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Blue Water Command: The Evolution of Authority on Chinese Warships

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Cover image
Chinese People's Liberation Army-Navy ship frigage, Yi Yang, prepares to berth alongside Garden Island Naval Base in Sydney.

Blue Water Command: The Evolution of Authority on Chinese Warships

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Just fifteen years ago, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) seldom sailed beyond the Chinese littorals. When PLAN ships left home port, they did not stay away long; while at sea, they encountered few threats. Such were the rhythms of a coastal defense navy in a time of peace. Decades of easy duty nurtured a command culture that favored concentrated authority: only the commanding officer (CO) or the executive officer (XO) "drove" the ship or made decisions about what the ship did.

But the PLAN is no longer a coastal defense navy. It is increasingly operating in waters remote from the Chinese mainland, as far away as the Atlantic Ocean, sometimes for months at a time, performing a range of new missions, from suppressing piracy to confronting other great powers. Indeed, the PLAN surface fleet has become the "tip of the spear" in China's national defense. This development has forced service leaders to rethink—and reform—the old approaches to shipboard command.

These reforms have centered on questions of trust. First, the PLAN has been forced to reconsider how much to trust its ship COs. Today, decisions made aboard Chinese warships could seriously impact the interests of the People's Republic of China (PRC). An imprudent action, or failure to act, could lead to an armed clash at sea, or an embarrassing display of weakness. As a result, the PLAN has had to grapple with whether COs should have ultimate

authority to command their ships while conducting important missions. Until very recently, the answer was "no." Second, COs have been forced to decide how much they should trust junior officers to assume actual command responsibilities, something they did not do in the past. Longer and more intense deployments create pressures for COs to delegate authority to "drive" the ship and handle threats, so that they can focus on the most crucial matters at the most crucial times. But doing so demands a radical shift in command culture—which has not been easy.

Restoring Command to the Captain

The PLAN's operational patterns began to change under General Secretary Hu Jintao (2002-2012). Starting in 2007, PLAN frigates and destroyers began transiting the "first island chain" to train and operate in the Philippine Sea.[1] In December 2008, the PLAN sent its first counter-piracy escort task force to the Gulf of Aden.[2] Meanwhile, PLAN warships started operating in new parts of the East China Sea and South China Sea, often working in concert with the paramilitary forces—coast guard and militia—at the forefront of China's maritime expansion. In September 2012, following an imbroglio over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, PLAN warships began patrolling the eastern half of the East China Sea. These activities elicited the concern of China's neighbors, who responded by sending air and maritime forces to monitor them. In some cases, China pushed too far too fast, leading to tense encounters at sea.[3]

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[1] "The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces," Central Government of the PRC, Information Office of the State Council, April 2013, www.gov.cn/zhengce/2013-04/16/content_2618550.htm

[2] Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *No Substitute for Experience: Chinese Antipiracy Operations in the Gulf of Aden* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2013), .https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-red-books/12/

[3] Ryan D. Martinson, *Echelon Defense: The Role of Sea Power in Chinese Maritime Dispute Strategy* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2018), https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-red-books/15/

As the PLAN's mission set expanded, its leaders apparently decided that they could not fully trust ship COs to meet new operational requirements—at least not independently. PLAN units began embarking more senior officers, called "mission commanders" (任务指挥员) or "accompanying commanders" (随舰指挥员), who had ultimate command authority while aboard.[4] Their role was to "safeguard" (保驾护航) the mission, a euphemistic phrase suggesting a passive presence, but in practice they were in charge and COs could do nothing without their consent.[5]

Mission commanders were often the most experienced surface warfare officers (SWOs) in the units to which the deploying ships belonged. After having served as COs, they had been promoted to more senior leadership positions in ship flotillas (支队) and groups (大队).[6] Most had achieved the status of "trainer captain" (教练舰长), which entitled them to mentor junior (or aspiring) COs.[7]

Mission commanders have played important roles in several major events. The then-deputy commander of the East Sea Fleet's 6th Destroyer Flotilla, Wang Mingyong (王明勇), is a case in point. It was Wang—not the ship's CO, Liang Yang (梁阳)—who commanded the Type 054A

[4] 王栋，邵婧，周启青 [Wang Dong, Shao Jing, and Zhou Qiqing], 舰长"放单"，前路是鲜花还是荆棘——南海舰队某驱逐舰支队探索单舰指挥机制新闻调查 ["Captain is 'Sent Out on His Own' and the Road Forward Could Be Fresh Flowers or Thorns—A News Survey of a South Seas Fleet Destroyer Flotilla Exploring a Single Ship Command Mechanism"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], April 9, 2018, p. 5.

[5] Wang, Shao, and Zhou, "Captain is 'Sent Out on His Own,'" p. 5.

[6] 刘一翔、侯瑞 [Liu Yixiang and Hou Rui], 海军襄阳舰利用远程视频通讯系统让官兵过上团圆年天涯今日共此时 ["The Navy's *Xiangyang* Ship Uses the Remote Video Communications System to Connect with Their Families over the Holiday"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], February 7, 2016, p. 3.

[7] Wang, Shao, and Zhou, "Captain is 'Sent Out on His Own,'" p. 5.

frigate *Changzhou* as it rescued the 26 crew members of a Taiwanese fishing boat following their release from captivity in Somalia in July 2012.[8] Wang was also in charge of the *Changzhou* in late October 2013, as it conducted a "combat readiness patrol" in tense proximity to Japanese forces in the East China Sea, just as the remnants of typhoon Francisco bore down. As the *Changzhou* took on water in the high seas and wind, Wang led the effort to secure the ship and keep it on station despite the storm.[9]

To be fair, the practice of sending "nannies" (保姆) to babysit COs was not limited to the PLAN's surface fleet. In at least some cases, perhaps all, deploying PLAN submarines also embarked mission commanders senior to the CO. In early 2014, a Chinese submarine (hull number 372) encountered underwater turbulence in the form of an internal wave and nearly descended beneath crush depth.[10] The boat was only saved by the quick thinking of the mission commander, Senior Captain Wang Hongli (王红理), who was the submarine flotilla commander.[11]

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[8] 侯瑞，程必杰 [Hou Rui and Cheng Bijie], 海军"常州"舰安全接护台湾"旭富一号"渔船被劫持 570 多天的获释船员——"不要怕，你们到家了！" ["The Navy Ship Changzhou Safely Escorted the Released Crew of the Taiwanese Fishing Vessel 'Xufu No. 1' Which Had Been Hostage for 570 Days—'Don't Be Afraid, You Are Home Now'"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], July 20, 2012, p. 4.

[9] 陆淼，彭清，林健 [Lu Miao, Peng Qing, and Lin Jian], 军人血性如何练就--解读东海舰队某驱逐舰支队的血性基因 ["How to Train the Courage of Soldiers—Interpretation of the Courageous Genes of a Certain East Sea Fleet Destroyer Flotilla"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], June 16, 2015, p. 4.Wang later went on to serve as the commander of the 35th Counter-Piracy Escort Task Force. See 江山，刘飘 [Jiang Shan and Liu Piao], 海军第34、35 批护航编队亚丁湾分航 ["The 34th and 35th ETFs Go Their Separate Ways in the Gulf of Aden"], 中国军网 [*China Military Online*], June 2, 2020, http://www.mod.gov.cn/action/2020-06/02/content_4866139.htm

[10] 倪煜淮 [Ni Yuhuai], 内波，看不见的"能量传送带" ["Internal Waves, The Invisible 'Conveyer Belt of Energy'"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], November 11, 2020, p. 4.

[11] 蔡年迟，梁庆松，邓冉子 [Cai Nianchi, Liang Qingsong, and Deng Zaizi], 虎鲸出击 ["Killer Whale Strike"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], December 12, 2014, p. 1.

Many in the PLAN recognized that embarking a mission commander was bad practice. Trainer captains were scarce; sending them to sea for weeks or months at a time to babysit ship COs kept them from other important tasks, like developing training plans, certifying and evaluating training outcomes, and refining tactics. Adding a mission commander made ships less "agile" because COs had to gain approval before making any important decisions. [12] Reliance on mission commanders meant a limited role for the surface fleet in wartime, as there were not enough senior captains to go around if the PLAN wanted to surge forces. The approach stunted the development of young COs and the party committee system that was supposed to be the center of policy decisions at sea.[13]

By 2017, individual units were experimenting with change. The first to do so appears to have been the South Sea Fleet's 9th Destroyer Flotilla.[14] It created a pilot program to send ship CO's "out on their own" (放单). The first to do so was the captain of the Type 052C destroyer *Haikou*. After subjecting the ship's crew to a comprehensive evaluation, flotilla leaders empowered the CO, Fan Jigong (**樊继功**), to take the vessel out alone to conduct the full range of peacetime missions, including politically sensitive sovereignty (i.e. "rights protection") patrols.[15] The COs of other ships in the unit followed suit. In the fall of 2017, for example, the

[12] Wang, Shao, and Zhou, "Captain is 'Sent Out on His Own,'" p. 5.

[13] 侯融，孙国强，陈国全 [Hou Rong, Sun Guoqiang, and Chen Guoquan], 破除惯性，解决"问题背后的问题" ["Break Through the Inertia, Solve the 'Problem Behind the Problem'"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], April 16, 2019, p. 5.

[14] 陈国全 [Chen Guoquan], 全国人大代表、南部战区海军某驱逐舰支队岳阳舰舰长赵岩泉——"每一次起航都是第一次" ["Zhao Yanquan, NPC Delegate and CO of the Ship *Yueyang* from a Southern Theater Command Navy Destroyer Flotilla—'Every Time We Put to Sea is a First Time'"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], February 22, 2019, p. 3.

[15] 蔡年迟，袁珍军，肖勇利 [Cai Nianchi, Yuan Zhenjun, and Xiao Yongli], 创新，转型先锋的开山利斧 ["Innovation, The Mountain Axe Used by Transformational Pioneers"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], July 30, 2018, p. 1.

destroyer *Lanzhou* sailed across fleet boundaries (跨海区) to fire a cruise missile against a surface target as part of a training evolution, doing so without an accompanying commander, i.e., entirely under the command of the ship's CO, Zhu Zhengzhong (朱正中).[16]

In other units, the old practice endured. For example, in February 2018 the South Sea Fleet amphibious transport dock *Jinggangshan* participated in a 25-day (8,000 nautical mile) training mission to the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, and Philippine Sea. For this deployment, the ship embarked a mission commander, Li Xiangdong (李向东).[17] At the time, Li was the commander of the landing ship flotilla to which the *Jinggangshan* belonged.[18]

But the rest of the PLAN would soon follow the path blazed by the 9th Destroyer Flotilla. During a meeting in early 2018, the PLAN Party committee issued a policy statement declaring that henceforth unit or fleet headquarters could no longer embark mission commanders on individual ships.[19] On paper at least—and as far as can be learned from Chinese open sources—the age of the mission commander had come to an end. COs were now back in charge of their own ships.[20]

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[16] 张宏进 [Zhang Hongjin], 法驻兵心固牢强军之基 ["The Law Enters the Heart of the Soldier and Solidifies the Foundation of a Strong Army"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], October 13, 2017, p. 7.

[17] 周启青，王栋，刘畅平，顾亚根 [Zhou Qiqing, Wang Dong, Liu Changping, and Gu Yagen], 远海大洋，淬炼制胜刀锋 ["In the Fars Seas and Great Oceans, Tempering a Winning Blade"], 兵工科技 [*Ordnance Industry Science and Technology*], no. 12 (2018), p. 28.

[18] 2013 年 4 月 9 日，习主席视察井冈山舰。5 年来，井冈山舰官兵牢记领袖嘱托 ["On April 9, 2013 Chairman Xi Visited the *Jinggangshan*, and Five Years Later the Officers and Enlisted Still Remember the Leader's Trust"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], February 4, 2018, p. 1.

[19] Hou, Sun, and Chen, "Break Through the Inertia, Solve the 'Problem Behind the Problem,'" p. 5.

[20] To some extent, the PLAN CO shares authority with the Political Commissar (PC). However, there is a division of labor between the two. As Captain Jeff Benson and Zi Yang write, COs are in charge of "tactical military actions" and the PC generally manages personnel issues. Captain Jeff W. Benson and Zi Yang, "China's Dual

Empowering the Officer of the Deck

In the U.S. Navy (and most other navies), the officer of the deck (OOD) serves as the senior officer on the bridge. The OOD "drives" the ship in the absence of the CO, navigating it to its destination while following internationally-accepted "rules of the road." While operating at sea, the OOD handles communications with other ships for safety of navigation. The OOD is also responsible for conveying information and instructions to the rest of the ship via the public address circuit, including the order to prepare for battle (i.e., go to "general quarters"). The OOD makes decisions based on what can be observed from the bridge (visually and from available sensors), inputs from the officer in charge of the ship's combat information center (CIC), and instructions from the ship's CO.

While OODs have been a fixture on PLAN ships for decades, they never had much actual authority. Instead, they served as mere "messengers" (传令兵) for the CO, who made all major decisions and frequently conned the ship. When foreign warships visited China, PLAN officers marveled that their COs trusted OODs enough to let them maneuver the ship into and out of port. These difficult actions had always been reserved for PLAN captains.[21]

In 2009, the PLAN altered its training guidelines to require that OODs actually possess the ability to independently navigate the ship.[22] The goal was to reduce the burden on COs so that they could focus on commanding the ship instead of merely driving it.[23] This was a good aim,

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Command at Sea," *Proceedings of USNI*, March 2021, https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2021/march/chinas-dual-command-sea.

[21] 海军某登陆舰支队值班指挥员首次独立指挥军舰航行 ["The On-Duty Commander of a Navy Landing Ship Independently Navigates the Ship for the First Time"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], February 27, 2009, p. 5.

[22] "The On-Duty Commander of a Navy Landing Ship Independently Navigates the Ship for the First Time," p. 5.

[23] "The On-Duty Commander of a Navy Landing Ship Independently Navigates the Ship for the First Time," p. 5.

but plans for pursuing it were poorly implemented. In 2013, PLAN writings revealed that OOD training still suffered from neglect. Emphasis remained on developing competent captains, not subordinates. OOD evaluations focused on written exams, deprioritizing the ability of junior officers to actually operate the ship at sea. In many cases, COs continued to let their OODs serve as message bearers rather than give them any real authority.[24]

The PLAN took steps to improve training so that COs could feel greater trust in their OODs. Starting in June 2015, for example, the East Sea Fleet Vessel Training Center held a 70-day course for previously certified OODs who did not possesses the skills required to do the job—victims of a heavy mission load and COs fixated on "safety concerns" (**安全顾虑**). The course was taught by experts from PLAN academic institutions and outstanding COs and mission area experts from across the fleet. Course organizers tailored its curriculum to meet the diverse needs of individual students.[25]

Despite efforts like these, results across the three fleets have been mixed.[26] Some OODs, like those aboard the frigate *Linyi*, can independently drive the ship, giving the CO and XO more time and energy to focus on larger operational matters.[27] But the OODs of other vessels cannot. As recently as April 2019, the commander of a frigate flotilla admitted that "due to

[24] 吴海权 [Wu Haiquan], 加强值更官能力培养的思考 ["Thoughts on Strengthening Cultivation of OOD Capabilities"], 政工学刊 [*Journal of Political Work*], no. 3 (2013), p. 31.

[25] 侯瑞，林健 [Hou Rui and Lin Jian], 组织值更官批量脱产淬火 ["OODs Take Time Off For Study"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], June 24, 2015, p. 1.

[26] 瞿兵，陈迪 [Qu Bing and Chen Di], 为新装备形成战斗力提供坚强的人才保证 ["Provide Human Capital Support for New Equipment to Form Combat Power"], 政工学刊 [*Journal of Political Work*], no. 1 (2016), p. 38.

[27] 段江山，陈国全，孙伟帅 [Duan Jiangshan, Chen Guoquan, and Sun Weishuai], 临沂舰的灿烂青春 ["The Brilliant Youth of the Warship *Linyi*"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], December 11, 2018, p. 5.

safety considerations COs are not normally willing to let OODs independently operate the ship, and as a result their function is weakened. Some OODs have served this post for years and their skills have not seen much improvement."[28] In late 2020, it was considered newsworthy that the CO of an East Sea Fleet destroyer, the *Xuzhou*, allocated time while on deployment to give his OODs opportunities to take command of the bridge and handle interactions with foreign ships/aircraft. Even at that point, PLAN COs did not trust OODs with the conn because of "safety factors" (**安全因素**).[29]

Inventing the Tactical Action Officer

The CIC—or, what the PLAN calls the "combat command post" (**作战指挥所**)—is the nerve center of the ship. From watch stations in the CIC, crew members track the movements of foreign ships, boats, aircraft, and submarines, providing operational commanders a picture of the world not visible from the bridge. When operating in potentially dangerous waters, U.S. Navy ships assign an officer with responsibility to interpret all this information and, if necessary, respond to any threats, including with the use of force. This person is the Tactical Action Officer (TAO).

For decades, the PLAN did not have an analogous position on its ships. In the rare cases when a PLAN vessel operated in a dangerous area, the CO or XO probably stood watch in the CIC. But as relations with Japan worsened in late 2012 and into 2013, this old system became

[28] 蔡盛秋 [Cai Shengqiu], 主动设险，让考核"一波三折" ["Proactively Create Danger, Make the Evaluation Have 'Twists and Turns'"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], April 30, 2019, p. 2.

[29] 李宇，温子东 [Li Yu and Wen Zidong], 多岗位轮训任务中锤炼 ["Tempering Skills By Rotating Through Multiple Posts for Training"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], November 5, 2020, p. 1.

untenable. PLAN destroyers and frigates were spending days operating in danger zones and needed to be on alert at all times.[30]

In 2013, the 3rd Destroyer Flotilla of the East Sea Fleet, whose ships were on the front line in this eastward expansion, began experimenting with a Chinese analogue to the TAO.[31] Initially, the position was called the "combat duty officer" (作战值班官).[32] This later changed to "Combat OOD" (作战值更官). This new dual OOD system (双值更官制度), with the traditional OOD on the bridge now being called the Navigational OOD, expanded to other parts of the fleet. Today it seems to be the standard arrangement across the PLAN.[33]

Combat OODs are among the most senior officers aboard the ship. Just like U.S. Navy TAOs, they are department heads with years of experience serving on the bridge as Navigational OODs. Also like the USN, the process of gaining Combat OOD certification takes years of

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[30] 王志鹏，方廷 [Wang Zhipeng and Fang Ting], 专职作战值班官走马上任 ["Dedicated Combat Duty Officer Assumes Duties"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], September 24, 2013, p. 2; 温子东，王志鹏 [Wen Zidong and Wang Zhipeng], 让年轻干部早经受战场检验 ["Let Young Officers Get Tested Early on the Battlefield"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], June 21, 2016, p. 1.

[31] 陈国全，刘亚迅，王志鹏 [], 海军某驱逐舰支队出色完成一项项急难险重任务，被誉为"海上铁拳"——不解征衣，劈波斩浪闯大洋 [], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], August 21, 2016, p. 2; 梁庆松，方立华，侯瑞，王志鹏 [Liang Qingsong, Fang Lihua, Hou Rui, and Wang Zhipeng], "海上铁拳"亮剑波谷浪尖 ["The 'Maritime Iron Fist' Flashes Its Sword in the Waves"], 当代海军 [*Navy Today*], pp. 20-22; Wen and Wang, "Let Young Officers Get Tested Early on the Battlefield," p. 1.

[32] Wang and Fang, "Dedicated Combat Duty Officer Assumes Duties," p. 2.

[33] 代宗锋，刘亚迅，陈国全 [Dai Zongfeng and Liu Yaxun], 砺剑大洋--记东海舰队某驱逐舰支队常州舰 ["Sharpen the Sword in the Open Ocean—A Record of the Changzhou, a Ship from an East Sea Fleet Destroyer Flotilla"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], July 16, 2017, p. 1; 刘亚迅，代宗锋 [Liu Yaxun and Dai Zongfeng], 海军某驱逐舰支队益阳舰执行战备巡逻任务--浪打船舷如征鼓 ["The *Yiyang*, a Ship from a Navy Destroyer Flotilla, Conducts Combat Readiness Tasks—Waves Strike the Hull Like a Drum"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], October 14, 2017, p. 2; 杨运芳，王松岐 [Yang Yunfang and Wang Songqi], 时刻准备打胜仗的铁血 ["Iron Blood That is Always Preparing to Prevail in War"], 解放军画报 [*PLA Pictorial*], no. 8b (2015), p. 70.

study, practice, and training. If they perform their jobs well, officers certified as Combat OODs might be selected for XO training, a major milestone before taking command of a ship—again, a path very similar to that traveled by U.S. Navy SWOs.[34]

The job of the Combat OOD is to "organize watch personnel [in the CIC] to carefully monitor the [tactical] situation around the ship."[35] Like their U.S. counterparts, they have the authority to use deadly force to neutralize threats, though in practice they would likely transfer command back to the CO during an emergency.[36] Nevertheless, the creation and adoption of the Combat OOD position represents a major step towards entrusting junior officers with responsibilities akin to those held by other modern navies.

Conclusion

On balance, the results of PLAN efforts to reform shipboard command relationships to meet the requirements of blue-water operations have been mixed. For a decade or more, PLAN surface combatants conducting anything but the most mundane tasking were not commanded by their COs, but by more trustworthy senior captains. As one PLA article called it, this was an "ironclad law" (铁律).[37] As a result, the ships probably performed better (than

[34] Wang and Fang, "Dedicated Combat Duty Officer Assumes Duties," p. 2; Wen and Wang, "Let Young Officers Get Tested Early on the Battlefield," p. 1; 李韬伟，虞章才，李高健，张海龙 [Li Taowei, Y Zhangcai, Li Gaojian, and Zhang Hailong], "八个抓手"锻造过硬战舰 ["'Eight Hands' to Forge a Tough Warship"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], June 23, 2017, p. 3.

[35] Liu and Dai, "The *Yiyang*, a Ship from a Navy Destroyer Flotilla, Conducts Combat Readiness Tasks," p. 2.

[36] 李维 [Li Wei], 穿透夜幕的实战曙光--对南部战区海军部队夜间组训施训的调查与思考 ["The Dawn of Real Combat Penetrates the Night—Investigation and Reflection on the Night Training of the Naval Forces of the Southern Theater Command"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], April 22, 2021, p. 5.

[37] 王栋，周启青 [Wang Dong and Zhou Qiqing], 没有随舰"保驾"人员，完全按编制出航 ["Put to Sea With the Personnel that Should Be Aboard, Without Accompanying 'Safeguard' Personnel"], 解放军报 [*PLA Daily*], April 9, 2018, p. 5.

otherwise) on a given mission, but this practice arrested the development of Chinese COs. It also meant that China's operational surface force was much smaller in reality than it was on paper—for the PLAN did not have enough senior captains to go around for all its ships. This approach seems to have ended in the first half of 2018. Even if this is true, it will still probably take years before the PLAN develops the confident and competent cadre of COs it needs to command its surface fleet in battle. It is, however, entirely possible that the practice of sending mission commanders still endures, unmentioned by the Chinese press. If that is the case, the warfighting potential of the PLAN surface fleet must be deeply discounted.

PLAN efforts to train and empower its OODs have been only partially successful. On the one hand, the PLAN now requires that prospective OODs complete a more rigorous certification process than in the past. In at least some units, this means formal at-sea performance evaluations. However, it appears that many (but not all) PLAN COs remain reluctant to fully trust their OODs with authority to independently operate the ship. In the event of a protracted naval conflict, this would mean either exhausted COs or incompetent OODs—either outcome would severely degrade the combat effectiveness of Chinese ships.[38]

Prompted by operational experience in the East China Sea, the PLAN has adopted a new practice of empowering an officer other than the CO or XO to take charge of the CIC while operating in high-threat environments. Called the Combat OOD, this close analogue to the U.S. Navy's TAO seems to have generally been a positive development for the force. However,

[38] PLAN officers recognize that "in wartime, the operational command capabilities of its OODs would directly determine a ship's combat effectiveness." See 王庆厚，张淼，张庆宝 [Wang Qinghou, Zhang Miao, and Zhang Qingbao], 实案训练，对接多维立体战场 ["Training to Real Cases, Linking Up with the Three-Dimensional Battlefield"], 人民海军 [*People's Navy*], November 23, 2020, p. 1.

if PLAN CO's are indeed still unwilling to entrust OODs on the bridge with a meaningful role driving the ship it is hard to imagine that they are willing to impart significant trust in the Combat OOD, an officer theoretically responsible for making life and death decisions.

In sum, while the PLAN is showing all the outward signs of becoming an oceanic navy, the service is grappling with other less visible constraints on its blue-water combat ambitions. Many of these challenges center on issues of trust, namely, the unwillingness of PLAN leaders—at multiple levels—to depend on their subordinates. Unless they can learn to do so, the PLAN may never fully transform itself into the "world-class" navy it so desperately seeks to become.

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