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China – long a security factor to be taken seriously in maritime power dynamics

Jan Wiedemann, co-publisher of the magazine NAVAL FORCES and Chairman of MS&D 2018, spoke to Dr Sarah Kirchberger, Head of the Center for Asia-Pacific Strategy and Security, Institute for Security Policy, Kiel University (ISPK), for the upcoming International Conference on Maritime Security and Defence (MS&D).

Wiedemann: Dr Kirchberger, your reputation as an expert on an ascendant China extends far beyond Germany. You have continually proven this expertise through numerous presentations and publications and, in particular, through your role as Head of the Center for Asia-Pacific Strategy at Kiel University. Can you tell me about the path that led you to this excellent position?

Kirchberger: I studied Chinese language and culture as well as political science, which also included a lengthy period studying in Taipei and several periods doing field research in the People's Republic of China. Before obtaining my PhD in 2004, I focused primarily on understanding how the Communist Party of China operates. After that, I spent several years in the naval ship-building industry working as a sales analyst at ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems. Within the naval export business, I then encountered a very different side of China, namely as an ascendant technological power whose strong military presence and rapid armament were a cause for concern among neighbouring countries. After three years in this area, I was appointed to a junior professorship on the Current China at the University of Hamburg. I spent the following six years focusing on China from a purely academic perspective once again, in particular on more recent Chinese history. In addition, however, I continued researching Chinese naval development, which culminated in a book, *Assessing China's Naval Power* (published by Springer in 2015). In the book, I attempted to use the range of knowledge and perspectives I obtained from the various stages of my career to conduct a comparative analysis of China's naval development. When I began focusing on this topic seven years ago, hardly anyone in Germany was interested in the Chinese Navy or the South China Sea. Although that has since changed, there is still only a small number of European experts on this area who also have Chinese language skills.

Wiedemann: You will be giving a presentation at the MS&D that will focus on China's position within the military balance of powers in East Asia. How would you assess the current military strength of China as an important new player in this area compared with the other heavyweights, the USA, Russia and Japan?

Kirchberger: In my opinion, China's military is still in a phase of "developmental

catch-up". However, compared with Russia, Japan and the USA, China is making rapid progress and is significantly increasing its military budget every year. The only way to implement costly procurement programmes, such as the aircraft carrier programme, is by providing substantial financial resources. Simply put, there is not just a clear political will in China to establish a world-ranking army as quickly as possible, but also a willingness among the political leadership to actually provide all the funding that is needed for this. This differentiates China from Japan, for example, whose military spending is capped at 1% of GDP and whose armed forces are, not without reason, called the "Self-Defense Force", even though they are, in effect, very well-equipped and professional armed forces. The US is far superior to China overall and also has a strong alliance system in Asia-Pacific. In the event of conflict, however, China would, for example, naturally have a home advantage in the South China Sea against the US armed forces, which would be operating from the sea and from a small number of overseas bases. Overall, the technological-military gap between the two powers has been closing noticeably in recent times. In any case, the days when US units were able to operate without concern in immediate proximity to Chinese territories are over as a result of China's A2/AD strategy. Compared with China, I would rank Russia's military strength – with the exception of its nuclear element, where Russia is clearly superior – behind that of China. This is primarily due to China's higher level of spending on the procurement of defence technology and the training of soldiers. Furthermore, Russia has been severely affected by the loss of Ukrainian supplies of defence technology since 2014 and by the Western embargo policy, which has impacted ongoing and planned equipment programmes. However, the question is still interesting: what would happen if Russia and China harnessed their military synergies to a greater extent than they have done up until now? What effects would this have on Asia, the West and NATO?

Wiedemann: Sea and maritime security are becoming increasingly important for the ascendant China. China needs secure sea routes in order to trade successfully, meet the significant energy needs of its economy and implement its foreign and economic policies, for example in Africa. The significance of Africa, both politically and economically as regards rare minerals and metals, is reflected in the establishment of a naval base in Djibouti. What else is China doing to influence in its favour the maritime security situation in the sea areas in question?

Kirchberger: Chinese strategists have long complained about the "Malacca dilemma", in other worlds the vulnerability of Chinese commodity import routes as a result of potential blockades in maritime bottlenecks. In response to this, and in view of what is perceived in China as the "encirclement" of its coastal waters by countries allied with the USA in the "First Island Chain" (Japan, Okinawa, Taiwan, Philippines), the Belt & Road Initiative (also known as the Silk Road Initiative) was established. It includes a maritime element and has now even been extended to the Arctic region. As part of this gigantic infrastructure initiative, the commodity-rich countries of Africa have become important partners for China. China is also exporting more and more weapons technology to this region in order to strengthen alliances with individual countries. It is presenting itself to African countries as a partner for the fast and efficient construction of key infrastructure (roads, railways, energy production infrastructure, ports and airports) and is offering to supply weapons technology at economical prices in exchange for commodities and political support, such as on UN bodies. This includes North Africa as well as sub-Saharan countries. The new base

in Djibouti was initially established for similar reasons that had already prompted other powers such as the USA, Italy, France and Japan to set up their own bases at the same place, namely to support their own anti-piracy operations – an understandable decision for a large trading power. However, these Chinese operations, which have been conducted on a permanent basis since 2008, certainly also serve other purposes, as does the first Chinese overseas base itself. For example, they help Chinese soldiers to obtain more operations experience and they provide information on the skills of other armed forces in the region through direct observation. China's stronger maritime presence in the Indian Ocean – officially to combat piracy and provide dispatched Chinese workers and major investments with the necessary protection – also has the effect of both challenging India and keeping it in check through China's alliance with its "all-weather friend" Pakistan. For example, China conducts extensive hydrographic research in the Indian Ocean – ostensibly for purely scientific purposes – the results of which are of course just as useful when, say, preparing for submarine operations.

Wiedemann: The Chinese Navy's new construction programmes, which cover all three dimensions of maritime warfare, are evidence of rapid technological development in this area as well. How would you assess China's weapons, sensor and combat technologies compared with those of the Americans, Europeans, Japanese and South Koreans? To what degree are they based on Russian technology?

Kirchberger: Network-centred warfare is a relatively new area for the Chinese military. However, we know from open sources that the Chinese Navy claims it now has a combat system comparable to the American AEGIS system. It was first installed on the Types 052C and 052D destroyers (Luyang II and Luyang III class). These ships would therefore be roughly comparable to the American Arleigh Burke class, for example, while the new Type 055 destroyer (Renhai class) would correspond to American cruisers in the Ticonderoga class due to its size and armament. Of the Chinese combat system, only the phased array radar antennas on the mast and the vertical launch systems for missiles are externally visible at first. However, open sources do not indicate how well and failure-free the Chinese system actually works in realistic operations. My own assumption is that US ships, with the AEGIS combat system (which, of course, is also used by South Korea, Japan and Australia) as a proven design, have an advantage simply because their technology has been in use for longer and is well tested. However, it will only be a matter of time before the Chinese overcome any problems in the area of system integration. The Russians, on the other hand, do not have a comparable system of their own at all. It would even appear that Ukrainian technology contributed more than Russian technology to the development of the Chinese phased array radar on the Type 346, for example.

Wiedemann: In a second presentation, you will be focusing on China's efforts to achieve economic and military strength. What goals does the country have here in the medium and long term? Is it aiming to achieve the status of a regional power in East Asia, or is its goal to become a fourth global power, along with – or perhaps in opposition to – the current powers, the USA, Russia and Europe?

Kirchberger: China's leadership is pursuing the goal of establishing "comprehensive national strength", which ultimately comprises many components, including economic and military strength. As a result, by the time the centenary of the state's foundation is celebrated in 2049, China is expected to have finally become a global power with a leading role in all areas. President Xi Jinping proclaimed this "Chinese dream" shortly after taking office. Officially, Chinese representatives talk about working towards a "fairer" world order in which a single superpower can no longer dominate everyone else. Instead, they wish to see the "democratisation of international relations" – this ultimately means a multipolar world order. China, the USA, Russia and possibly Europe are usually cited as its new poles. China shares this vision of a multipolar world with Russia.

Wiedemann: Thank you, Dr Kirchberger, from me and on behalf of Hamburg Messe und Congress, the organiser of MS&D, for your assessment of what is certainly a very complex security situation in China. We look forward to your presentations at the MS&D.