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## China's Xi says navy should become world class

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Chinese President Xi Jinping on Wednesday called for greater efforts to make the country's navy a world class one, strong in operations on, below and above the surface, as it steps up its ability to project power far from its shores.

China's navy has taken an increasingly prominent role in recent months, with a rising star admiral taking command, its first aircraft carrier sailing around self-ruled Taiwan and a new aircraft carrier launched last month.

With President Donald Trump promising a US shipbuilding spree and unnerving Beijing with his unpredictable approach on hot button issues including Taiwan and the South and East China Seas, China is pushing to narrow the gap with the U.S. Navy.

Inspecting navy headquarters, Xi said the navy should "aim for the top ranks in the world", the Defence Ministry said in a statement about his visit.

"Building a strong and modern navy is an important mark of a top ranking global military," the ministry paraphrased Xi as saying.

It is a "pivot" for building the nation into a great maritime power, he said.

"Innovation is key to improving and transforming the navy," Xi said.

The navy should be able to operate far out at sea, combining the strength of forces on the water, under it and in the skies above, he added.

Xi said he had personally been paying close attention to naval missions, the ministry said.

"You continuously fight wind and waves. Thanks for your hard work!" state news agency Xinhua quoted Xi as saying.

China's military ambitions, including taking a more assertive stance in the disputed South China Sea such as by building artificial islands and ramping up defense spending, have long rattled its neighbors.

Beijing this year initially failed to release its defense budget on the opening day of parliament in March as it has done in previous years. It said a day later that it would rise by 7 percent to 1.044 trillion yuan (\$151.6 billion).

China's defense spending amounts to only about a quarter of the U.S. defense budget, although many experts believe its actual spending on the military to be higher than the official figure. It does not give a breakdown for its spending.

The government denies China is a military threat to anyone, saying its spending is for defensive purposes only.