

Pentagon Assessment: China Now Has World's Largest Navy



A Chinese Type 052C destroyer, the Changchun, in Malaysia in 2017.

ARLINGTON, Va. – The People's Republic of China, increasing its two-decade military buildup, now has the world's largest navy, according to the U.S. Defense Department's latest annual assessment of China's military capabilities.

The Pentagon's 2020 report to Congress on "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China," noted the PRC has marshalled the resources, technology and political will over the last 20 years to build a world-class military. "And China is already ahead of the United States in certain areas" such as land-based conventional ballistic and cruise missiles, air defense systems and shipbuilding, added the report, released Sept. 1.

"The PRC has the largest navy in the world, with an overall battle force of approximately 350 ships and submarines including over 130 major surface combatants," according to the report. The 2019 assessment said China simply had the largest navy in the region.

"Those numbers are likely to increase and we estimate that they will," because the PLAN [People's Liberation Army Navy] is seeking "greater far seas or global power projection capabilities," Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Chad Sbragia told a live-streamed discussion of the report presented by the Washington think tank AEI. He noted, however, that ship numbers are just one element of naval capability.

In comparison, the U.S. Navy, which has a long-sought goal of achieving a 355-ship fleet, had a battle force of 293 vessels as of early 2020.

The PLAN has replaced older weapons platforms with larger, modern, multi-role combatants featuring advanced anti-ship, anti-air and anti-submarine weapons and sensors. China is also the leading ship-producing nation in the world by tonnage and is increasing its shipbuilding capacity and capability for all naval classes, the report stated.

The army's evolving capabilities and concepts continue to strengthen China's ability to counter intervention by an adversary in the Indo-Pacific region and project power globally, according to the report.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has expanded its participation in bilateral and multilateral military exercises. It has a naval base at Djibouti in East Africa and "is very likely already considering and planning for additional overseas military logistics facilities to support naval, air and ground forces," the 2020 report stated. It added that China "has likely considered locations for PLA military logistics facilities" in Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola and Tajikistan.