

## China as a Twenty-First-Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications

By Michael A. McDevitt  
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Reviewed by Edward B. Fienning

Over 3 years, starting in 264 BCE, the Roman military built and launched 1,000 galleys to defeat Carthage in the First Punic War. This intentional, rapid transition from land to maritime power was unprecedented and resulted in 600 years of Roman military and economic dominance. It was a feat not to be repeated in any meaningful way until American naval expansion during World War II. However, according to retired Rear Admiral Michael McDevitt's comprehensive and insightful work, *China as a Twenty-First-Century Naval Power*, China is on the precipice of exceeding historical precedent. In this comprehensive review of rapid Chinese naval expansion, the former director for Strategy, Plans, and Policy (J5) at U.S. Pacific Command applies 34 years of commissioned service focused on the Pacific theater to provide

a holistic and clear-eyed analysis of Chinese maritime power.

McDevitt brings into clear focus how China is expanding its capabilities with both long memory and a clear vision of its future role on the global stage. He thoroughly recounts the past 15 years of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) transition from a largely "near seas" force, with only a handful of blue-water-capable warships, to a force McDevitt sees as the second most capable blue-water navy in the world. He illuminates the Chinese national focus on developing maritime power, a numerically superior fleet of warships, incredible ship-building capacity, the integration of command and control through a newly established coast guard, and the militarization of expansive merchant and fishing fleets. Increased training and integration into international operations are also on the rise. The decision in December 2008 to join the United Nation's call for naval forces to counter piracy in the Gulf of Aden has been a key accelerant in the PLAN's evolution from coastal defense to blue-water expeditionary capability, and the 36<sup>th</sup> PLA Navy antipiracy task force is currently on station in the Northern Arabian Sea.

With an approachable and technically thorough style, McDevitt describes the incredible political and financial shift China has made to focus on the maritime domain. Today, China is the top ship-building nation in the world, is first in merchant marine ship count, and maintains a fishing fleet that is both the largest in the world and the one that acts as a "maritime militia," supplementing the Chinese coast guard. Though China has more warships than the United States, McDevitt is quick to point out that in terms of tonnage the U.S. Navy remains larger and superior in key capabilities, such as sea-based tactical airpower, nuclear-powered attack submarines, advanced air defense, antisubmarine warfare-capable surface combatants, and amphibious forces.

One of the most valuable contributions of McDevitt's work is his strategic analysis of potential maritime flashpoints in and around the South China Sea,

particularly Taiwan and the nine-dash line. Taiwan is much more than a rogue province in the eyes of the Chinese—it forms a critical geographic point for strategic defense. Further south, the nine-dash line was originally conceived by the Republic of China to demarcate its island claims, but in the decades since, the People's Republic of China has "flipped the script" from a territorial demarcation to a claim of historic maritime rights, and likely heralds claims of outright sovereignty in the future.

McDevitt warns the joint force to watch for the development of offensive capabilities that extend Chinese naval operations beyond the shore-based missile defenses of China. The expansion of air cover through airfields on reclaimed land, the development and training of aircraft carriers and crews, and the foreign basing of ships and submarines will increase Chinese influence in sea lines of communication and may increase friction for U.S. and partner forces in global waters.

McDevitt's work is a critical addition to joint knowledge at a precarious time. China is rapidly expanding its maritime reach. In early 2021, Chairman Xi Jinping signaled his singular power over the Central Committee by reclaiming a nautically themed title not used since Chairman Mao: "core navigator and helmsman." Days later, opposition lawmakers on Kiribati, 1,860 miles south of Hawaii, expressed concern over Chinese plans to revive the strategic airstrip on Kanton Atoll, creating a "fixed carrier" for China in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Both announcements arrived on the heels of reports of China working with West African governments to develop a military port capable of combat repair and submarine basing on the Atlantic Ocean.

McDevitt also suggests that any flashpoint-driven conflict puts China on the offense and makes the joint force the away team in any conflict. Currently, all joint force components staged in Japan, Korea, and the South China Sea sit inside China's weapons engagement zone, creating significant disadvantages from the outset. McDevitt reminds us in compelling prose that understanding China's

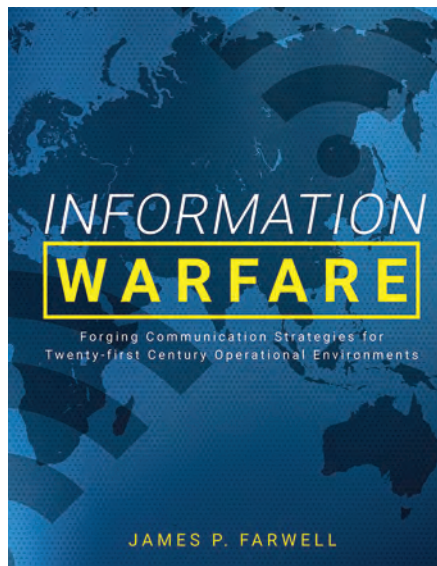
intent, drive, positioning, force composition, and growing capability is critical prior to any potential conflict.

For those interested in a deeper dive on China's role in Great Power competition, consider *Red Star Over the Pacific* (Naval Institute Press, 2010) by Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, and *The Great Wall at Sea* (Naval Institute Press, 2001) by Bernard Cole. Another terrific resource for current information on Chinese maritime and other military efforts is the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission.

One reasonable critique of this work is that McDevitt misses an opportunity to contextualize Chinese maritime expansion against the backdrop of a coordinated and aggressive nonmilitary expansion of Chinese influence across the globe, particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia. However, within its maritime area of focus, *China as a Twenty-First-Century Naval Power* is packed with detailed insights and should be on the shelf of every warrior-scholar in the joint force. JFQ

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### Information Warfare: Forging Communication Strategies for Twenty-First Century Operational Environments

By James P. Farwell

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178 pp. Free to Download

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Reviewed by Christopher Paul

What is communication strategy? What steps should defense leaders and planners take to build such a strategy? Curiously, in James Farwell's *Information Warfare*, he answers the second question without ever answering the first. Farwell seeks to provide "a concise treatise on the steps for developing and implementing a communication strategy and includes key historical and contemporary examples for deeper insight." The book includes 12 chapters, most of which are insightful. The book does not end with a traditional chapter of conclusions, but it does include a useful "Winning Communication Strategy Workbook" as a terminal appendix.

The principal strength of *Information Warfare* is its practicality. The material is approachable and presented with great efficiency—the book is only 178 pages, and 30 of those are the workbook appendix. Farwell lays out good first principles

for any kind of strategy, beginning with being clear about what you are trying to accomplish. After reading this book, the reader will be much better prepared to think about and plan a communication strategy in support of military operations or campaigns. The workbook is a useful addition as it lays out numerous questions that will guide users around pitfalls and toward strategic success.

Among other strengths is the excellent use of historical examples. Farwell presents historical vignettes with just enough detail to situate the reader and then immediately proceeds to distill lessons from the examples. This is made even more powerful by repeatedly returning to some of the same vignettes in later chapters, adding another layer of historical detail and drawing additional lessons. These bite-size bits are perfectly suited to purpose and avoid the risk of overwhelming the reader with lengthy historical accounts before making the point clear.

*Information Warfare* also has some significant weaknesses. This is not a traditional academic work and so it lacks many of the academic trappings, for good or for ill. Farwell includes more than 20 historical vignettes, ranging from the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE through contemporary operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. These are not presented in any discernable order, and there is no clear rationale for the selection of the cases and no announced method for how the lessons were extracted. In fact, there is no discussion of methodology at all. What analysis there is draws from the author's experiences and the narratives of the historical vignettes. That said, the lessons are compelling and have face validity; Farwell offers good advice.

Farwell also uses several different terms related to the subject at hand and does not distinguish between any of them. These include the clearly related but probably distinct "information warfare," "communication strategy," "strategic communication," and "narrative." He evinces disdain for the definitional gyrations of academics and insists that they not be allowed to "obstruct the clear thinking required for effective information warfare strategy