehensively defeat the Kuomintang (KMT) after they retreated from mainland China to the outlying islands. The establishment of the East China Navy, which later became the Eastern Theatre Navy or East Sea Fleet, served as an experimental platform for building the national navy, the

* Commodore Himadri Bose is in the Indian Navy and is currently affiliated to the National Defence College, New Delhi, India.

PLAN. Communist forces assembled a provisional navy by utilising former Kuomintang (KMT) officers, sailors and civilians like fishermen and merchant mariners with their boats. Naval leaders swiftly set up naval academies and introduced a system to train a new generation of naval officers and personnel. By the end of 1950, the Chinese navy had devised a long-term vision and a detailed expansion plan. However, the onset of the Korean War and Mao's decision to intervene drastically altered Beijing's focus, significantly scaling back the navy's development efforts.

Alongside the PLAN's institutional growth, Mao's forces carried out a series of amphibious operations to seize offshore islands held by the Nationalists. These island-capturing campaigns were remarkably diverse, with varying objectives, landing scales and geographical terrains, leading to various strategic outcomes. The field armies that had secured much of the mainland initiated these cross-sea assaults along China's south-eastern and southern coastlines. The Third Field Army was tasked with operations near the coasts of Zhejiang and Fujian Provinces, while the Fourth Field Army focused on capturing islands off the coast of the Guangdong Province.

In the early days, two distinct navies were formed: the East China Navy, led by General Zhang Aiping in April 1949, and the PLAN, established in early 1950 under General Xiao Jinguang. Both Zhang and Xiao were experienced land commanders who faced the immense challenge of creating and training an amphibious naval force from scratch. However, they relentlessly approached the task and were motivated by their dedication to Marxism-Leninism and the harrowing experiences of the civil war under Mao Zedong.

The main hurdle in developing a navy, even a small one, was the lack of maritime expertise in ship handling, engineering and logistics. Zhang and Xiao recognised that this expertise was found among former Republic of China Navy (ROCN) personnel, many of whom had been trained on US vessels and systems. They aimed to incorporate captured ROCN officers into the new naval force. Despite Zhang's disdain for capitalist influences, he tactfully assigned ex-ROCN members to training positions, which caused some resentment among the ideologically committed proletariat. Nevertheless, Zhang managed this situation well, and several former ROCN officers later rose to prominent positions in the PLAN.

The book examines the campaigns at Xiamen, Jinmen, Zhoushan, Hainan and the Wanshan Islands, offering in-depth details of the battles and strategies. The October 1949 failure to seize Jinmen off the coast of Fujian Province laid to rest Mao's plan for invasion of Taiwan and set the

stage for the current Taiwanese stalemate. However, the lessons from the defeat at Jinmen were carefully analysed and corrected in the successful Hainan campaign, reflecting the PLAN's early dedication to learning from its failures. In early 1950, the Fourth Field Army launched the PLA's first significant amphibious assault on Hainan, an island comparable in size to Taiwan. The operation involved landing approximately 45,000 troops, making it one of the most important post-war military campaigns. Securing Hainan gave China a crucial strategic position over the South China Sea. Today, the Yulin naval base, located on Hainan's southern coast, is a central point for China's maritime power in the region. Subsequently, the capture of the Wanshan archipelago in 1950 was the first army-navy operation. 'The Wanshan campaign is considered the Chinese navy's first combat operation and is integral to the naval service's historiography.' Easy-to-read maps support the island campaign narratives, however, adding images could have been considered for greater context.

Yoshihara concludes the book with 'An Assessment of the PLA's Seaward Turn and Discerning Institutional Continuities'. The fledgling PLAN benefitted immensely from the KMT personnel; by 1955, they comprised 2.1 per cent of the 188,000-strong navy. Zhang and Xiao wholeheartedly supported their contributions to "education, experience, technical expertise, institutional memory, and naval culture." The PLA battled resource scarcity. The remaining Nationalist navy had already relocated their choice assets to Taiwan, leaving the Communists with various vessels of varying quality and reliability. In need of ships, they pulled together available resources, including civilian vessels, as a temporary solution to address the shortfall. They retrofitted amphibious assault ships, merchant ships and fishing vessels.

Contrary to the Western notions that the communists were blind-sighted to maritime undertakings. However, ten months before the founding of the People's Republic, the PLA leadership directed the formation of a navy. Mao recognised that having a strong navy was essential for concluding the civil war and protecting China's extensive coastline and inland rivers from external dangers. He managed critical personnel decisions, selecting Zhang and Xiao, and was crucial in challenging the Central Military Commission and the General Staff Department's perspectives on the navy's role. Mao supported Xiao's position that the navy should be established as an independent military branch.

Furthermore, Yoshihara presents evidence outlining how Western scholars have overplayed Russian influence in the formation of PLAN.

Yoshihara highlights various tactical measures used by the communists to overcome their numerical inferiority, such as surprise, adept modifications, camouflage and dispersion. They used civilian infrastructure and capability to offset their military disadvantages.

Understanding the evolution of the PLAN from its inception to the present and future is an intricate task. Furthermore, linking current behaviours to historical events is challenging. However, Yoshihara does present some reasonable conclusions.

First, the Third and Fourth Field Armies facilitated the establishment of the PLAN's regional fleets, which supplied the leadership, personnel, equipment and resources. Second, the political commissars were crucial in more than just fostering CCP loyalty. During the 1949–50 offshore campaigns, they fought alongside troops, participated in assaults and endured casualties. They also provided essential training to adapt ground troops to naval operations, bolstering morale and bravery. Commissars mobilised local support for the Communist forces and used psychological tactics to induce surrenders among Nationalist defenders, acting as significant force multipliers. He argues that a deeper understanding of their role is vital to comprehending Chinese naval operations.

Third, strategic debates from the founding period show that Communist leaders applied land-based strategies to maritime challenges. Lacking a navy and air force, they relied on shore-based weaponry for naval influence. Based on Mao's principles, the first island chain concept extended China's land defence strategy into the maritime domain. Fourth, he contends that the initial battles left an indelible mark on the values and traditions of PLAN. For instance, in a 2009 article commemorating the 60th anniversary of the PLAN's founding, Admiral Wu recalls how 'the People's Navy grew up through baptism in the fires of war' by seizing offshore islands and breaking enemy blockades.

Lastly, early on, the party-army system utilised civilian and commercial resources to build the navy and conduct island-seizing operations. Coastal China's maritime industries provided the necessary infrastructure and expertise, demonstrating the PLA's reliance on societal resources and its tradition of people's war. This early period significantly shaped the PLAN's outlook and values, and understanding this context is crucial for assessing its current and future trajectory.

Overall, it is a very well-researched book that sheds light on a hitherto unfamiliar portion of the history of PLAN. Yoshihara uses Chinese resources well to extract the foundational construct of the PLAN and explain its

historiography. He makes relevant connections between the amphibious missions of Mao's navy and the challenges that the PLAN faces today. It is highly recommended for those interested in maritime affairs, especially those yearning to understand the history of PLAN and its ideological foundation.