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# China's Nuclear Submarine Accident

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# China's Nuclear Submarine Accident

## Abstract

This paper delves into the disappearance of a Chinese nuclear submarine '093-417' which had allegedly crashed down. Different sources have reported conflicting information regarding the location of the accident, with some stating it occurred in the Taiwan Strait and others in the Yellow Sea. Details regarding the functionalities and offensive capabilities of the submarine in question have also been explored. Furthermore, the paper reiterates the responses to the rumours from different official sources. Moreover, the two different reports have been compared and the importance of each area to the respective nation has been undertaken as well.

The unverified reports of an alleged accident involving a Chinese nuclear submarine in the Taiwan Strait on August 21, which purportedly resulted in the loss of 55 crew, and sparked significant interest and concern. As of now, these reports remain unsubstantiated by any official government or security force, and are mere rumours and fodder for speculation within the international community. The genesis of these rumours can be traced back to an anti-Chinese Communist Party activist's social media account, known as Lude Media, which disseminated the information on the social media platform X. According to this source, while on a mission in the Taiwan Strait, a Communist Party of China Type 093 nuclear-powered attack submarine was involved in an accident. However, it is crucial to emphasize that these claims have not been independently verified or validated by any credible authorities.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Firm, M., & Chan, E. (2023, October 9). Did the Chinese submarine accident happen? Retrieved from Radio Free Asia: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/china-submarine-deaths-10092023041959.html>

## The Shang-Class Submarine

To provide further context, a Chinese Navy Type 093, or Shang-class, refers to a nuclear powered attack submarine in the Chinese PLA Navy's arsenal. '093-417' is a unique identification in this context, with '093' denoting the submarine type as Shang-class and '417' representing its specific hull number. According to the most recent information, China has six Shang-class submarines in its fleet. The Shang-class submarines stand out for their high specifications and innovative capabilities. Submarines of this type are normally 107 metres long, 11 metres wide, and 7.5 metres tall. This scale is essential to accommodate the complicated technology and equipment required for nuclear propulsion, as well as the personal required to operate these vessels effectively. The Shang-class submarines have a submerged displacement of more than 6,000 tonnes and can seat a crew of roughly 100 sailors.<sup>2</sup>

The nuclear propulsion system represents a salient and distinguishing feature of Shang-class submarines. In stark contrast to conventional diesel-electric counterparts, nuclear-powered submarines derive their motive power from nuclear reactors, which produce steam for propulsion. This technological divergence bestows several distinct advantages, notably an expanded operational range and increased endurance. The consequential ability to maintain protracted submerged operations, devoid of the requisite surfacing or snorkelling for the purpose of replenishing air and power resources, confers upon these submarines a discernible strategic advantage. The pressurised water nuclear reactor engine's propulsion unit drives a single shaft with a seven-blade propeller. Furthermore, Shang-class submarines are outfitted with a suite of advanced armaments and sensor systems, emblematic of their multifaceted operational versatility.<sup>3</sup> The complexity and versatility of the Shang-class submarines highlight the supreme power of the PLA Navy

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Naval Technology. (2023, February 17). *Shang-Class Nuclear-Powered Attack Submarines, China*. Retrieved from Naval Technology: <https://www.naval-technology.com/projects/shang-class-nuclear-powered-attack-submarines-china/?cf-view>

and the invaluable part it plays in China's arsenal. These submarines are also a classic display of China's overpowering technological prowess that has been developing, more and more in the recent years.

It is anticipated that the most recent iterations of the submarines will be equipped with variants of the PLA Navy's domestic submarine-launched YJ-I8 anti-ship cruise missiles. A variant of the submarine also contains a towed array deployment tube, which is believed to house a missile vertical launch system capable of launching the YJ-I8 missile, the Yu-8 rocket-propelled torpedo, and the CJ-10 Land Attack Cruise Missile. The submarine can also be armed with a total of 6 533-mm bow-mounted torpedo tubes, to attack ships and submarines that it deems hostile. The tubes are capable of transporting wake-homing, anti-submarine, and anti-surface torpedoes. The submarine's carrying capacity is 20 torpedoes or 36 mines.<sup>4</sup> These submarines are meticulously engineered to fulfil principal roles in anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare, and intelligence gathering. This diversified weaponry enhances their adaptability and augments their combat capabilities significantly. All the critical weaponry and technology present within the submarine showcases China's dominance in the technological sector. The submarine provides China with splendid manoeuvring capabilities that can rapidly adapt to its surroundings and according to the kind of foes it finds itself facing. It is an invaluable asset to the PLA Navy.

## Chinese and Taiwanese Responses

Amid escalating tensions and the increasing risk of unfounded rumours escalating the situation, the Ministry of National Defence in Taiwan took proactive steps to address the matter and counteract the speculations surrounding the alleged crash of the Chinese nuclear submarine in the Taiwan Strait. On August 22, the Taiwanese Ministry of National Defence organized a press conference with the primary objective of refuting these claims and providing a transparent account of the situation. The official spokesperson for the Ministry of National Defence, Sun Li-fang, took the podium during the news conference, and categorically denied the reports suggesting a submarine crash in the Taiwan Strait. During

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

his address to the media, Sun Li-fang reiterated that Taiwan's joint intelligence and surveillance systems had not detected any concrete evidence or indications of a submarine crash either within the Taiwan Strait or in its immediate vicinity. This official statement aimed to quell any misinformation and ensure that the public and international community had access to accurate information regarding the situation at hand.<sup>5</sup>

In a parallel effort to dispel the rumours surrounding the alleged submarine incident, the Chinese Ministry of National defence also issued a statement. In Beijing, Chinese Ministry of National Defence spokesman Wu Qian conducted a news conference where he categorically dismissed the rumours of a submarine crash in the Taiwan Strait, asserting that they are entirely baseless and unsubstantiated. Wu Qian urged the public to exercise discretion and to rely on authoritative and credible sources of information.<sup>6</sup>

Rumours of a submarine disaster in the Taiwan Strait sparked both fear and debate about the potential consequences for regional stability and international ties. Given this context, official comments from Taiwan and China are more than just denials of a specific incident; they serve as diplomatic signals in a bigger geopolitical conflict. During times of uncertainty, these responses emphasise the importance of maintaining control and restraint, as well as responsible communication. Taiwan demonstrated its dedication to transparency and its determination to delivering factual information, especially during times of heightened tension, by holding a press conference to dispel the rumours. The Taiwanese Ministry of National Defence's claim that there was no actual evidence of a submarine collision was intended not merely to dispel rumours, but also to maintain a measured and fact-based discourse.

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<sup>5</sup> Taipei Times. (2023, August 22). Chinese submarine crash rumor unsubstantiated: MND. Retrieved from Taipei Times: <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/08/22/2003805127>

<sup>6</sup> Chenglong, J. (2023, August 31). *Defense Ministry dismisses rumor of sub crash*. Retrieved from China Daily: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202308/31/WS64f074a6a310d2dce4bb3320.html>

## British Reports

However, British media, on 22nd August 2023, had declared that a Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy nuclear submarine '093-417' had gotten caught up in a trap that had initially been intended to entrap the British sub-surface vessels in the Yellow Sea. The UK, citing a report and intelligence had claimed the happening of an onboard accident whilst the submarine had been carrying out a mission in the Yellow Sea on the 21st of August.

The Daily Mail, a renowned British tabloid, was the first to report the riveting and troubling incident. According to the publication, the incident had featured the Chinese submarine that had appeared to have been the victim of complex and unexpected turn of events. The submarine's position was described as an unforeseen result of the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy's sophisticated strategy originally designed to target US and NATO submarines. As per the Daily Mail's account, this incident unfolded when the Chinese submarine inadvertently struck a submerged obstacle consisting of a chain and anchor system. Intriguingly, this is the same method employed by the Chinese PLA Navy to ensnare British submarines, the British media report insinuated that the Chinese submarine had encountered an obstacle intended for foreign naval assets, particularly those of the United States and its allies. The collision with this chain and anchor system had led to a system failure within the Chinese submarine, rendering it incapacitated and submerged for a protracted period.

The consequences of this incident, as reported by the Daily Mail, were catastrophic, resulting in the loss of 55 lives. The cause of these fatalities was attributed to hypoxia, a condition arising from a severe loss of oxygen within the submarine due to the extensive system failure. The casualties included a significant breakdown of ranks within the crew, encompassing 22 officers, 7 officer cadets, 9 petty officers, and 17 sailors. Among the reported casualties was the submarine's captain, Colonel Xue Yong-Peng, who was presumed to be among the deceased. While the Daily Mail's report provided extensive insights into the tragedy, the validity of the submarine's purported disappearance or collision, as well as the death toll, have not been independently validated. Notably, there has been no independent validation or official remarks from the Chinese Defence or Foreign Ministries in response to the British media's assertions.

## Linking the Two Reports

The two different reports underlining the crash of the same submarine vessel at the same dates but at two different geographical locations certainly depicts a greater theme. The reports within the Taiwan Strait highlight the sensitivity between China and Taiwan. The accounts surrounding the incident in the Taiwan Strait highlight the underlying sensitivity that characterises China and Taiwan's relationship. This long-standing conflict stems from historical animosities and territorial disputes, which have worsened by China's uncompromising devotion to the "One China Policy," which maintains Taiwan as an integral part of its territory.

Furthermore, the Taiwan Strait is a particularly combustible flashpoint, with military manoeuvres and geopolitical posturing dominating the landscape. As is apparent today, misinformation and disinformation campaigns have evolved into powerful instruments in modern geopolitics, used by both state and non-state actors to achieve a variety of goals such as creating unrest, diverting attention, and altering perceptions. Given the official denials by credible sources on both sides, it becomes plausible to consider that the reports emanating from the Taiwan Strait may have been a deliberate attempt to propagate misinformation. This could have been orchestrated with the intention of heightening existing tensions between China and Taiwan, leveraging their historical enmity and the divisive "One China Policy."

In contrast, the Yellow Sea incident reports mention the Chinese submarine getting caught up in a trap set by its own country to ensnare British, American, and allied sub-surface vessels, underscoring the broader geopolitical dynamics and the complex interactions between nations. This attempt of the PLA Navy can perhaps be attributed to a attempt to safeguard their territorial interests and assert Chinese presence in the Yellow Sea. The Yellow Sea plays a pivotal role within the context of China's maritime strategy, serving as a fundamental theatre for naval power projection, assertion of territorial claims, and the safeguarding of strategic interests. Within the broader framework of China's maritime strategy, the imperative to establish control over this region is in alignment with its overarching objectives to expand its regional influence and to enforce sovereignty over areas embroiled in territorial disputes.