As a great state with vast territory and a long coastline, China’s development depends heavily on the oceans for commerce, security and resources. It regards access to the sea as a vital part of its national security and development policy.

Meanwhile, China is acutely aware that oceanic affairs are sensitive and complex, involving the interrelated interests of many nations. In order to guarantee the protection of its own rights and to take into consideration the rights of other players, China pursues a “Harmonious Oceans” policy at the core of its maritime security strategy.

The often-used concept of “harmony” in this context means to maintain peace and the sustainable development of the oceans through comprehensive co-ordination and co-operation. Comprehensive measures include not only security mechanisms such as military and law enforcement operations but also economic and environmental considerations. The policy is carried out not only in China’s territorial seas but also in international waters, including areas that are currently a matter of dispute. The main driving factors in the pursuit of a Harmonious Ocean are geography, the requirements of economic development and international considerations.

A seafaring nation
First, China is becoming an important actor in oceanic affairs. A huge country with impressive marine resources, China has 18,000 kilometers of coastline and more than 6,500 islands; it has eight deep-water harbors that are among the 10 largest harbors in the world. Its shipping capacity is listed as the fourth largest in the world. In addition, the demand for ocean shipping as a result of foreign trade will increase at an average of 6 percent per year over the next five years, compared to a glo-
In an interdependent world where both technical and economic pressures are rising, no one country can develop its oceanic resources or protect the integrity of its coastal areas in isolation from the international community. That is why various cooperative mechanisms have been established in recent decades through the United Nations and other multilateral bodies. China is committed to enhancing international and regional co-operation in maritime affairs.

However, faced with the complex reality of managing ocean policy, China confronts three main strategic obstacles or dilemmas. The first is the shortage of administrative resources to manage the expanding arena of maritime security. For example, non-traditional security issues such as pollution of the marine environment and sea disasters need an advanced monitoring system with both technical and political aspects, but China’s marine science and technology are not yet up to the task and the country lacks a high-level national coordination mechanism on marine security. Some international analysts argue that despite visible improvements over the last decade, China’s maritime enforcement capacities remain relatively weak compared to other major powers in the Asia-Pacific region. Some Chinese experts believe that these capabilities are disproportionately small given the scale of China’s maritime development, noting that the vast majority of coastal patrol vessels are less than 500 tons and the small number of ship-borne helicopters cannot meet the requirements of comprehensive maritime law enforcement.

A second contradiction lies in the gap between international demands for China to play a more responsible role in global maritime security and the perceptions of some who worry about China’s intentions in building up its maritime capabilities. In recent years, Chinese efforts to protect international maritime security — such as a naval escort operation in the piracy-prone Gulf of Aden and law enforcement cooperation with Southeast Asian countries to counter piracy — have been largely welcomed by the international community. But lingering suspicion over the development of China’s maritime capabilities sometimes casts a shadow on international cooperation. Some argue that China is pursuing an ambitious program to dominate the Western Pacific and even whole oceans in the future. Some argue that there will eventually be bitter maritime rivalries and com-
petition between China and existing regional and world naval powers.

Finally, there are the disputes between China and some neighboring countries over territorial boundaries and differing views on maritime operations, such as freedom of navigation.

**THE ‘FOUR CO-ORDINATIONS’**

To deal with the existing contradictions and challenges it confronts as a growing international ocean power, China is carrying out several comprehensive measures. These efforts to preserve and enhance harmony in ocean policy could be expressed in simple terms as the “Four Co-ordinations.”

The first co-ordination is to harmonize national and international maritime law. Managing marine security affairs under the rule of law is a key principle for the Chinese government, and this must take into account not just the domestic legal environment but international law, especially the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China’s National Project for the Development of Marine Affairs considers the first basic principle of marine development to be the need to manage maritime issues according to the applicable legal understandings that govern different areas, including international territory.

The Standing Committee of the National People's Congress ratified UNCLOS in May 1996, but in order to bring domestic legislation in line with its provisions, the government issued a series of laws and regulations to guide oceanic affairs. These include laws covering territorial seas, exclusive economic zones, environmental protection, fisheries and more.

The Chinese government sees the need not only to manage domestic maritime security through coordinating national and international law but also to manage its international obligations with regard to maritime security. For example, when the Chinese Navy sent warships to the Gulf of Aden in 2008, the PLA Daily, the newspaper of the People’s Liberation Army, carried a series of commentaries arguing the case for the navy to operate off the coast of Somalia. The official newspaper wrote that the operation, far from being aggressive, was in keeping with UN Security Council Resolutions 1816, 1838 and 1851, empowering all countries to “take all necessary and proper measures to put a stop to pirating operations and maritime armed plunder.” According to both UNCLOS and the 1988 Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Maritime Navigation, all countries must join the effort to suppress piracy on the high seas. China therefore has the right and obligation to fight against Somali pirates.  

The second co-ordination is related to maritime law enforcement agencies. Marine security affairs are complex and interrelated, covering many different fields and requiring different management mechanisms. Related agencies must be integrated in a coherent fashion into maritime security issues. Some Chinese experts describe it as “Five Dragons Stirring Up the Sea,” which means there are at least five agencies that have a hand in maritime security. The Five Dragons are the Chinese Coast Guard, Maritime Safety Administration, China Marine Surveillance, Fisheries Law enforcement Command and China Customs. To reduce bureaucratic competition and inefficiency, the State Council issued an order calling for enhanced coordination among these agencies in 2004. The directive called for joint enforcement operations and emergency management at a national level. It also directed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to make recommendations to the central government when it is necessary to select a lead agency in an emergency related to national maritime security.

The third co-ordination involves both traditional and non-traditional security issues. Defined in Chinese official documents, traditional security mainly refers to territorial threats requiring a military response; non-traditional involves issues that transcend traditional sovereignty, such as economic problems, environmental threats and natural disasters. The Chinese government sees non-traditional security threats as crucial challenges in the era of globalization. So from this view, China is enhancing its maritime security not only in terms of naval strength but also civilian security responses, such as environmental protection and disaster relief.

Since the 1980s, China has been developing a legal framework for non-traditional maritime se-
China and Japan have reached an agreement on cooperative development in some areas in the East China Sea, and agreed to make it a zone of peace, cooperation and friendship. China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) issued the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea in 2002 that encourages the nations concerned to exercise self-restraint so as to reduce tensions. It was also reported in September 2010 that China and ASEAN have begun discussions to hammer out a stronger code of conduct aimed at preventing South China Sea territorial disputes from erupting into armed conflict. Besides ongoing talks with its neighbors, China also consults with the US on maritime security confidence-building measures. There is a bilateral Military Maritime Consultative Agreement mechanism between the two countries, and current maritime talks are a continuation of contacts begun in the late 1990s, although subject to frequent interruptions due to political tensions.

International maritime security for China is not only meant to reduce tensions with other countries but also to contribute to the overall security of international waterways. In Chinese government documents on strategies for national maritime defense and security, international cooperation is always put forward as a vital component. Because China views the oceans as a shared public resource, no country can dominate the seas or solve complex marine affairs by itself. In recent years, the PLA Navy is also becoming more open to the international community. Visits by Chinese warships to foreign countries and joint naval exercises now happen frequently, and the PLA Navy has even cooperated on escort missions in the seas off Somalia.

The Four Co-ordinations are not an easy task because of the complex national and international situation, but the Chinese government is doing its best to confront the obstacles it faces and to pursue its goal of living with a “harmonious ocean” for its own people and the international community.

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