Navies are anchors of seafaring nations holding them securely in the chaotic currents of history. Any nation with a coastline facing the sea that is without a navy is subjected to the storms that history brings. Looking back at all the great nations, empires, and civilizations, most used a strong navy to achieve their power. Even though it is hard to imagine, building ships and training sailors is a monumental effort, and it is tempting to believe navies are always ready and available when needed.

The perception that ships and sailors have and always will be sailing the oceans defending their waters and coastlines does not account for the complex milieu of building and maintaining a navy, most especially if a fledging nation doesn’t even have a navy. Toshi Yoshihara’s excellent book, “Mao’s Army Goes to Sea: The Island Campaigns and the Founding of China’s Navy” dives into this little researched but crucial subject by articulating the challenges of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in creating a navy “ex nihilo” in the final years of the Chinese Civil War from 1948 - 1950.

This book is essential for all scholars and military strategists attempting to understand the current condition of the Chinese navy, because it is one of the few that exclusively explores its origins, earliest failures, and successes in detail. Yoshihara writes with incredible clarity and precision how the Chinese navy was born, the birthing pains that came with it, and its earliest successes that gave confidence to the fledging People’s Republic of China and its leaders that in fact it could defend its new borders and secure its sovereignty.

As most 19th century American history scholars can attest, a civil war can be brutal because it is so personal. The Chinese Civil War was no different. Yoshihara puts the reader into the very heart of the Chinese Civil War where the reader can almost feel the deeply intimate abhorrence the Communists and Nationalists had for each other, but also portraying their close relations, all in the context of building a navy from nothing within a year.

Most research of the Chinese Civil War focuses on the land campaigns waged by the Communists that pushed the Kuomintang (KMT) Nationalists from the mainland to the periphery islands and ultimately Taiwan. However, much of the same research skips over a crucial step that connects the Civil War with the establishment of the status quo of the founding of the People’s Republic of China on the mainland and the securing of Taiwan by the Nationalists in 1949. The war did not end with both sides securing their respective corners; it only changed formats from primarily a land war waged by armies to a naval / amphibious war where the waters and islands of the East and South China Seas took center stage and Yoshihara places this into focus.

It is one thing to sow rebellion, it is another to lead a government with all the institutions required: It is one thing for a revolutionary group to create an army, it is entirely another matter to create a navy. Against all odds, the rebelling Communists came to understand this when they pushed the established Nationalist government out of power. This is when the CCP realized its success became a problem. Yoshihara’s comprehensive research fills in the gaps detailing the
efforts of the CCP to build a navy and develop amphibious assault capabilities to defeat and seize Nationalist outposts on the periphery islands of the mainland forced by extraordinary circumstances.

Yoshihara utilizes the best available primary sources from the CCP and KMT to describe with clear and precise language the creation of the PLAN Navy but does so with a healthy dose of skepticism required of a scholar. He recognizes that the sources used have a revisionist quality to them and cuts through the fog to portray a complex depiction of intermingling conditions necessity for both the KMT and CCP to survive. The KMT held most of the naval assets but its hope of victory diminished everyday with each new heavy loss, whereas the CCP was gaining ground by the day but had no naval assets or expertise to complete the victory.

Yoshihara soundly explains how pragmatism and self-interest carried the day with KMT naval officers defecting to the CCP and taking their naval assets with them. Subsequently the CCP accepted the former KMT into their ranks despite the political and ideological differences. Yoshihara uses this small example to highlight that the CCP’s origin myths are not as pure as revisionist historians would have one to believe, but it also shows that current Chinese military leaders do have a precedent to rely upon if they need a pragmatic solution to any contemporary vexing problem instead of defaulting to party ideology for answers.

The author clearly articulates the earliest issues of the PLAN Navy that any navalist would sympathize with, i.e., the lack of properly trained manning, lack of ships, and lack of capacity. However, the incredible feat of getting a navy into operation was accomplished in just over one year. This was not by their own efforts but with the help of Moscow and KMT defectors. Still, the CCP’s sheer dedication, commitment, and willingness to accept the resources available and make the most of it harkens back to the founding of the United States Navy from practically nothing in the late 18th century. The difference is that the CCP kept firm political control over its navy making it an agent of the Communist Party, whereas the U.S. Navy has fought throughout its history for independence from political influence.

However, Yoshihara does stop short of completely describing why the CCP did not fully commit to a campaign to seize Taiwan when it had momentum. He does briefly state that the advent of the Korean War derailed Mao’s and the CCP’s plans to move on Taiwan but doesn’t explain further. This is an essential chapter of the story that the reader will have to look elsewhere for understanding.

The book concludes by focusing through a modern lens the evolution of the Chinese navy’s force structure alongside the growth of the powerful Chinese maritime shipping industry. Evoking echoes of Alfred Thayer Mahan, Yoshihara paints a direct line from the creation of the Chinese navy to its dominance in maritime shipping which should raise the hairs on the back of any naval strategist.

Toshi Yoshihara’s historical survey of the founding of the Chinese navy is brief but packed with crucial knowledge and is a must read for any China scholar or military strategist who has an eye on the Western Pacific. Chapter by chapter, Yoshihara gives the reader valuable insight into the motivation behind the CCP pursing its agenda to ultimately defeat the Nationalists and secure its own sovereignty, all within the naval and maritime context. Most Westerners see this motivation as merely history and do not truly appreciate the viewpoint of the CCP. To ensure we do everything we can to protect our friends, allies, and interests around the
world to maintain the status quo, we must first understand the motivation and history and Yoshihara gives us a tool to do this. Yoshihara writes that the early CCP learned from the U.S. strategy in World War II to successfully complete their own island-hopping campaigns to defeat the Nationalists. Now it is our turn to learn from them so that we can accomplish keeping the peace for as long as possible.

Toshi Yoshihara is a Senior Fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments and is an adjunct professor at the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University. He previously was the inaugural John A. van Beuren Chair of Asia-Pacific Studies and a Professor of Strategy at the U.S. Naval War College. Dr. Yoshihara has also served as a visiting professor at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University; the School of Global Policy and Strategy, University of California, San Diego; and the Strategy Department of the U.S. Air War College. His previous books include (with James R. Holmes), the second edition of Red Star over the Pacific: China’s Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy (Naval Institute Press, 2019).

E.J. Prevoznak is a staff chaplain at Naval Station Great Lakes, IL.