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DEEP-SEA EXPLORATION

Chinese tackle U.S. record with landmark dive

Submersible attempt comes as UN approves Beijing's plan to search the seabed for polymetallic sulphide deposits

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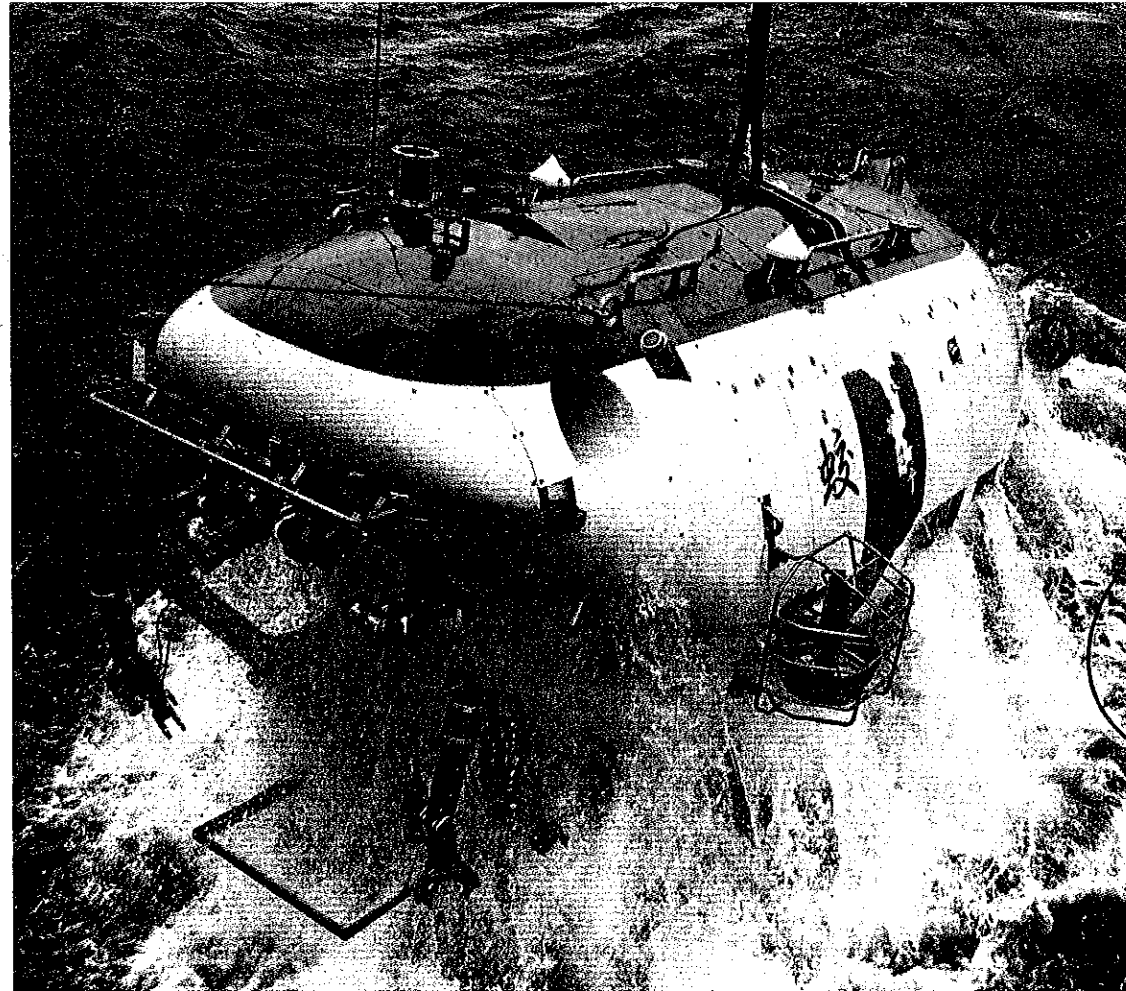
As China's first manned deep-sea craft prepared for a landmark dive to 5,000 metres, surpassing current U.S. capabilities, a United Nations body approved Beijing's plan to explore a swath of ocean floor between Africa and Antarctica for metal deposits.

In the first of four planned dives, the Jiaolong submersible reached 4,027 metres at 5:26 a.m. Thursday, Beijing time, according to China's State Oceanic Administration. State media said it would make another attempt at 5,000 metres early Friday.

The Jiaolong is diving at a site between Hawaii and the North America mainland, where China was granted rights to explore for minerals in 2001 by the International Seabed Authority, a U.N. body that oversees mining in international waters.

ISA, meeting at its headquarters in Jamaica, said it had approved on Tuesday applications from China and Russia – the first from any countries – to explore relatively newly discovered deposits called polymetallic sulphides that form around volcanic vents in ridges on the seabed.

ISA also approved applications



covered vast deposits of rare-earth minerals – used in a variety of high-tech products – on the ocean floor east and west of Hawaii at depths ranging from 3,500 meters to 6,000 meters.

The only other submersibles capable of exploring below 3,500 meters are France's Nautile and Russia's Mir, which planted a Russian flag on the seabed beneath the Arctic in 2007.

Chinese experts hailed the Jiaolong's mission and the ISA's approval as milestones in China's deep-sea exploration program.

"China's economy is developing, and the central government finally realizes that it's not nearly enough only to develop mining on land," said Prof. Wang Pinxian, head of the State Laboratory of Marine Geology at Shanghai Tongji University. "The ocean is rich with resources. So this is a big step that we are starting to pay attention to exploring oceanic mineral exploration."

He added that he was leading a 150 million yuan (\$23-million) research project next year that would use the Jiaolong to explore a volcanic site in the South China Sea, where China is locked in territorial disputes with Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei.