The Place and Role of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and the South China Sea in Chinese Government’s Grand Strategy (from 1949 – now)

By

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Abstract

This paper comprehensively assesses the People Liberation Army – Navy (PLAN)’s role and activities, as well as its behaviour in the South China Sea under China’s grand strategy of Peaceful Rising, in which the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative and the String of Pearls (SoP) strategy are key components. The PLAN’s behaviour in the South, East China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and its rapid naval modernization can only be conceived and understood in the context of the OBOR. The nature of China’s grand strategy is also analyzed by revealing how China adopted, applied and embedded Captain Mahan’s naval theory as the theoretical base for the maritime component of Chinese Grand Strategy. This analysis provides basis to understand future Chinese activities, as well as its rivals, in particular the ASEAN, the U.S.A, Japan and India might react.
List of Acronyms

OBOR - One Belt One Road initiative

SoP - the String of Pearl strategy

PLAN – People’s Liberation Army-Navy (of China)

SLOC – Sea Lines of Communication

A2/AD – Anti-Access/Area Denial strategy

ASCM – Anti-Ship Cruise Missile

AWAC – Airborne Early Warning and Control system

ASBM – Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile

MaRV – Maneuverable Re-entry Vehicle

CCG – China’s Coast Guard

ONI – Office of Naval Intelligence

PAFMM – People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia

USN – United States Navy

C4ISR - Command, Control, Communications, Computer, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance

EMP – Electro-Magnetic Pulse

IOR – Indian Ocean Region

GoA – Gulf of Aden

HoA – Horn of Africa

VLS – Vertical Launch System

CPEC – China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

CNA - Center for Naval Analyses
MOOTW – Military Operations Other Than War

SCS – the South China Sea

ECS – the East China Sea

ADIZ – Air Defense Identification Zone

FONOP – Freedom of Navigation Operations

AMTI – Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative

CSIS – Center for Strategic and International Studies

JMSDF – Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force

Blue Water Navy (force) - A blue-water navy is a maritime force capable of operating globally, essentially across the deep waters of open oceans

Green Water Navy (force) – a naval force that is designed to operate in its nation's littoral zones and has the competency to operate in the open oceans of its surrounding region

Brown Water Navy (force) – a naval force capable of military operations in river or littoral environments

Off-shore Regional Navy – a Green water navy with certain capabilities to project power in certain open ocean regions
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Dedication

To my family, and everyone, who have put their faith in me.
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Introduction

This thesis examines China’s grand strategy, its theoretical base and policy results. It explains how the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative became China’s grand strategy and how the People’s Liberation Army – Navy (PLAN) and its activities are a key component. Overtime, the PLAN transformed from a coastal, brown-water navy into a blue-water force capable of power projection. Its activities in the East and South China Sea, as well as expeditionary task forces in the Indian Ocean, can only be explained under the umbrella of the OBOR initiative.

China’s rise as a regional power in Indo-Pacific is primarily the product of its economic strength. By using its economic advantage, it established the OBOR to create a new trading and commercial network in the Central-Western Asia, with the vision of expanding the network to Europe. China seeks to lead a new economic bloc on the Eurasian continent in order to compete with the United States (U.S) as a new superpower. In East Asia, with its growing military might, the PLAN has become a major force. In terms of capacity and capability, the PLAN is the largest navy in Asia, notwithstanding the U.S Navy (USN), China has used the PLAN to exert itself as a major player in the maritime sphere. The South China Sea (SCS) and East China Sea (ECS) disputes are key operational areas of the PLAN. Apart from these waters, the PLAN has also moved into the Indian Ocean and Africa with the acquisition of key military bases. China’s influence is now felt in the Middle East, East Africa and South Asia.

There have been countless papers, and reports on the rapid development and rise of China onto the world stage. Chinese territorial claims, its objective to become a new superpower in every aspect, and its rapid economic growth have all been carefully examined. M. Taylor Fravel’s report on China, entitled “Shift in Warfare and Party Unity: Explaining China’s Changes in Military Strategy”¹, identifies the motivations behind changes in Chinese strategy, and reveals the circumstances which might lead China to change its national strategy. Based on realist theory, Taylor argues that China is likely to adopt new strategy when it feels vulnerable to its opponents,

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or when it faces internal political disunity. Specifically, Fravel identifies the various iterations of Chinese national strategy between 1949 and 2010. While he explains how and why China adopted various strategies overtime; he does not explain why China spent significant resources to expand its navy, establish oversea bases and conduct activities in distant waters.

Dr. David M. Finkelstein, in “China’s National Military Strategy”\(^2\) examines the scope of Chinese military development, arguing that the Chinese military is a direct political tool of Chinese government, and its development reflects the government’s ambition. In so doing, he examines the evolution of the Chinese military as a whole. However, he does not examine the full scope of Chinese strategy and military development, and his explanation does not fit with the actual strength and activities of the PLAN.

The growth of China’s military is one of the most popular subjects. For example, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) published an insightful report on the technical development of the Chinese military from 1949 to 1994\(^3\). The PLAN accounts for more than 50% of the report’s content but does not explain why China invested heavily in naval forces. The report also does not place the development of the PLAN into any overarching national or grand strategy, or why China prioritised the PLAN.

Roger Cliff, in testimony to the U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission on January 27, 2011\(^4\), points out that Chinese investment in the PLAN is designed to build an Anti Access / Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy and capability, under the label of Active Defense. He relates this strategy as the means to ensure Chinese control of its self-defined territorial waters in the South China Sea (SCS). He links the construction of Chinese outposts in these waters as the means for China to prevail in a maritime conflict over the SCS. However, he fails to place the A2/AD and the position of the SCS within a broader context. In effect, he treats the PLAN’s A2/AD strategy and China’s objectives in the SCS in isolation.


Chinese economic strategy has also been extensively examined. Specifically, since China launched the OBOR, it has become a top concern of the literature in China. However, these concerns have not linked this economic strategy to any bigger strategic considerations. For example, Xiaoyu Pu, an Assistant Professor in Political Science of University of Nevada, in “One Belt, One Road: Visions and Challenges of China’s Geo-economic Strategy” provides a comprehensive analysis on the OBOR. Xiao refers to diplomatic and economic motivations, grand strategic debates and provides a schematic application of the strategy. Xiao argues that the OBOR is an economic strategy based on realist theory aimed to promote Chinese economic strength, with its vision to connect all the partners of the OBOR to the Chinese economy. The objective is to establish a Chinese economic hegemonic zone and contends that it is China’s grand strategy to become a new superpower and to compete with the U.S.

Dr. Xue Gong, a researcher at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, has published a series of analyses on the OBOR. In one piece, “Asymmetric Economy Interdependence and the South China Sea Dispute”, Xue focuses on how the OBOR is funded by Chinese state capital. Xue also links the OBOR to the SCS dispute, arguing that Chinese enterprises under the scheme of the OBOR are gaining influence and are designed to make ASEAN nations economically and politically dependent on China. This has created an advantage for China in the SCS dispute. The ASEAN nations will eventually be coerced to recognise China’s maritime claims. Her research, however, focuses on the economic and political side of the OBOR and the SCS. It does not link the PLAN’s activities to the issues at play.

Overall, the literature on China has looked at economic, military and political aspects of Chinese strategy and behaviour in relative isolation. Whether in terms of the evolution of Chinese military strategy, the growth of the PLAN, the OBOR initiative, or the SCS disputes, little attention is paid to the linkage among these areas of research. This analysis posits that none of these elements can be understood without reference to the others. In other words, Chinese military strategy, the

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evolution of the PLAN, the OBOR and the SCS are part of a strategic whole, or Chinese Grand Strategy.

In order to understand the relationship between the OBOR, the PLAN, and the SCS, this analysis begins with an examination of the concept of grand strategy relative to Chinese policy. Chapter I focuses on the theory of grand strategy and identifies China’s grand strategy. It then looks at China’s OBOR economic initiative and the String of Pearls energy security strategy as a unified plan to create a Chinese hegemonic zone in Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. It also identifies and examines the theoretical roots of the maritime component, drawing extensively on the work of Mahan as adopted by China.

Chapter II examines the PLAN’s evolution in capability, modernization, strategy modifications and its A2/AD strategy in East Asia. In so doing, China relies on its massive navy and sophisticated strategy to deter the USN from interfering in the region, with a long-term vision to keep the US Navy out of the Western Pacific as far as the Marshall Islands. It also demonstrates the evolution of the PLAN operations in Asia and the Indian Ocean.

Chapter III reveals the PLAN’s activities in the South China Sea. Its bases and artificial islands in the Spratly islands are presented. This chapter focuses on China’s geo-political implications and military ambitions in this water; and further explains why it has invested so many resources into these outposts.

Chapter IV concludes the assessment of how the PLAN’s modernization and activities should be reconsidered in a big picture of the OBOR. It also examines how China’s major competitors in the region, ASEAN, Japan, India, and the U.S.A might strategically react.
Chapter One

China’s Grand Strategy

This chapter examines China’s contemporary grand strategy. Central to its grand strategy are three primary components: the One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative, the String of Pearls (SoP) strategy, and the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN). These three combined are key to the core objectives of Chinese Grand Strategy: the protection of the domestic Chinese economy and promotion of China as a superpower on the Eurasian landmass.

This analysis begins with a brief examination of the concept of Grand Strategy as a means to understand China’s contemporary grand strategy. This is followed by an examination of the OBOR and SoP strategy, and their relationship to each other and China’s grand strategy. Finally, through the application of Mahan’s theory of sea power, the key role of the PLAN in the execution of China’s grand strategy is laid out.

China’s Grand Strategy

The word strategy originated from the ancient Greeks as movements and calculations of generals in military affairs. Overtime, the meaning of strategy grew to encompass a wider meaning and application. In the military sphere, according to Liddell Hart, strategy became “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy” 7

In national politics and international relations, strategy generally refers to an overall plan to achieve specific targets over a long-term period by using every resource available. Subsequently, grand strategy emerged in the context of the first and second world wars, when the great powers began to plan their national strategies on a global scale. According to Liddell Hart, the purpose of grand strategy “is to coordinate and direct all the resources of a nation, or band of nations, towards the attainment of the political object of the war.” 8

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Neither strategy nor grand strategy is created in a vacuum, or laboratory. It is shaped by real time political situations, resources, ideology, and the international environment. As one scholar noted “mistakes in operations and tactics can be corrected, but political and strategic mistakes live forever” \(^9\). Strategy is the zenith of a nation’s will and preparation.

A nation creates a grand strategy in order to fulfill or accomplish core objectives, such as a grand strategy to win a war, or a grand strategy to promote the national economy. Once objectives are established, nations or national decision-makers establish guidelines for behaviour and the resources to meet the objectives. Grand strategies, designed to operate as a long-term plan, will vary or change over time relative to success or failure. In politics, grand strategy is a total of all policies, acts, and resource distribution undertaken by a government.

There are many variables that affect a grand strategy. These include geography (size and location), historical experiences, ideology, religion, culture, economic capacity and capability, the organization of government and military institutions, and the processes through which a government makes decisions \(^{10}\).

Regarding China’s grand strategy, there are many debates on whether China has an official and coherent grand strategy. Some scholars argue that China indeed has a conventional grand strategy as much as Western powers \(^{11}\). Others contend that a grand strategy requires coherent diplomatic, political and military moves, and China usually does not act according to what they claim. They state that China’s strategy is simply pragmatic \(^{12}\). However, all scholars agree that China’s grand strategies or pragmatic strategies are rooted in its historical dynasties thousand years ago. They established the concept of tributary system, which dictated how China dealt with international relationships.

The tributary system was adopted from the beginning of the Chinese dynasties. It dictated a hierarchal relationship between China and its neighboring countries, in which China stood at the top of the relationship. The neighboring countries, or local clans were forced to join the system as peripheral kingdoms at the costs of providing tribute. Any neighbour that refused would be

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\(^9\) Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, Alvin Bernstein, The Making of Strategy – Rulers, States, and War, page 3
\(^{10}\) Williamson Murray, MacGregor Knox, Alvin Bernstein, The Making of Strategy – Rulers, States, and War, page 10
\(^{11}\) Lukas K. Danner, China’s Grand Strategy – Contradictory Foreign Policy? (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) page 6
\(^{12}\) Lukas K. Danner, China’s Grand Strategy – Contradictory Foreign Policy? page 6
punished with military force, or simply considered as barbarians. Natural resources, rare flora and fauna species were the primary tributes. Princes and princesses were also obtained as political hostages. The uppermost form of this system was the blessing and acceptance by China of the peripheral kingdoms’ leaders. These leaders were required either first to present themselves before the Chinese emperor to receive their titles or be recognised remotely by an emperor’s messenger. In this way, these regimes were considered legitimate. In case of any internal upheaval or external threat, China would offer diplomatic or military assistance. Finally, the tributary system also entailed the export of Chinese political philosophy, religion, law, culture, and literature to the peripheral kingdoms to create a hegemonic zone. Trade routes among kingdoms were connected, and the ancient Silk Road was the most famous of all.

Unlike Western civilizations that relied on economic, political and security interests to calculate national planning, Chinese civilizations integrated honor as a factor into their strategic considerations. In Chinese culture, the concept of losing face and giving face are paramount. They could overrule other materialistic factors in decision-making. According to L. K. Danner,

“…honor is a main driver for China’s actions on the global stage” and “an important socio-cultural factor that can be enable one to explain and better understand an often-ambivalent behaviours exhibited in China” 13.

At the top of the system, receiving tribute from peripheral kingdoms was considered as a privilege. The emperors saw this as giving face, and respect to inferior people. Losing face, or an insult occurred if someone failed to provide tribute. Each dynasty sought recognition and reputation from the surrounding states and ethnic groups14. To the subjects of a Chinese dynasty, this was the sign of national legitimacy. It indicated whether the regime was a strong. As a result, this enhanced the legitimacy of the emperor. In external affairs, China expected tributaries to value its legitimacy. The emperor’s blessing and provision of royal titles were key practices in the tributary system. As an interdependent network, this ensured the rule of China in East Asia for thousands of years.

13 Lukas K. Danner, China’s Grand Strategy, page 6
14 Lukas K. Danner, China’s Grand Strategy, page 14
The 19th century marked the end of this system, when China faced stronger and modernized Western nations. A backward China was unable to respond to Western technologies. The situation worsened when Japan, which used to be an inferior kingdom within the tributary system, cooperated with Western powers to conquer Chinese territory. Overall, this led to the disintegration of the tribute system in which the peripheral kingdoms were colonized by Russia, France, Great Britain and Japan. Chinese literature regards this era as the ‘Century of Humiliation’; a term rooted in the political atmosphere of China until present time.

Since the birth of communist China in 1949, its government led by Mao Zedong and later Deng Xiaoping paid close attention to preserve the safety and legitimacy of the regime. The intervention in the Korean War and assistance to Vietnam during the Vietnam War were two examples. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping undertook major economic reforms. China abandoned Soviet-style economic planning and began the process of integrating into global economy. It was followed by Deng’s foreign policy doctrine known as “conceal one’s capacities and bide one’s time, keep a low profile” 15. This unofficial strategy focused on three components: protecting Chinese sovereignty, reunifying China (Tibet, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau; Tibet was conquered in the late 1950s, and Hong Kong and Macau were returned to China in 1997) and resolving territorial disputes 16.

During the reign of Hu Jintao and later Xi Jinping, this strategy officially emerged in the 2005 and 2011 White Book as Peaceful Development. This strategy was created during the height of Chinese development, and there were several incidents between China and neighboring nations concerning maritime and territorial disputes. Chinese assertiveness created a worrisome atmosphere in Asia, and peaceful development was meant to express China’s attitude to international relations. This grand strategy concentrated on

“…. following a policy of anti-hegemonism, maintaining an international environment favourable to economic growth in China and avoiding creating the perception that China is a threat to international security” 17

During the economic crisis in 2008, Chinese economy somehow maintained its strength, in contrast to the depressed economies of the Western powers and “a seemingly declining United

15 Lukas K. Danner, China’s Grand Strategy, page 7
16 Ibid., page 8
17 Ibid., page 7
States”\textsuperscript{18}. Chinese national planners felt “less compelled to conceal its strength” and “convincing that the time has come” \textsuperscript{19}. China wanted to payback the ‘Century of Humiliation’ and emerge as the new superpower on the Eurasian landmass. China became assertive and aggressive in border and maritime disputes with Japan and South East Asian nations. The Taiwan question was escalated with a threat of force as a last resort. The PLAN was rapidly modernised on the path to becoming a world class, blue water Navy. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) overtly expressed in its constitution in November 2012 that the “beginning of the new century marks China's entry into the new stage of development of building a moderately prosperous society.” In this new stage, strategic objectives of economic and social development are set to “bring China into a moderately prosperous society” by the time of the Party's centenary in 2021, with a per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) “up to the level of moderately developed countries”, and “realize modernization” by the time of the centenary of the People's Republic of China in 2049” \textsuperscript{20}.

These are the guidelines to return China back to prominence on the world stage after the ‘Century of Humiliation’. In 2012, Xi Jinping restated this vision in the concept of ‘the Chinese Dream’. This concept concentrates on

“…the well-being of individual citizens and thus modifies traditional notions of the primacy of the collective over the individual” and “change the global landscape, which was shaped by Western countries over the past two centuries during industrialization. The new global landscape will be established through international rules and experiences of both developed and emerging countries…” \textsuperscript{21}.

To fulfill this mentioned dream and vision, Chinese government devised the OBOR initiative and the SoP strategy.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., page 8
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., page 8
\textsuperscript{20} Communist Party of China, ‘Full text of constitution of Communist Party of China’, Accessed May 20, 2019
http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014npcandcppcc/2014-03/05/content_17324203.htm
The OBOR initiative is central to the economic objectives of Chinese Grand Strategy to ensure a stable, sustainable, expanding Chinese economy. During the global economic crisis of 2008, the Chinese economy faced difficulty. Exports declined as foreign markets stagnated and domestic production was affected by declining foreign investment. High-profile Chinese economists and government advisors proposed a new approach to sustain Chinese economic strength. Justin Yifu Lin, an economist at Beijing University and former senior vice president of the World Bank proposed a ‘Global Marshall Plan’, to generate sustainable economic growth. Its objective was to extend Chinese economic power to neighboring nations and create peripheral economic zones dependent on the Chinese 22. Wang Jisi, Dean of International Strategic Studies at Beijing University suggested ‘Westward March’ strategy as a counterstrategy to America’s Asian pivot. 23 He argued that China should shift its attention from East Asia and rebalance its geographical priority westward to Central, South Asia and the Middle East 24.

These two proposals formed the core of Chinese grand strategy today. The objectives are to ensure continued Chinese economic growth as a mean to elevate China to superpower status. In September 2013, the President of China, Xi Jinping, first used the term ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ in his talks in Kazakhstan, which implied an economic alliance on land, targeted at Central Asian countries. One month later, the term Maritime Silk Road was mentioned in Indonesia, which aimed

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for a maritime economic alliance, directed towards the members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) 25. In 2016, these plans officially merged into the OBOR Initiative26.

Closely related, the Chinese government generated a grand domestic economic plan in 2012, known as the Two Centenary Goals. The first phase is to be completed in 2021, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Chinese Communist Party. The goal of the first phase is to make China a moderately prosperous society, by doubling its 2010’s GDP figure by 2021. The second phase is to be completed on the anniversary of the establishment of the PRC 27. The second phase is to transform China into a “strong, prosperous, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and modern socialist country” 28.

When it comes to the motivation behind the OBOR, the literature concentrates on its economic side. The OBOR is regarded as an extension of China’s economic strategy. As a function of OBOR, the objective is for the Chinese economy to account for 55% of world’s GNP and affect 50% of the world’s population 29. It is designed as an outlet for Chinese investments, which the domestic market can no longer absorb, dictating access to foreign economies.

28 Lu Ding. China’s “Two Centenary Goals”: Progress and Challenges. Page 07
The OBOR encourages domestic growth by building new infrastructure and facilities, such as industrial zones, harbors, railroad networks, and auxiliary structures. It is calculated to create more jobs and enhance the prosperity of local economies. OBOR is also a part of Xi’s new normal, and designed to change comprehensively China’s economic development. In so doing, it is to transform the current mass production, export-based economy into a sustainable, and innovative one. The OBOR is also linked to expanding the role of the Chinese currency, the Reminbi, via Chinese foreign investment. If this move is realized, China hopes to be the biggest capital exporter.

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in the world. This will facilitate China’s internationalization and deepen regional economic integration under Chinese leadership 32.

Foreign economic relations mirror its domestic plan. Countries, such as Kazakhstan in Central Asia, are now connected to the Chinese rail network. Huge terminals have been built to transfer cargo from trains to trains. The ultimate objective is to link the Chinese rail network to European rail systems and reach as far as the Netherlands. Within this network, interval sites are expected to be built, as industrial complexes, with visions for major cities and new commercial hubs 33.

Apart from trade and commerce, the OBOR opens enormous opportunities for culture and employment exchanges between China and its partners. The OBOR also facilitates the movement of people as well. The railroads between Kazakhstan and China open a new corridor to boost tourism. The OBOR allows free visa entry for all citizens along its routes. Thousands of Chinese tourists visit Kazakhstan every month and make a significant contribution to the local economy. As a result, partner countries are exposed to Chinese culture. Chinese language centers have also opened to meet tourist’ demands 34. In Myanmar, the case is similar. Everyday, Myanmarese and Chinese cross the border to work in joint factories. China provides capital, technology and management, while Myanmar provides low-price labor 35.

A high-speed railway project, which links Kunming, China via Vientiane, Bangkok with Singapore, is also underway. In addition, highways, economic zones, and harbors are planned along this route. In Cambodia, Sihanoukville has been transformed into a huge industrial complex. It is expected to house up to 500 Chinese-owned factories and thousands of accommodation and

35 Helen Chin, Winnie He. Global Sourcing. The Belt and Road Initiative: 65 Countries and Beyond.
recreation facilities. The country’s only deep-water port has also been upgraded by Chinese capital
36. Sihanoukville is now the Chinese OBOR link to South East Asia.

Towards India, a route from China to Pakistan is designed in part to encourage India to join the plan. The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor runs through the disputed Kashmir region of Pakistan and India. The plan is to bypass the dispute and move on to build transportation facilities. In so doing, the investment bank of the OBOR, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, provided funding, especially through disputed areas 37. This is also intended to make India and Pakistan feel obliged and responsible for the safety of the project. It, arguably, undermines differences and brings the countries together.

The primary motive of OBOR investment is to establish special economic zones in a partner country’s strategic locations (ideally a port), upgrade its facilities, construct industrial complexes, and link them with networks of railroads and highways. The nodes are to be connected by ports or land terminals that connect back to China’s cities. To achieve this, China created major financial institutions to support the OBOR. The main sponsor is the China Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Capital from the bank is invested through long-term, low interest loans, with no strings attached, unlike Western capital that ties loans to human rights governance. The Chinese government claims that “the OBOR will promote mutual benefits, create more jobs and increase living standards for people” 38

Domestically, the OBOR is also expected to erase social and economic differences between the advanced coastal cities and rural regions of China. It provides for the flow of ideas, capital and human resource to less developed rural regions. It is also designed to build new industrial complexes to create more jobs, highways, railroads, and bridges to link these zones together. Growth and development are expected, and the living standard of rural citizens is expected to

grow. Related, low performance production systems are being removed and replaced with innovative jobs. The objective is to undertake a change in Chinese society and economic structures.

According to the document jointly published by China’s National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce, the OBOR has more than just economic objectives. Apart from trade, infrastructure and investment, the other two objectives are strictly strategic. Beijing believes the OBOR can expand China’s influence in countries along its routes. In terms of strategy, analysts also contend that the OBOR is potentially China’s response to American hegemony and the pivot to Asia. In so doing, it reflects Mao Zedong’s military thinking, “When the enemy advances, we retreat; and when the enemy retreats, we pursue.” China hopes to enhance relationships with Central Asian countries, while consolidating its position in East Asia region.

Central Asian countries have been the first focus of China’s OBOR. Most of them are landlock and economically underdeveloped following the demise of the Soviet Union. Co-operation with China will open new opportunities for them to develop and reduce Russia’s influence. This region will also be the bridge for China’s penetration into Europe. For example, China has hosted several trade exhibits in Europe to promote the benefits of the OBOR. To the ASEAN, China has already improved diplomatic ties with several countries. Several meetings and conferences have been conducted. China has increased its presence in the Indochina, Singapore and Malaysia. These conferences have been followed with promises of more investment projects in hi-tech

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production, transportation and submarine communication cables. These projects are specifically expected to tighten the Malaysia - China relationship.

In the Indian Ocean and East Africa, China has established a presence in Gwadar-Pakistan, Hambantota-Sri Lanka, and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. Chinese diplomats are also continuing to expand links deep into African continent (Figure 1.2). A huge railway project, which links Tanzania, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda and several neighboring countries, has been proposed and invested in. These railroads connect remote African areas, where various mineral sources are located within coastal East African cities. All of them are built and financed by China. Chinese and local diplomats assert that these projects will make these countries more prosperous.

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45 European Parliament Think Tank. 2016. One Belt, One Road (OBOR): China’s regional integration initiative
46 Alice Ekman, Francoise Nicolas, John Seaman, Gabrielle Desarnaud, Tatiana Kastoueva-Jean, Serif Onur Bahcecik and Clélie Nallet. There years of China’s New Silk Roads – From Words to (Re)action?
48 Alice Ekman, Francoise Nicolas, John Seaman, Gabrielle Desarnaud, Tatiana Kastoueva-Jean, Serif Onur Bahcecik and Clélie Nallet. There years of China’s New Silk Roads – From Words to (Re)action?
The OBOR is considered a game-changing plan for China. The Chinese government’s objective is to generate sustainable domestic growth to increase its domestic legitimacy\(^{50}\). Strong

\(^{49}\) Mamta Badkar, MAP: Here Are All Of The Big Chinese Investments In Africa Since 2010
Accessed April 30, 2019

\(^{50}\) European Parliament Think Tank. 2016. One Belt, One Road (OBOR): China’s regional integration initiative.
GDP growth since the 1990s has been a symbol of an efficient and strong Chinese leadership. The government also fears that economic stagnation, or decline may lead to social unrest, undermining the central role of the party. The OBOR seeks to create millions more jobs for the Chinese people, boost commercial exports, and promote domestic manufacturing. Chinese manufacturing and capital capabilities have accumulated beyond the domestic market’s capacity. The government is also concerned that foreign investment poses a potential threat.

Apart from domestic political motivations, the OBOR helps China generate economic and political leverage over its neighbor countries. As a result, China’s status as an emerging superpower will rise. It will enjoy a stronger voice in international politics and establish a Chinese hegemonic zone, where partner countries orbit around a Chinese core. Many economists argued that the OBOR is similar to the U.S Marshall Plan after the Second World War. It shares the same model; using economic tools to create a base for political hegemony. It helps achieve foreign policy objectives and promote win-win co-operation. Though the Chinese government sends a different message on the nature of the OBOR, many influential scholars perceived it as China’s Grand Strategy. “The OBOR begins with a set of domestic plans and expands into a grand strategy for the Eurasian continent and beyond.” The OBOR is China’s new geo-economic

policy. The OBOR is also designed to compete with Japan in the South East Asian and replace it as the major economic investor in the region.

A key component of the OBOR is the SoP, initiative, even though it is generally treated as distinct. Central to the SoP is Chinese energy security. In 2005, Booz Allen coined the term SoP in his Energy Future in Asian report. He contended that “China would attempt to expand its naval presence throughout the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), by building infrastructure in friendly states in the region”. This SoP will “increase China’s economic, military, diplomatic and political clout in the IOR”. Every port in this ‘String’ represents an important ‘Pearl’, which China plans to secure.

These ports are in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar and the Maldives. China has been building facilities at the port of Gwadar in Pakistan, which is only 240 miles away from the Strait of Hormuz, and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, which is roughly 6 miles away from the major shipping routes of the Indian Ocean. The port of Chittagong, Myanmar is to be the destination point for Middle East oil, which will then be shipped by rail, road or pipeline to Yunnan province. In so doing, it will reduce time and eliminate the risks associated with the Strait of Malacca. In the south of the Indian Ocean, the Maldives, is stuck with a large Chinese debt, and the Chinese have offered to build a major port as the means to retire the debt. Notably, India has intervened and proposed to assist the Maldives.

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62 Ibid, 5-6
65 Ibid, 5-9
It is important to note that the SoP is a term employed by Indian, Pakistani and Western scholars. The Chinese government has never officially employed this term, even though China has increased its presence in these abovementioned locations. They regarded it as part of the OBOR, or the Maritime Silk Road concept.

The SoP primarily focuses on Chinese energy security. The Indian Ocean is one of the most important trade routes in the world. This route links the Middle East, and Africa with Asia. It also connects these regions with Europe via the Mediterranean. It is estimated that more than 50% of the world’s maritime oil trade is transported through the Indian Ocean. China, with its huge economy, recognizes its vulnerability to energy sources. Most of its oil supplies come through traditional sea routes from the Middle East via the Strait of Hormuz, the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Malacca, the South China Sea to China. The route runs through two bottle necks: the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca, which are very vulnerable. In case a conflict occurs, these routes might be threatened and closed.

According to the International Energy Agency’s report in 2012, China consumes about 9.6 million barrel per day of oil. Chinese domestic production accounts for only 44% of total consumption. It is forecasted by BP Energy Outlook that by 2030, China will expand its oil imports to 80%. As such, China is increasingly dependent on imported oil to fuel its domestic energy demand. Thus, oil has become a major Chinese strategic interest. The oil supply routes are under constant surveillance and are dominated by Western powers, which make China feel insecure. The Chinese government is aware that:

“...energy issue and maritime interests [are] vital elements in [the] nation’s economic health... and [thus the Chinese Navy] is tasked with energy security as a mission”.

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70 Ibid, 7.
One of the PLAN’s core missions is linked to energy security, which has created the need for a modernized and capable force. To cope with the situation in the Indian Ocean, the PLAN has changed the scope of its missions. It is “assigned a role in modernizing and expanding China’s energy infrastructure, has also begun to serve as the guarantor of sea trade via naval platforms and base agreements” 71. An article in the Chinese journal Modern Navy asserts that “whoever controls the oil can also control the lifeblood of other countries’ economic development” 72. This, in turn, led PLAN commander, Wu Shengli, and Political Commissar Hu Yanlin to state: “to maintain the safety of the oceanic transportation and the strategic passageway for energy and resources…we must build a powerful navy” 73

Above all, this is where the SoP meets the OBOR. The SoP component is designed to secure a steady flow of energy resources, to ensure a Chinese presence in new markets, and to secure supply routes throughout the Indian Ocean Region.

“Beijing is also interested in the social development of the countries (spreading soft power and influence across the region), which will take part in the String of Pearls and finally, China will certainly try to minimize if not neutralize competition in this region with the String of Pearls.” 74

Brahma Chellaney, professor of strategic studies at New Delhi’s Centre for Policy Research, points out:

“China’s new Silk Road initiative as a repackaging — in more palatable terms — of China’s so-called “string of pearls” strategy, which India views as an attempt to strategically encircle it. “The new Silk Road is just a nice new name for the strategy they’ve been pursuing. They’ve wrapped that strategy in more benign terms. The Chinese dream is pre-eminence in Asia, and this goes to the heart of that dream 75. It’s not just a trade initiative, what China is doing has a strategic element that is increasingly obvious” 76

71 Ibid, 10.
72 Ibid, 10.
73 Ibid, 10.
76 Ibid, 2.
Similarly, Junaid Ashraf identified the link between the SoP and the OBOR. “China is trying to promote its position in the Indian Ocean Region by implementing SoP under the OBOR. The strategic culture of China in the 21st century is influenced by economic growth, trade and maritime security, which would help China to counter the US influence in the Pacific Ocean.” 77

When it came to the OBOR initiative, the Chinese government added economic factors into the SoP and turned it into the Maritime Silk Road. It then combined the Silk Road Economic Belt through Central Asian countries to become a part of the OBOR initiative. The OBOR is a comprehensive, sophisticated plan, which combines economic, political and security essences in one name. China is promoting this plan to assert itself in the world stage as a new superpower. The two pillars are economic capability and naval strength.

**Chinese Maritime Strategy**

Since 1949, Communist China has adopted several national strategies primarily designed to protect its sovereignty and strengthen its political standing at home and abroad. These have changed the way the Chinese military thinks about and conducts war. From the beginning of the revolutionary movement, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) albeit tightly controlled, played a special role in Chinese politics. It is considered by the party, as the ‘right-arm’ of the regime, and an extension of the party and the revolutionary struggle. China has used the PLA as a key means to meet its national objectives. Given the significance of the PLA, and today the rising important of the PLAN in Chinese grand strategy, Mahan’s theory of the relationship between sea power and global power status provides a useful means to understand the Chinese grand strategy. While there is no definite clear evidence that contemporary Chinese naval, military or political elites have directly accessed Mahan’s work in the development of its grand strategy, per se, the long lasting, influential nature of *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660 – 1783* would suggest that Chinese naval elites at least are more than just familiar with Mahan. Moreover, as the bible of the USN, China’s primary challenger for political control over its adjacent waters, one should expect Chinese naval elites in relation to the special role of the PLA in Chinese grand strategy to be equally informed by Mahan’s work.

Mahan was born in 1840 in West Point, New York. In 1856, he attended the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. After graduation, he served on the frigate Congress from 1859 to 1861. During his career in the navy, his work focused on naval warfare. In his aforementioned book, Mahan emphasized the idea of “a strong presence on the seas is one of the biggest factors that helps a country win wars and become an influential world power”. The book became the basis for naval powers in 20th century. He emphasized building a strong navy, whose main task is to destroy an enemy’s fleet. The adjunct’s goal relative to grand strategy is to protect trade routes or sea lines of communications (SLOCs), and establish a global presence, to ensure the prosperity of the nation, and its rise to world power status.

Mahan identifies general conditions that affect sea powers. First, geographical position refers to the natural position of a nation. Second, physical conformation relates to the specific characteristics of a nation’s coastal lines. Third, the extent of territory considers artificial factors. Fourth, a nation’s population provides a measure of the total strength of a nation. Fifth, national character, and sixth, government policy also contributes to national Maritime’s strength. 78

Evidence suggests that Mahan’s general conditions for sea powers was adopted by the Chinese navy. Mahan’s ideas arrived in China at the beginning of the 20th century, following the combat role of Western and Japanese navies in penetrating into China and forcibly imposing unequal, extra territorial control over key seaports and the adjacent hinterland. The arrival of Mahan’s works created “inspiration, discussions, and investigation” among Chinese military officials and intellectuals 79. Influenced by Mahan, the Chinese Qing Empire “paid attention to the sovereignty over islands in order to protect approaches” 80.

Chinese scholars and education elites popularised Mahan’s ideas through school curriculums. This impact was significant as “the Chinese people exhibited unprecedented passion for navy construction”. Chinese citizens donated money for a new navy to protect its adjacent seas. Oversea Chinese people “contributed to organise a Merchant Warship Association with the purpose of establishing a strong merchant fleet to support the navy 81.

78 Captain A. T. Mahan. 1890. The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660 – 1783. See chapter I
80 Sun, Lixin. 2010. Chinese Maritime Concepts
The first Chinese democratic leader, following the collapse of the Qing Empire, Sun Yat-sen, was an enthusiastic embracer of Mahan’s theory. According to Sun Yat-sen:

“Since the world situation changed, the rise or fall of national strength often lay in the sea rather than land, those who possessed great sea power often had powerful national strength. The basic problem of China being repeatedly daunted by other countries was the lack of sea power. By virtue of the advantages of sea power, the western powers seized lands and treasures of China. The oceans did not benefit Chinese and national security; instead, they became the channels by which the western powers invaded China and the Achilles heel of the country. As a result, the chief means to resist invasion was to regain China's sea” 82.

The situation following Mao’s victory in the civil war and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) did not permit any real application of Mahan’s sea power model. Instead, the PRC “conceived of the oceans as natural strategic barriers and advanced the strategy of establishing a coastal defense battlefront 83. The emphasis was to “strengthen defense and consolidate coastal defense and prevent imperialist invasion”84. This strategy, expedient under the prevailing historical conditions, was also, influenced by the traditional Chinese ideas of “paying great attention to land but little to sea” and “land was primary while sea was auxiliary” 85.

Following economic reform in 1978, China became increasingly dependent upon imports and exports for economic growth. The need to protect sea trade became important. This led to a change in maritime strategy from coastal defense to offshore defense. The strategy stressed the development of the navy. It dictated the expansion of the combat operational range of the navy, and the enlargement of a maritime defense perimeter. Chinese interests expanded far beyond the coastal areas. Islands, reefs, sea resources, and SLOC considerations were put into the war plans of the PLAN. Deng Xiaoping, Chinese president at that time, recognised the need to “establish a

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83 Deng Wenjin. 2009. The evolution of Chinese maritime concepts in the era of reforming and opening up—a review taking CPC's second and third collective leaders as core. Research and Education on the History of CPC
84 Deng Wenjin. 2009. The evolution of Chinese maritime concepts in the era of reforming and opening up—a review taking CPC’s second and third collective leaders as core.
strong navy with a modern battle capacity”. He added that “we do not need too much, but it should be refined and really modern” 86.

The geographical position of a state dictates the place of sea power in national grand strategy. An island state relies upon a maritime economy, shipbuilding industry, and an equivalent navy. A peninsular state, depending upon its specific geopolitical situation has choices. If it has a secured land border, and stable continental affairs, then it will likely direct its interests and resources to the sea, and vice-versa. A continental state has little need for a navy and focuses on its continental requirements.

China is a peninsular country, with both land and sea borders. China has 30,017 kilometers of coastline 87 from the Korean peninsular to the South China Sea. It is also surrounded by a 22,117 kilometers land border, adjacent to fourteen countries 88. As a peninsular country, China depends upon the political situation of neighboring countries to decide its policies and security or defence investments. In the case of hostile neighbors on land, borders need to be defended, national resources allocated to their defence, and diplomatic attention to their land neighbors. Land borders are sensitive political issues. Instability within neighbor states, or the threat of invasion poses a direct threat to the state. Moreover, land borders are the locations where trade occurs between states which has significant implication for the national economy and political stability. For example, the historical Silk Road was a key conduct for trade between China and the West.

For China historically, securing its land borders, for economic and security reasons, has been a priority. This is specifically evident from the various land invasions of China over time and the building of the Great Wall. This did not mean that China completely neglected the sea. For example, in the 14th century, a Chinese fleet led by Zhang He sailed across Indian Ocean and reached as far as Africa. Nonetheless, with the threat of land invasion and concomitant absence of a maritime threat until the European arrival in the 19th century, the land received political and investment priority. With it, maritime strength declined.

Similarly, the PRC faced primarily land threats until the end of the Cold War, resulting in the priority of securing its borders and, in so doing, investing in land power. In 1950, China intervened into the Korean War to prevent the UN/US led coalition force from reaching the Chinese border area. In 1951, China invaded Tibet and incorporated it into Chinese territory. In 1962, China fought a short border war with India and occupied some parts of India’s border. A border agreement was reached in 1981 with India. In 1969, the PLA clashed with the Soviet Union on its northern border, which nearly escalated into a full-scale war. It was not until 2004, that China and Russia reached an agreement on the border. In the South, sporadic clashes between Chinese and Vietnamese border patrols began after 1975. They triggered a Chinese invasion in March 1979. The China-Vietnam border was formerly agreed to in 1999.

After being defeated by communists, the Republic of China government retreated to Taiwan. The PRC attempted to launch several campaigns to invade the island during 1950s. Under the cover of the USN, Taiwan was safe and remained separated from China. Nonetheless, the PRC claims Taiwan as its territory, evident in a variety of diplomatic and economic forums, but so far has been unable to realize it politically and militarily. After 2000, China started to normalize its relationship with Taiwan and called for peaceful reunification, albeit military action has not been excluded. Thus, by 1990, all Chinese land border issues were stabilised, resulting in a shift towards the maritime sector.

Physical conformation relates to the specific characteristics of a nation’s coastlines. Key here is the relative location and the relative distance of the coast to neighboring seas or oceans. China’s long coastline faces the Yellow Sea, the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea. The Yellow Sea faces the Korea peninsula. The Southern coastline peers into the South China Sea, similarly. The Eastern section faces the Pacific Ocean.

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For Mahan, the extent of territory focuses on artificial effects, harbors and maritime facilities. China has an extensive coastline, which covers 30,017 kilometers through various latitudes. For China, there are three strategic harbours, which contain major maritime facilities and are the home of the PLAN’s three fleets: the North Sea Fleet, based at Qingdao, Shandong province; the East Sea Fleet, based at Ningbo, Zhejiang province; the South China Sea Fleet, based at Zhanjiang, Guangdong province. (Figure 1.3) Qingdao harbor is located on Shandong peninsular in the North Eastern corner of China and looks out to the Yellow Sea. It is a warm water port, providing year-round access. Ningbo harbor has direct access to the Pacific Ocean. It is only hours from Taiwan in the South and

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Okinawa to the East. The PLAN located its best naval assets here, including its latest models. This is the PLAN’s primary base, where its largest number and most up-to-date assets are deployed.

The port of Zhanjiang is central to the South China Sea dispute. It lies in the South, opposite Hainan Island. The French occupied this base in 1898 and used it as a main commercial port in East Asia. After 1949, it was renovated into a major modern port in the Southern area, which can host ships of up to 50,000 tons. Every ship transiting from the Indian Ocean to the North must pass this base.

In terms of Mahan’s population criterion, China has the largest population in the world, at 1,409,517,397 people in 2017. In terms of population distribution, Chinese population historically was concentrated deep inland, despite a long coastline. However, with the development of China’s industry and economy, more and more Chinese have moved from rural areas to the large cities, most of which are located along the coast.

National character reflects a population’s aptitude towards the sea power. Being a peninsular state, Chinese history contains a mixture of land and sea aptitudes. Hundred years of land wars largely created a strategic culture that focused upon continental lifestyles and warfare. Even so, Chinese strategic culture also has a significant maritime element. China has long been a maritime trading nation. With its coast facing Korea, Japan and the South East Asian kingdoms, Chinese merchantmen traveled extensively in the region. Chinese fishing vessels also

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96 VADM Yoji Koda, JMSDF (Ret.) China’s Blue Water Navy Strategy and its Implications.
97 Anthony H. Cordesman. CSIS. The PLA Navy.
99 OECD. The Silver and White Economy: The Chinese Demographic Challenge.
100 Ray Brooks and Ran Tao. IMF. China’s Labor Market Performance and Challenges
101 Ringmar, Erik. History of International Relations. History of International Relations: China and East Asia.
sailed offshore. They reached as far as Faifo in Dai Viet empire, Malacca\textsuperscript{103}. With these voyages, a sea power’s character instinctively emerged. As stressed by Mahan: “...the tendency to trade, involving of necessity of the production of something to trade with, is the national characteristic most important to the development of sea power...”\textsuperscript{104}

Lastly, the character of the government plays a significant role in sea power. In 1980, Chinese government’s new security plan transformed a land security tradition into a maritime security vision. Chinese navy admiral Liu Huaqing stated: “As the strategic position of the Pacific is becoming more important... and as China is gradually expanding the scale of its maritime development, the Chinese Navy will have to shoulder more and heavier tasks in both peace-time and war ...”\textsuperscript{105} By 1986, China began to implement its new grand plan for a world-class navy. This consisted of three phases\textsuperscript{106}. Up until 2000, the first stage focuses on training and enhancing existing formations, renovation and improvement of its conventional naval vessels in order to deter regional threats and to fight battles quickly and at low risk. From 2001 to 2020, the second stage concentrates on the construction of several light aircraft carriers of 20,000 to 30,000 tons, and purchases of several of warships to supplement the carrier task force in order to improve the strength of the fleet and to bolster the PLAN's offshore combat capability. The objective is to project the PLAN into the Western Pacific and globally with aircraft carriers and high-tech equipment. From 2021 to 2040, the third phase will transform the PLAN into a major sea power with a blue-water capability.

Related, the Chinese government has realised its legitimacy depends upon continuous economic growth. The Chinese economy relies upon exports and imports through maritime transportation. Its energy sources are transported via sea routes from the Middle East, through the Strait of Malacca, and the South China Sea. To protect its lifelines, the PLAN needs to be able to secure this SLOC. To safeguard its interests, China needs to be a sea power.


\textsuperscript{104} Captain A. T. Mahan. 1890. The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660 – 1783. See chapter II


\textsuperscript{106} Srikanth Kondapalli. China’s naval strategy.
In so doing, the government has popularised its maritime requirements and spirit among its citizens through education and propaganda programs. Flows of naval news, and thousands of programs on maritime activities are broadcasted on state media. TV and online streaming videos provide reports of naval exercises. Chinese scholars and naval officials also provide public speeches on maritime issues, naval innovations, sea and territorial disputes. The aim is to heighten national self-esteem and pride among the people.

Looking at the development of Chinese navy from Mahan model, these arguments indicate that the PLAN has close connection to Mahan’s naval theory. China ostensive used Mahan’s model to build its contemporary naval force and national strategy. While arguably built under Mahan’s model, the PLAN does not strictly follow Mahan’s strategic naval goal “to destroy other naval forces and ensure a domination over the seas”. Rather, the PLAN has been built to protect Chinese energy security.

According to the International Energy Agency’s report, China consumes about 9.6 million barrels per day of oil in 2012. Chinese domestic production only accounts for 44%. It is forecasted by BP Energy Outlook, in 2030, China will expand its oil imports to 80%. Thus, oil has become a vital strategic interest. The oil supply routes are under constant surveillance and domination by Western powers, which makes China feel insecure. The government is aware that “energy issue and maritime interests are vital elements in the nation’s economic health... and thus the Chinese Navy is tasked with energy security as a mission”.

The PLAN’s core mission of national energy security created the strong momentum for a modernized and capable force. To cope with new situations in the Indian Ocean, the PLAN has also changed the scope of its missions. It has been

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109 Ibid, 15.
110 Ibid, 15.
“...assigned a role in modernizing and expanding China’s energy infrastructure, has also begun to serve as the guarantor of sea trade via naval platforms and base agreements.” 112.

The Chinese journal Modern Navy asserts that “whoever controls the oil can also control the lifeblood of other countries’ economic development”. This sparked the view that was sponsored by PLAN commander Wu Shengli and Political Commissar Hu Yanlin: “to maintain the safety of the oceanic transportation and the strategic passageway for energy and resources...we must build a powerful navy” [113]

This also led to China’s policy to extend the reach of the PLAN into the Indian Ocean. The government decided to send a PLAN anti-piracy taskforce into these waters in January 2009 to directly protect Chinese commercial ships. Subsequently, the decision was made to maintain a permanent PLAN presence in Djibouti, and increase Chinese influence in Pakistan, Sri-Lanka and Bangladesh, in order to upgrade these energy security missions onto a world stage level.

112 Ibid, 15.
113 Shanghai Institute for International Studies. 2014. The Development of the Chinese Navy and Energy Security
Chapter Two
The Evolution of PLAN Strategic Doctrine, Capabilities and Actions

This chapter focuses upon the People’s Liberation Army – Navy (PLAN). It examines the evolution of the PLAN, from a small navy to a modernised force, its force structure, capabilities, and doctrine. It demonstrates how much China has invested in the PLAN to make it a first-class fighting force, and how this force is designed to support China’s grand strategy.

It begins by discussing the evolution of the PLAN as a modern combat force, with a focus on its inventories and doctrine. Then, the evolution of PLAN operations is demonstrated. It shows how the PLAN has developed and moved beyond its adjacent waters. Lastly, the PLAN’s Anti Access / Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy, designed to protect Chinese sovereignty, is examined. In so doing, the PLAN’s doctrine is linked and alongside the evolution of its technological capabilities and recent activities, indicates the PLAN’s key role in Chinese OBOR grand strategy.

The Evolution of PLAN as a Modern Combat Force

At the birth of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), the PLAN was considered an extension of ground forces. Its primary missions were to support ground forces in providing fire support, and transportation. For maritime duty, the PLA leaders designated the Navy as a coastal defense force, or brown water navy. With small vessels inherited from the Japanese and ex-Nationalist forces, this force was only capable of patrolling coastal regions and estuaries. These vessels included coastal-river patrol boats that the Nationalist government acquired before the Second World War, alongside a few Japanese destroyers.

The PLAN itself was formally established in 1950. Its initial growth was a product of direct support from the Soviet Union between 1949 and 1960. The Soviets provided naval advisors, including instructors at the PLAN Naval Academy, vessels, and technological transfers. By 1955,

114 The Office of Naval Intelligence. The People’s Liberation Army Navy – A Modern Navy with Chinese Characteristics
the PLAN established three naval fleets, the North, East, and South Sea fleet. Soviet assistance was decisive in establishing an industrial base to support the PLAN.\textsuperscript{115}

Growing tensions between China and the Soviet Union in the 1960s led to the withdrawal of all Soviet support and advisors. The Chinese government recognized its vulnerability from relying upon a sole source for military technology. While Chinese engineers were able to reverse-engineer most Soviet armaments, they had no capacity to upgrade or modernize capabilities. As a result, the PLAN largely expanded its existing 1950s era inventories. Some larger vessels with greater ranges were built with an anti-ship missile capability, and auxiliary support ships were also developed. Regardless, the PLAN by the 1970s remained a Soviet 1950s navy.

The strategic environment after 1970, however, opened the door to possible military cooperation with the West, as a function of the visit of U.S President Nixon in 1972. The change in military doctrine also revitalized Chinese arm inventories. After a short, fierce war with Vietnam in 1979, the Chinese leadership realized its People’s War strategy, based on “an early war, a large-scale war, and a nuclear war”\textsuperscript{116} was no longer suitable. Instead, the Chinese adopted a posture of People’s War under modern conditions\textsuperscript{117}.

China sought dozens of arms trade agreements with the West, but only a few came to fruition. Based upon its Soviet experience, the Chinese military was sensitive to simply replacing Soviet support with Western. Instead, they developed a two-track strategy, which sought to obtain foreign technologies to deal with short-term needs and opted for technological transfer for indigenous production in the long term\textsuperscript{118}. Weapon systems were purchased in small numbers. The Chinese military tested them under real combat conditions and developed indigenous versions. On the Chinese side, the mass acquisition of Western weapon systems was also problematic, because of the low proportion of well-trained scholars and engineers. Most of them were barred from doing research during the Cultural Revolution in 1960s\textsuperscript{119}. As a result, Chinese lacked the

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\textsuperscript{116} Bates Gill and Taeho Kim. SIPRI Research Report No.11. China’s Arms Acquisitions from Abroad-A Quest for “Superb and Secret Weapon’s
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid, 30.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, 33.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid, 21
\end{flushleft}
capacity to absorb Western technology. In addition, Western technology also proved incompatible with China’s Soviet-standard inventory.

The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident led the West to suspend all military contracts with China. It again had become technological isolated. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, China had a chance to re-establish military links with Russia. Both sides had different motives for co-operation. The Russian needed financial sources to support its government and solve its economic difficulties. During this period, China’s dramatic economic growth led to significant increases in Chinese military spending, which in turn provided the capital to acquire Russian military technology. With the average annual GDP growth between 1980–91 at 9.4%, the Chinese government was able to purchase new arms in mass quantities and to upgrade its military capabilities commensurate with its economic and diplomatic position. Chinese economic growth, as a function of its engagement with the global economies, also raised the importance of maritime trade routes.

The PLAN was put into focus as Chinese economic development required the protection of maritime trade routes. China managed to build new types of destroyers and frigates in the 1990s with some parts from Western contractors. It still needed Russian technologies to upgrade those vessels. Russian radar and electronic systems were purchased. All Soviet era vessels were replaced with new generation ones. Apart from these contracts, China recognised the need for a power projection capability. Submarine, aircraft carrier, and anti-ship missile technologies were the key. China also paid attention to upgrade its anti-submarine warfare capability. New fighters were purchased. Arms contracts with Russia included agreements to co-operate and ensure domestic production. Chinese engineers, technicians and staffs were sent to Russia to absorb new technologies and tactics.

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120 Bates Gill and Taeho Kim. SIPRI Research Report No.11. China’s Arms Acquisitions from Abroad-A Quest for “Superb and Secret Weapon’s
122 Bates Gill and Taeho Kim. SIPRI Research Report No.11. China’s Arms Acquisitions from Abroad-A Quest for “Superb and Secret Weapon’s
123 Ibid, 32.
The Evolution of the PLAN

Since the birth of the PLAN, China relied on Soviet technology and armaments for procurement. Its inventories since 1950s until the outbreak of Tiananmen incident were basically a Soviet navy of the 1960s. In detail, four Gnevny class destroyers, thirteen submarines, eight large patrol vessels, two minesweepers and several torpedo boats were transferred to the PLAN in the 1950s. The Soviet Union also provided naval parts and machines, and several domestic shipyards were upgraded with Russian technology. For armaments, the PLAN was supplied with the Russian anti-ship missile, the Styx. With initial support, the PLAN operated with Russian vessels, while producing its own indigenous versions. By 1960, the PLAN consisted of Russian supplied vessels, some of them assembled in Chinese shipyards.

According to a SIPRI report in 1995,

“…. the PLAN’s inventory comprised 350 surface ships and submarines. It included about 12 submarines directly transferred from the USSR and 19 Whiskey Class submarines assembled in Chinese shipyards, 4 Soviet Gordy Class destroyers, 4 Riga Class frigates (assembled in Chinese shipyards), 20 Kronstadt Class large patrol craft (14 assembled in Chinese shipyards), some 150 patrol craft (most assembled in China) and about 30 minesweepers (some 26 assembled in China)”

With this naval force structure, the PLAN was clearly designated for coastal patrol, anti-amphibious landings and conducting asymmetric naval warfare.

With the normalisation of relations with the US in 1972, a window was opened for the PLAN to acquire Western technologies. It was halted in 1989 after the incidence of Tiananmen Square. The U.S and Western bloc ceased all connection with China which left its inventories obsolete. China sought to resume suspended or cancelled Western military contracts after 1989 but largely failed. Nonetheless, they were able to obtain from the U.S dual-use equipment such as the Cray supercomputer (capable of calculating space, meteorology equations, and simulated nuclear weapon testing), turbofan engines, and an agreement to launch U.S television satellites on Chinese launch vehicles. China also managed to renew some agreements with the EU following

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124 Bates Gill and Taeho Kim. SIPRI Research Report No.11. China’s Arms Acquisitions from Abroad-A Quest for “Superb and Secret Weapon’s
125 Ibid, 34.
126 Ibid, 34.
the Tiananmen incident. For example, China received radars from the United Kingdom, diesel marine engines from Germany, and helicopters plus missile technologies from France. China also was able to acquire aircraft technologies, tanks and armored vehicles upgrade kits, and radar components from Israel. 127

After the end of Cold War, China returned to Russia to renovate its aged naval arsenal. Its new naval strategy, active defense, dictated future arms acquisitions and developments. The PLAN’s first Anti-Ship Cruise Missile (ASCM) possessed was the Soviet Styx missiles (SY-1 under the Chinese term). They came with Soviet supplied missile patrol boats as standard armaments. After Sino-Soviet split, China produced its own version, the SY-2. It was followed by series of HY, C types and their current successor, the YJ type missiles. The YJ models are the most common ASCM in the PLAN’s arsenal. They are widely employed on surface vessels, submarines, air fighters and long-range bombers. Apart from the domestically built ASCM, the PLAN also acquired Russian-made ASCM SS-N-22, which are the main armaments of four Russian-built Sovremenny class destroyers.

The PLAN also developed several ways to enhance its ASCM’s capabilities. Most notably was the procurement of indigenous Airborne Early Warning and Control (AWAC) systems. The KJ-2000 planes procured in 2003 were first of their type in the PLAN’s inventory. These planes provide better guidance, and command-control capabilities 128. China has also been working on a ballistic missile platform to counter USN aircraft carriers from a very long range.

The DF-21D is the first Chinese Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile (ASBM). It is a “theater-range ballistic missile equipped with a maneuverable re-entry vehicle (MaRV) designed to hit moving ships at sea” 129. It is potentially able to destroy an aircraft carrier as far as 1500 kilometers away. Its successor, the DF-26, has a longer range with the capability to “conduct conventional and nuclear precision strikes against ground targets and conventional strikes against naval targets in the western Pacific Ocean” 130. Chinese ASBMs are supported by broad area maritime surveillance

127 Bates Gill and Taeho Kim. SIPRI Research Report No.11. China’s Arms Acquisitions from Abroad—A Quest for “Superb and Secret Weapon’s
129 Ibid, 40.
130 Ibid, 40.
platforms. China is also working on a hypersonic glide vehicle that “if incorporated into Chinese ASBMs, could make Chinese ASBMs more difficult to intercept 131.

Alongside its A2/AD missile capabilities, the PLAN has invested in a submarine force. China regards its submarine force as a critical element of regional deterrence to conduct counter-intervention against a modern adversary. A report from US Congressional Research Service stated:

“The large, but poorly equipped [submarine] force of the 1980s has given way to a more modern submarine force, optimized primarily for regional anti-surface warfare missions near major sea lines of communication” 132.

During the 1990s, the PLAN purchased 12 Kilo-class submarines from Russia and developed its own Yuan class diesel electric submarine. Apart from these diesel-electric submarines, several new Jin class nuclear-powered-ballistic submarines and Shang class nuclear-powered attack submarines were procured. All submarines have been upgraded with the newest indigenous acoustic quieting technologies. They also equipped with long-range missiles that possess capabilities to attack vessels and land bases over the horizon 133. (Table 2.1)

China’s first aircraft carrier, a former Soviet carrier, the Liaoning was commissioned in 2012. A Chinese businessman bought its hull from Ukraine in 1998 and planned to create a floating casino. It was then transferred to the PLAN and refurbished by a domestic shipyard 134. Its second one, an indigenous version of the Varyag, was completed in April 2017. It is reported that China has already constructed a third aircraft carrier. It is expected to field four to six aircraft carriers in the future 135.

131 Ibid, 41.
133 Ibid, 40.
135 Ibid, 45.
Table 2.1

The PLAN’s Submarine Fleet Procurement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Jin SSBN</th>
<th>Shang SSN</th>
<th>Kilo SS (Russian-made)</th>
<th>Ming (Type 093/093A) SS</th>
<th>Song (Type 039/039G) SS</th>
<th>Yuan (Type 039A/B/C) SS</th>
<th>Qing (Type 032) SS</th>
<th>Annual total for all types shown</th>
<th>Cumulative total for all types shown</th>
<th>Cumulative total for modern attack boats</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>2a</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>2001</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
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<td>52</td>
<td>39</td>
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<td>2015</td>
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<td>55</td>
<td>41</td>
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<td>2016</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>57</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IHS Jane’s Fighting Ships 2017-2018, and (for Ming class) previous editions.
After a decade of modernization, the PLAN put the Liaoning into service as a training carrier. The U. S’s Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) revealed:

“...full integration of a carrier air regiment remains several years in the future, but remarkable progress has been made already,” 136 “it will take several years before Chinese carrier-based air regiments are operational” 137 “...”

The second aircraft carrier, Type 001A, which is an indigenous copy of the Liaoning, is currently under sea trials. The Chinese claim it has new improvements and capacity to house up to 35 carrier-based fighters, while the Liaoning has only 24 fighters 138.

The third aircraft carrier, the Type 002, has been under construction since 2015. It is reported to be a bigger version, with a nuclear engine. It will be equipped with an electromagnetic catapult system. A bigger vessel means it can carry more fuel, for aircraft, and can sustain longer voyages. This is key to “China’s ambition to transform its navy into a blue-water force by the middle of next decade”139.

China produced the J-15 as a carrier-based aircraft to pair with the Liaoning. The J-15 was a domestic design of the Russian-built Su-33 fighter. The J-15 is claimed to have a range up to 1,200 km. Its capability is limited by pairing with the Liaoning, since the ship only has sky jump take-off platform. The sky-jump platform cannot provide as much air speed as a catapult system, thus reducing the fighter payload 140. China has also developed new generations of carrier-based fighter to replace the J-15s. It is mentioned that

“...China needs to develop the new fighter jet as it plans to create at least four aircraft carrier groups to fulfil its global navy ambitions and defend its growing overseas interests” 141.

136 Ibid, 44.
137 Ibid, 45.
138 Ibid, 45.
139 Ibid, 46
141 Ibid, 47.
In February 2017, a report claimed that China could be working on a carrier-based airborne early warning and control aircraft, like the U. S’s E-2 early warning and control aircraft. A press report in April 2018 stated that China is also developing carrier-based unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) \(^{142}\).

China has also spent huge efforts to replace and procure new types of surface vessels. Most of them are destroyers, frigates and corvettes. These vessels are equipped with latest armaments as well as indigenous radar-electronic systems. The purchase of four Sovremenny class destroyers from Russia in 1990s upgraded the technological level of the PLAN’s surface fleet \(^{143}\). These new destroyers allowed the PLAN to reach a new material level of a offshore-regional navy (green-water).

To fill the gap in the new force structure, the PLAN procured six new indigenous destroyers, and four domestic frigates since the early 1990s. The Luyang III destroyers are armed with radar technology, comparable to the U. S’s Aegis system \(^{144}\). For the frigates, the new Jiangkai II (Type 054A) has many improved features in hull designs and systems, including an anti-aircraft warfare capability. The Type 054A is now the backbone of the PLAN’s frigate force, with total 30 ships expected \(^{145}\). China also has been working on a New Renhai (Type 055), large destroyer with displacement between 10,000 and 13,000 tons. A Chinese expert at the PLA Naval University of Engineering revealed that “it will be a super-destroyer.” \(^{146}\). A U.S report categorized it as a cruiser, and China is the only country at the moment procuring cruisers. It is planned to carry many types of indigenous weapons in large quantity \(^{147}\).

The PLAN has also procured a great number of new corvettes. The Type 056 corvette is the most numerous type of vessel in the PLAN. The IHS Jane’s fighting ships, 2017-2018, states that “the first 8 ships were commissioned into service in 2013, followed by 10 more in 2014, 5 more in 2015, 7 more in 2016, and 11 more projected for 2017, for a projected total of 41 through

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\(^{142}\) Ibid, 47.  
\(^{143}\) Ibid, 35.  
\(^{146}\) Ibid, 34.  
\(^{147}\) Ibid, 35.
2017, and a fleet of 60 new Type 056 will replace old vessels such as the Jianghu-class frigate and smaller fast attack craft” \(^{148}\). These corvettes provide versatility for littoral warfare and anti-submarine warfare and are suitable to operate in the South China Sea and East China Sea. These corvettes are designed to maintain a combat presence over the short-term while possessing decent anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare capabilities. They also have a quantity advantage with a maximum of 60 in by 2018.\(^{149}\)

### Table 2.2

**The PLAN’s Surface Vessels 1991 - 2018** \(^{150}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Type of surface vessels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Corvettes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>&gt;41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2013, the Chinese government merged its non-PLAN maritime agencies into the China Coast Guard (CCG). In the disputes in the South and East China Seas, the CCG is the main law enforcement arm of China. CCG vessels are used to “enforce China’s sovereignty claims, patrol, surveillance, anti-smuggling and protect fisheries resources” \(^{151}\). The number of CCG vessels are rising each year. According to the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI), the Chinese CCG has undergone significant modernization, both in size and capability. It has added 100 new patrol crafts, as well as auxiliary ones. Apart from quantity, these vessels are armed with bigger guns, up to 30mm and are big enough to carry helicopters\(^{152}\).

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\(^{148}\) Ibid, 40.


\(^{151}\) Ibid, 50.

China uses the CCG to maintain its presence in disputed areas, with surveillance and support from the PLAN. In so doing, they can enforce China’s sovereignty claims without necessary provoking a potential conflict. Supporting the CCG is the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM). Under the direct administration of PLA command, this force consists of seafarers or fishermen, who are trained, and equipped to undertake various maritime tasks, such as protecting ordinary fishing vessels, supporting Coast Guard and Naval forces on surveillance, as well as reconnaissance of rivals. These ships, disguised as fishing boats, have harassed and spied on opponent forces. According to reports from Vietnamese Coast Guard and the Filipino Coast Guards, these PAFMM vessels are claimed to have smashed and sunk fishing boats. Sometimes, a concentration of PAFMM vessels is used to bar and block opponent’s coast guard vessels 153.

The PLAN’s Combat Vision

After the economic reform launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, the PLAN acquired significant financial support. In 1986, Naval Commander Liu Huaqing pioneered a shift in PLAN doctrine. The coastal defense strategy was replaced by an offshore defense strategy 154. The new strategy featured the defense of Chinese interests within Chinese maritime territories. It had four objectives. The ability to seize limited sea control in certain areas for a certain time, the ability to defend effectively China’s sea lanes, the ability to fight outside of China’s claimed maritime areas, and finally the ability to implement a credible nuclear deterrent 155.

To fulfill these objectives, the PLAN identified three phases of development. Phase 1 was expected to be achieved by 2000, during which time the PLAN needed to be able to exert control over the maritime territory within the First Island Chain, the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea. Phase 2 is to be achieved by 2020, when the navy’s control is extended out to the Second Island Chain. Phase 3 to be achieved by 2050, is to have the PLAN evolved into a true

global navy. \(^{156}\) (Figure 2.3). The first island chain covers the southern tip of Japan, Taiwan and two islands in the South China Sea. The second island chain reaches as far as the main island of Japan, the Mariana islands down to Guam, and the archipelago of Malaysia, which is close to Papua New Guinea.

With this new doctrine, the PLAN focused on “modernizing and downsizing the military in light of the new requirements to be able to fight a smaller, more technical type of war” \(^{157}\). This new doctrine resulted in significant changes in force goals. The PLAN “began to recognize the potential economic value of controlling the maritime areas”. The Chinese government also sought to control the rich natural resources, oil and minerals under the adjacent seas. If these resources


could be secured, the Chinese economy will benefit. Chinese energy security will also be ensured in the long-term. This strategy led to confrontation and territorial disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea 158.

The PLAN’s future is directly related to China’s evolution of its people’s war strategy, initially created by Mao Ze Dong during the engagement with Japanese in World War II 159. The core of this strategy is relying on people to fight wars. The idea is to let the enemy invade and conduct a war of attrition. The enemy will be surrounded and defeated by the people. Main regular forces will strike at the right time to achieve a decisive victory. Time is the main factor; it allows the enemy forces to be circled by the growing strength of the PLA. This strategy was applied during the war against the Japanese and the Chinese National forces.

In 1978, Deng re-defined this strategy as people’s war under modern condition. The military shifted from a manpower to a technological concentration 160. This strategy proved itself effective during a series of border skirmishes with Vietnam between 1980 and 1989 in the aftermath of the 1979 Sino-Vietnam War, and ongoing maritime disputes with South East Asian nations.

In 2006, the Chinese Defense White Paper stated "The (Chinese) Navy is … exploring the strategy and tactics of maritime people’s war under modern conditions.” 161 By extending its naval power into the first and second island chains, the PLAN will confront Japanese and U.S naval forces. This requires the PLAN to upgrade its navy from a green to a blue-water force. The gap between the PLAN and the USN is large. In term of aircraft carrier operations, the Chinese navy is five decades behind. Similarly, amphibious landing crafts, surface vessels tactics, strategic submarines, information and space warfare lag far behind the USN. For now, a head-on military confrontation with the U.S would likely lead to a defeat.

161 Ibid, 23.
To offset the USN’s advantages in technology and experience, the Chinese military devised a new defense strategy based upon the idea of People’s War. China’s active defense strategy has several features entailing “defensive operations, self-defense and striking and getting the better of the enemy only after the enemy has started an attack” 162. With this strategy, the PLAN seeks to establish a defensive position in favorable waters and expel the USN. In a broader sense, this strategy is based on traditional motto of “using inferiority to defeat superiority” 163. It contains a series of movements and tactics that resemble guerilla warfare. In the maritime domain, this approach can be understood as using a quick and mobile attack on enemy forces. Submarines, surface ships armed with anti-ship cruise missiles, and mobile land based anti-ship missile (both ballistic and cruise missiles) are key to this strategy. This strategy is reflected in the development of Chinese naval capabilities since 1990s. The PLAN acquired conventional diesel-electric submarines, new frigates, destroyers and land based ballistic anti-ship missile system.

According to the U.S naval strategists, Chinese active defense strategy is defined as an Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy. In 2011, Roger Cliff, a strategist for RAND Corporation contended:

“I should note that, while we in the United States frequently refer to China as having an anti-access strategy, the Chinese military does not think in those terms. […], we could find no instances of the use of a term equivalent to “anti-access” in Chinese military publications, […]. The Chinese term for their approach to this broader challenge is “using inferiority to defeat superiority” (以劣胜优). Chinese doctrinal writings describe a wide range of actions and tactics consistent with how a militarily inferior country might defeat a militarily superior country, however, and many of these are things that we in the United States would regard as anti-access tactics. Thus, although China cannot be said to have an explicit anti-access strategy, their likely strategy for defeating the United States in the event of a conflict contains virtually all of the elements of what we would consider to be an anti-access strategy (plus other things as well)” 164

It is safe to regard Chinese Active Defense as a Chinese-made “Anti-Access/Area Denial” strategy. The implications of this Chinese-made strategy are close to those of any typical A2/AD

strategy. U.S strategists provide several reasons for this strategy. First, China seeks to avoid a direct confrontation with its strongest adversary, the US. Second, China aims to seize the initiative early to give it a strategic advantage. A larger Chinese force will face a smaller USN force at this critical moment. Third, the strategy enables military surprise, employing lightning, unpredictable attacks that the USN in theory will be unable to withstand. Fourth, China possesses the advantage of pre-emption. Fifth, the PLAN plans to strike at strategic targets, US aircraft carriers. Finally, the principle of concentration allows the PLAN to unleash a saturated mass missile attack on the USN, which increases chances of success. 165

The Chinese literature identifies three main ways to carry out the strategy. 166 The first entails “attacks on the bases and platforms from which adversary combat aircraft would operate”. This method focuses on neutralizing as many of the enemy’s aircraft as possible, which can be done in two ways: by destroying airbases and its auxiliary facilities as ammo dumps, fuel tanks, runways, so aircrafts are prevented from taking off, and seizing air dominance, and by eliminating aircrafts per se, or denying enemy from using aircrafts by jamming, hacking, and applying information warfare. It can be done by using strategic bombers, long range cruise or ballistic missiles. Jamming systems will be widely used to block enemy’s surveillance vehicles and satellites.

Second, the strategy requires “attacks on adversary systems and facilities used to transport, supply, and repair and maintain forces in the theater”. Apart from destroying airbase auxiliaries, naval amphibious vessels, support and replenishment ships, and tankers will be targeted to cut the logistic supplies of attacking forces. In the land domain, highways, railroads, pipelines, transport columns, logistic bases and depots will also be attacked. By doing this, the adversary forces (navy, army or air force) will be cut off from reserves and supplies (fuel, spare parts, normal and precision-guided ammunitions). The enemy’s combat effectiveness will be reduced. This can be done with combat aircraft, bombers, or any vehicles that can carry long range precision ammunitions.

Finally, “attacks on adversary systems used to collect, process, and disseminate information for forces in the theater (usually referred to as “command, control, communications, 165 Ibid, 14.
computer, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance” or “C4ISR” systems)” are carried out. The objective is to cripple connections among adversary forces, and prevent enemy forces from navigating, engaging, attacking, and coordinating with friendly forces. The enemy’s command and control systems will be disrupted. The overall combat effectiveness of joint forces will be depreciated. This can be done with stealth aircraft, long range precision ammunitions, electromagnetic pulse weapons (EMP), anti-satellite weapons, jamming-hacking computer systems, cyber-attacks and alike.

Figure 2.4

Potential Chinese Anti-Access Targets

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The Evolution of PLAN Behaviour

The development of China’s economy relies on flows of oil coming through the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean. To ensure this flow, and thus continue growth, China established a new strategic guideline in 1977 that focused on active defense. This remained until the end of Cold War and ended up as “winning local wars under high technology conditions” in 1993, whose opponent was designated as Taiwan. From an army with inland defense thinking, it changed into a force with power-projection capabilities. The PLAN reflected this trend with new armaments and doctrine. China acquired the latest destroyers, frigates and corvettes. The PLAN was also equipped with a power-projection capability asset, an aircraft carrier.

In 2008, China for the first time sent a task force outside of its regional waters, to the Gulf of Aden to counter piracy. Without near-by supply bases, the PLAN initially relied upon replenishment ships to refit and refuel its task forces. Shortly, in order to meet the demand of anti-piracy missions in distant waters, as well as to support the Chinese economy, and expand its political influence, China obtained basing rights in several ports.

This series of naval and port facilities generated many concerns for Indian and Western scholars. It was interpreted as signs of China’s strategic expansion into the Indian Ocean, which Booz Allen (2005) termed the SoP. He contended that “China would attempt to expand its naval presence throughout the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), by building infrastructures in friendly states in the region”. This SoP will “increase China’s economic, military, diplomatic and political clout in the IOR”. Every port in this “String” represents an important “Pearl”, which China planned to secure along the route.

The plan was to secure a series of ports along the Indian Ocean in Djibouti, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar and the Maldives. The SoP is vital to China’s energy security. The

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171 Ibid, 3.
Indian Ocean is one of the most important trade routes of the world. These routes link the Middle East, and Africa with Asia. It also connects these regions with Europe via the Mediterranean. It is calculated that more than 50% of the world’s maritime oil trade is transported through the Indian Ocean. Most of its oil supplies come through traditional sea routes from the Middle East through the Strait of Hormuz, the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Malacca, and the South China Sea. In case a conflict occurs, these routes could be threatened and blocked.

In the Indian Ocean, China is presence is found in access to the Djibouti naval base, and the ports of Gwadar, Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Chittagong in Bangladesh. After years of deploying anti-piracy task forces to the Indian Ocean, China officially opened its first overseas naval base in Djibouti in July 2017. The base consists of a naval port, helicopter bases and accommodation facilities for up to 10,000 personnel. The Chinese government sought this base for logistic support to the PLAN’s anti-piracy task forces in the Gulf of Aden. At the same time, it supports China’s peacekeeping missions in Africa and assists humanitarian operations for overseas Chinese citizens. Currently, it is China’s hub for all operations in Africa and Indian Ocean.

Gwadar port is a key position in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). It is the last point of a network of highways, railways, and pipelines that connect Pakistan and China. This corridor is a component of the overreaching OBOR initiative. China used financial funds under the OBOR to upgrade the port. As a regional maritime hub, it is one of the strategic ports of Pakistan. With the Karachi and Qasim ports in Pakistan old and problematic to upgrade, Gwadar became the key. China invested in new infrastructure worth up to $ 60 billion. The facilities

172 Ibid, 3.
175 Ahmad Saffee, Najam Rafique. Institute of Strategic Studies. 2017. Chinese Naval Base in Djibouti: Possibilities and Implications
178 Ibid, 5.
are expected to house up to 500,000 people and China has not ruled out the possibility of sending a contingent of PLAN marines for internal security. Pakistan has already deployed a security force of 15,000 people to deal with potential threats. A U.S report also claimed that China is about to set up a new airbase in Jiwani, which is in the vicinity of Gwadar. This area also has a Pakistani naval base that could be expanded and used by Chinese forces, both navy and naval air-force 179.

Unlike Gwadar, which resulted from wider Pakistani and Chinese cooperation, Chinese access to Hambantota, Sri Lanka was a deal to settle Sri Lanka’s debts from a Chinese construction loan following the civil war in 2009. Being unable to repay the loans, a $ 1.1 billion deal was signed in July 2017, which gave Chinese the control and development of Hambantota. China assured the Sri Lanka government that Hambantota will only be used for commercial purposes. While being under Chinese control, security for Hambantota will be undertaken the by Sri Lanka Navy 180.

In 2010, China expressed interests to invest in Chittagong port, which lies in the South-East of Bangladesh. The investment is expected to reach $ 9 billion. Like Gwadar in Pakistan, the investment includes an upgraded port facility and networks for transportation that will connect Bangladesh with China via Myanmar by railways, and highways 181. The Bangladeshi government confirmed Chittagong will serve as commercial port and all military activities are prohibited. At the moment, this project is still being debated and negotiated.

Gaining access and in some cases control of these strategic ports in the Indian Ocean as part of the SoP, and larger OBOR, China obtained several strategic benefits. First, these bases serve China’s interests in the region. The base at Djibouti supports China’s anti-piracy deployment,


humanitarian operations, peacekeeping missions, and China’s maritime links to Africa. Next, Gwadar, Hambantota, Chittagong serve as commercial hubs for China exports and intake points for its oil import. Access to Gwadar and Chittagong enable China to bypass the Strait of Malacca choke point.

Second, the SoP provides a safe corridor for the PLAN’s operations in the Indian Ocean. It has multiple replenishment bases. Although Gwadar, Hambantota and Chittagong are commercial ports, they also have facilities to refuel and resupply PLAN’s vessels. As a result, longer deployments make it more likely for the PLAN to seek stronger ties with its local partners. Last, these bases signal China’s presence in the region. They communicate a message of China’s economic and political might. They are also a steppingstone for China to expand and assert its global investments as a new emerging superpower, with capabilities and ambition to create a Chinese-hegemonic zone, in which countries are tied into China and relied on it for prosperity and security.

In December 2008, the Chinese government dispatched a naval taskforce to the Gulf of Aden (GoA). Its mission was to participate in the international anti-piracy campaign led by U.S and NATO. For China, it was the first mission outside its adjacent seas. For the U.S, it was regarded as an indication of China taking a larger military role on the global stage182.

The primary motive behind this decision was to protect Chinese shipping passing through the GoA. With piracy activities reaching 120 confirmed attacks and 43 ships seized by Somalian pirates in 2008 183, and 1200 Chinese ships and forty-three percent of Chinese raw materials and goods passing through the Gulf 184, the decision was clearly defending Chinese national interests. As Wu Shengli, commander of the PLAN, announced: “It’s the first time we go abroad to protect

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182 Dr. Alison A. Kaufman. CAN China Studies. July 2009. China’s Participation in Anti-Piracy Operations off the Horn of Africa: Drivers and Implications

183 Dr. Alison A. Kaufman. CAN China Studies. July 2009. China’s Participation in Anti-Piracy Operations off the Horn of Africa: Drivers and Implications

our strategic interests armed with military force.”  

185. China depends on ensured access to oil from the Middle East passing through the Gulf. It was estimated that 46 percent of the oil imports are from the Middle East and 32 percent from Africa. 186. Chinese energy security relies on the freedom of navigation in this region. The decision was clearly driven by Chinese energy security requirements.

Apart from protecting Chinese economic interests, broader diplomatic motives were at play. As a new power in Asia, China seeks to exert its power, interests and positive image to the world. It also signaled Chinese commitments to international cooperation. As scholars at the CNA indicated, “a desire to enhance international prestige may be one driver for many countries’ participation in anti-piracy operations. Piracy affects the trade and security interests of many nations, and thus participation in Horn of Africa (HoA) anti-piracy operations has become one way for a country to signal both its willingness and its ability to cooperate in issues of international concern.” 187.

Becoming a responsible global actor means taking part in more international activities and being a good-will presence in crisis areas. In answer to Resolution 1851 of the United Nations Security Council, which “encouraged member states to take a more active role in fighting pirates off the Coast of Somalia” 188, a naval task force was assembled to signal Chinese intention: participation in anti-piracy operations is fulfilling an international obligation and have justified their deployment by citing United Nations resolutions in government press releases and on government websites” 189. It is worth noting that while taking part in anti-piracy activities alongside a Western naval coalition, the PLAN decided to carry out its missions unilaterally, rather

than directly within the coalition. As the PLAN Rear Admiral Du Jingchen made clear China would not accept assignments from “other regional organizations or countries”. 190

Participating in the anti-piracy mission was also an occasion to demonstrate and practice naval capabilities. This operation was the first time PLAN’s ships sailed outside Chinese adjacent waters. It demonstrated new Chinese military capabilities. The PLAN deployed its most advanced ships to the Gulf of Aden. The task force usually consisted of two destroyers and one replenishment ship. The destroyers included the Lanzhou-class (Type 52C) and the Guangzhou-class (Type 52B). Equipped with long range anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM), surface to air missiles in a vertical launch system (VLS) and torpedo tubes, they have independent and fleet combat capabilities. One technical journal commented that “these destroyers may also have the capability to transmit information to other ships over data link or satellite communications, […] greatly enhance the effectiveness of the anti-piracy mission […] Each destroyer is also equipped with a Russian-built Kamov Ka-28 helicopter […] greatly expanding coverage for the anti-piracy operations….” 191

The two destroyers were supported and followed by the replenishment ship Weishanhu; the largest of its type in the PLAN fleet. The replenishment ship carries food, water, spare parts, and ammunition for the operations. To maintain strategic endurance, this ship, in turn, was replenished at the port of Aden. It provided the PLAN a “a beneficial trail of logistics support mode by the Chinese Navy in performing military operations other than war (MOOTW) abroad”192

The PLAN task force’s main objective was to escort Chinese ships traveling through the region. The task force adopted similar tactics as the NATO-led coalition. It included patrolling designated areas, responding to distress calls, reconnaissance of suspicious vessels, and repelling pirate vessels. As Rear Admiral Xiao Xinnian, deputy chief of staff of the PLAN shared: “The Chinese naval vessels will generally adopt three methods when performing their escort mission: Upon finding suspicious ships at sea, the Chinese side will first send shipborne helicopters to conduct reconnaissance before sending its naval vessels to approach them. Second, if pirates are engaged in robbery and if our conditions and capabilities permit us to stop them, the Chinese side

190 Ibid, 10.
192 Ibid, 11.
will adopt appropriate measures in light of the circumstances. If the Chinese side encounters unprovoked attacks by pirates, it will resolutely defend itself and ensure its own safety.\textsuperscript{193} By 2015, nineteen rotations of PLAN vessels had occurred.

By 2012, the situation in the GoA changed. The number of pirate attacks decreased. Nonetheless, the PLAN maintained its task force in the region, with certain force-structure modifications. The three-vessel task force was now escorted by a Yuzhao-class amphibious transport dock. This additional ship allowed the PLAN to deploy more helicopters in a campaign. This also allowed the task force to track several ships in many directions at the same time, to expand the scope of reconnaissance missions, and also practice offshore amphibious operations\textsuperscript{194}. The scope of the missions was also expanded. The PLAN began to providing escort for any merchant ship, regardless of nationality. Cooperation with other navies widened, including sharing intelligence information and communicating on the same radio frequency.

As the number of piracy attacks declined, the nature of the PLAN missions changed. The effort spent on counter-piracy decreased. In March 2011, the 7\textsuperscript{th} task force escorted a ferry evacuating Chinese citizens from the Lybian crisis. Ships of 16\textsuperscript{th} task force escorted vessels in charge of conveying Syrian chemical weapons in the Mediterranean. The 17\textsuperscript{th} task force contributed to the search for Malaysian Flight 370. In 2015, the 19\textsuperscript{th} task force was accompanied by a Han-class nuclear submarine, and the PLAN announced deployments with submarines will be a “standard exercise”.\textsuperscript{195}

Overall, the missions clearly demonstrated how the PLAN’s power projection capabilities evolved over each deployment. A matrix study carried out by the French think tank Institut Français des Relations Internationals (IFRI) revealed the contradiction between the duration of operations and the number of ships escorted by task forces at the same period. While the recent task forces spent longer days on missions, the number of escorted ships declined.


After sending nineteen rotations of Escort Task Force to the GoA, the initial objective to escort and protect merchant vessels from pirates faded. In its place, political, economic, and military objectives emerged. They can be summed up in three ways: enhancing Chinese political posture, improving the PLAN’s offshore deployment capability, and protecting Chinese economic interests.

Having a naval presence in the region served two political aims for China. First, it gave a positive Chinese image to the world, China proved itself to be a newly emerging superpower, able to exert its presence beyond its neighborhood. It also demonstrated to other superpower, the U.S, and Europe that China was now ready to bear more responsibilities in world’s affairs. China also demonstrated its ability to protect its citizens and interests abroad. Second, sending naval ships to the region signaled to the world that China is now reaching in far waters to protect its national interests. In addition, the Chinese have laid a foundation for potentially new political relationship.

The ports in the Indian Ocean act as political leverage for the Chinese government. In so doing, Chinese ships can now join in several activities with local governments, such as disaster relief, humanitarian support, anti-terrorism, and enhancing cooperation with partners’ navies.

China relies on oil and materials from Africa and the Middle East. All of them pass through strategic areas as the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden, and the Strait of Malacca. While the PLAN has capabilities to cover the strait of Malacca, the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Aden are more challenging. Nonetheless, any upheaval, or crisis will undermine China’s energy security. The presence of the PLAN near these regions also serves China’s diplomatic purposes. China has established many economic projects in the Indian Ocean and around the East Africa nations. These ships maintain a Chinese presence in the region, where Chinese workers, technicians and investments are situated. In the Lybian crisis, for example, ships from task force assisted and provided escort to Chinese civilian evacuations.

The PLAN’s evolution from a coastal force to a regional navy—with certain power projection capabilities may be understood as the initial steps towards the creation of global capability. Deploying task forces to the Indian Ocean created an opportunity for the PLAN to test its new capabilities over two decades. The anti-piracy missions provided a justified reason to build up long range naval assets like aircraft carriers, amphibious ships, and long-range replenishment ships. Newly built frigates, destroyers and nuclear submarines had a chance to practice in a combat task force. These deployments were real training situations for the PLAN, helping it accumulate experience, test new capabilities, and enhance coordination among task forces and combat fleets.

The PLAN’s anti-piracy missions started as an ordinary escorted mission, which served to protect Chinese merchant ships passing through the region. Through time, the implications of these deployments have changed. The presence of the PLAN in the East Africa, and in the Indian Ocean in general had a wider aim. This switch in Chinese behaviour indicates the PLAN is protecting China’s interests on a bigger scale, under the OBOR initiative.

Alongside the PLAN activities in the Indian Ocean, excluding the SCS discussed in Chapter Three, China has undertaken relatively aggressive actions in the East China Sea (ESC). The Senkaku islands are located in the Eastern sea of China, roughly 300 kilometers from the
Chinese coast and 400 kilometers from Okinawa, Japan. The surrounding area is estimated to contain lucrative natural gas fields and fishing grounds. The islands consist of five islands and three rocks, which are uninhabited. China claimed to discover and manage these islands since the 14th century, while Japan controlled from 1895 until the end of the World War II. Control was then transferred to the U.S and subsequently returned to Japan in 1972 under the Okinawa Reversion Agreement. Since then, Senkaku has been under Japanese administration.

Before the 1970s, China made few territorial claims over the islands. Reports of interaction between two nations were minimal. In 2010, a Chinese fishing boat collided with two Japanese Coast Guard ships near the islands. Japan arrested the Chinese captain, and China retaliated via diplomatic protests and vandalism aimed at Japanese citizens and facilities in China. China also halted the export of rare-earth minerals to Japan.

In 2012, Japan nationalized the islands by purchasing them from the private owner. China retaliated by extending the ban on rare-earth mineral exports to Japan, and the frequency of a Chinese presence near the islands increased. Japanese authorities reported that Chinese Coast Guard ships intruded into Senkaku territorial water 68 times from September to December 2012. The number rose to 188 in 2013, 88 in 2014, 86 in 2015 and 121 in 2016. In 2015, China also started to use armed Coast Guard ships, accompanied by maritime militia vessels. According to the Japanese Coast Guard, Chinese vessels appeared not to violate the rights of innocent passage.

In the aerial domain, the dispute reached a higher level. The frequency of Chinese planes approaching the islands surpassed vessels. In 2013, Japan announced that Chinese aircraft

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regularly conducted surveillance activities and combat patrols of the area at an increasing rate. Japan replied by sending more aircrafts to intercept these flights. (Figure 3.2)

Figure 2.6
Report on Japanese sorties to stop Chinese planes in Senkaku islands

Not only did the number of air intrusion increases, but also their complexity. Several Chinese fighters and long-range bombers flew in squadrons and conducted several maneuver, command-control, and long-range combat exercises with air tankers. In 2013, China unilaterally imposed an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the area of the East China Sea (Figure 3.3), which included the Senkaku islands and overlapped with surrounding countries’ ADIZs. China’s Ministry of National Defense stated regarding the ADIZ; “All aircraft entering the zone must identify themselves to Chinese authorities and are subject to emergency military measures should they fail to abide by the rules governing the ADIZ.”

The Japan Foreign Department responded, noting “deep concern about China’s establishment of such zone and obliging its own rules within the zone,” and commented that it was a “profoundly dangerous acts that unilaterally

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changes the status quo in the East China Sea, escalating the situation, and that may cause unintended consequences in the East China Sea.”

Figure 2.7
Map showing the extent of China’s ADIZ on the East China Sea

The situation at Senkaku islands remains relatively static. China has several tactical and strategic objectives in this dispute. In the maritime domain, using Coast Guard and maritime militia vessels are not new in asserting sovereignty claims. They are also widely used in the SCS to compete with Vietnamese or the Filipino vessels. It is different in the aerial domain. Tactically, from reports by Japanese authorities, China is using this dispute to practice and test its air force. Combat planes fly, cooperate, patrol in mixed squadrons with air tankers, and long-range bombers. From these flights, China may have opportunities to compare and estimate Japanese air force capabilities, sorties per day, surveillance procedures, patrol routines, and technology. The

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203 Ibid, 7.
experience from these flights can be applied into any real conflict scenarios, which China likely hopes to have tactical advantages.

Looking at big picture, this dispute has strategic implications. By keeping the dispute below the level of direct engagement, China is able to establish its territorial claims without provoking a military conflict. By sending ships to these islands, China seeks to create a scenario in which Japan is the aggressor in trying to expel, bully and arrest Chinese vessels. These acts potentially give China an upper hand in diplomatic and media debates. By regularly conducting aerial patrols and setting up the ADIZ, this situation has become the new normal and signal China’s strong presence on the East China Sea. It is consistent with the point raised by Chinese Defense spokesperson, who said “the parties concerned” should “[get] used to such drills”\(^\text{204}\). Above all, these acts reflect grand political thinking of China as a new regional power, seeking domination in East Asia.

Chapter Three

The South China Sea in China’s strategic planning

This chapter explains the strategic significant of the SCS to China’s grand strategy. The behaviour of the PLAN in these waters will be discussed in order to find out the long-term political calculation. This explains how artificial outposts in the Spratly islands can augment a Chinese A2/AD strategy and deter all military activities in the SCS region.

The Strategic Significance of the SCS

China relies on its adjacent seas to maintain its maritime strategic defense space. The coastal areas are also home to China’s major economic centres, which make up large proportion of the Chinese population and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) index. China’s current active defense strategy reflects the significance of its adjacent seas. China depends upon oil and material resources from the Middle East, which transit through the SCS. The PLAN is designated to control this area to protect the flow of imports. They go through the Strait of Malacca and the SCS before reaching Chinese ports.

As a part of its grand strategy, China has tried to reduce its vulnerability by constructing pipelines reaching as far as Myanmar and Pakistan, as a part of the OBOR initiative. These pipelines allow imported oil flow directly to depots on the Chinese mainland and avoid transit through the Strait of Malacca.

The Strait of Malacca is the strategic point south of the SCS. Considered the busiest maritime route in the world, this Strait is of concern to many powers, especially the U.S, Japan,

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Korea, and India. China fears that its energy supply might be controlled by hostile powers. Without enough energy, the Chinese economy would stall, and the regime’s legitimacy threatened.

Beyond the significance of the SCS as a transit route, it is calculated to contain 11 million barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas under the seabed. Most of the potential oil wells are located inside the 9-dash-line. Chinese scholars believe these resources are keys for sustainable economic growth. Potential oil and gas deposits in this water has led to various oil surveys, and domestic and international cooperation projects between Vietnam and Western oil companies, and Chinese as well. These survey expeditions have resulted in clashes between China and the ASEAN nations. China has employed diplomacy and military harassment to prevent any neighboring country from surveying for oil. In 2017, China pressured the Spanish REPSOL oil company to stop cooperating with Vietnam in an oil survey project, while at the same time threatened to attack Vietnam’s positions in the Spratly islands, even though these oil surveys were conducted inside Vietnam’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ).

China and the relevant neighboring nations have agreed on the code of conduct (COC) to deal with the SCS disputes. It signals a willingness of all the partners to put aside disputes and cooperate to harvest resources in the region. The Philippines has already carried out negotiations with Chinese oil firms on co-drilling, while Vietnam has been considering cooperating in areas inside its EEZ, or much closer to its coastal waters.

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206 Frank Umbach. RSIS Commentary. 2017. The South China Sea Disputes: The Energy Dimensions  


As a function of the strategic, economic significance of the SCS, it is considered a key sea line of communication (SLOC). The growth of Chinese economy depends on this SLOC. At the same time, this SLOC is also vital to Japan, South Korea, the U.S and other regional actors. According to Mahan, SLOCs are essential to control, and this explains the PLAN’s investments, strategy and behaviour. If this SLOC is choked by a power, the PLAN will likely intervene to protect Chinese national interests.

From the view of China, the South China Sea’s SLOC has a role in its strategic security. A disruption in these lines will threaten Chinese economy, leading to social unrest, threatening the government’s legitimacy. Protecting this SLOC is the PLAN’s top priority. The entrance to the SLOC is the Strait of Malacca, a narrow water strip between Malaysia and Singapore, and the strategic link between the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. In case of a conflict between China and neighboring countries, like the ASEAN, Japan, South Korea or the U.S, sealing off this SLOC creates a strategic advantage for China. With the development of new naval vessels and artificial islands on the SCS, the ships, planes, long-range missiles of the PLAN are now able to cover all the SCS, including the Strait of Malacca. Invested in an offshore A2/AD strategy, the PLAN can seal the SLOC at the Strait of Malacca and prevent any navy from intervening. This strategy creates a strategic defense zone around China and the SCS, and enables the PLAN to harass and cut off trade.

In a geo-strategic view, the SLOC and chokepoint all contribute to a larger strategic picture. Controlling the SLOC and choke points in the SCS ensure a strategic advantage for China’s geopolitical plan. Maintaining control ensures flows of energy, and material for the Chinese economy.

209 Captain A. T. Mahan. 1890. The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660 – 1783. See chapter I
It protects the legitimacy of Chinese government and the prosperity of China. By establishing artificial islands on the SCS and developing a navy according to an A2/AD strategy, these moves are consistent with the PLAN strategic thinking on “offshore defense”. It dictates that the PLAN avoids fleet to fleet combat. Instead, focused upon protecting the SLOC, and controlling the chokepoints to maintain the strategic initiative, while projecting its power offshore to safeguard national interests. This strategy is coincident with the PLAN’s force structure and training model, and its efforts in building long-range anti-ship missiles as well as aircraft carriers.

This naval orientation is designed to win a flash naval engagement in China’s surrounding waters, with the SCS as the central point. At the same time, it enables the projection of power far from home waters, where the strategic oil supplies are located. The PLAN’s South Sea Fleet is designated to the SCS. The fleet is designed to protect the water and control the Strait of Malacca to maintain a strategic initiative. Aircraft carriers, amphibious ships and marines are already deployed as far as the Indian Ocean, where China’s oil supplies are situated.

**Chinese Activities in the SCS**

In 1974, China seized and consolidated its interests by occupying the Paracel islands from South Vietnam, and several shoals in the Spratly islands from Vietnam in 1988. It issued a map with a 9-dash-line that covered most of the South China Sea and claimed it as historical waters (Figure 3.4). This triggered sovereignty disputes with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), especially Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Taiwan. To consolidate its position in the SCS, China built artificial islands in the Paracel and Spratly islands. Military

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facilities have been built, troops deployed, and Chinese navy vessels regularly patrol these artificial islands \(^{211}\).

**Figure 3.1**

Map of China’s nine dash line in the SCS

According to Dr. Erickson from U.S Naval War College, China uses the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) and the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) vessels to protect these outposts as grey-zone operations, while the PLAN’s vessels handle the conventional operations. The CCG and PAFMM are trained to deal with sovereignty rights protection and preventing foreign fishing boats from fishing in the 9-dash-line water \(^{212}\). By trailing, ramming, firing water cannons, or blocking, they harass and stop vessels from violating China’s sovereignty and water.


\(^{212}\) These vessels formed up a small taskforce traveling in controlled distance. The furthest one is PLAN’s warships, several CCG vessels in the middle and the PMFAA ships take the lead. They patrol the water inside 9-dash-line and
Neighboring fishermen working inside the 9-dash-line water are regularly rammed, and their equipment confiscated and ransomed. These acts provoked dozens of clashes between Chinese forces and the neighboring Coast Guard services of Vietnam and the Philippines. In 2012, China took the Scarborough shoal from the Philippines by using Coast Guard ships. The stand-off ended with the U.S mediation. While the Filipino ships returned, the Chinese Coast Guard refused to withdraw and seized the shoal. This was followed in 2014 HYSY 981 oilrig stand-off between China and Vietnam. The oilrig was deployed 120 nautical miles east of Vietnamese Lyson island, which is well inside Vietnam’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The stand-off continued for months before China withdrew.

The PLAN also conducts military exercises in these waters, regardless of neighboring nations’ objections. In response, these nations retaliate conducting their own military exercises alone (Vietnam), or in co-operation with the Japanese, Indian and U.S navy. The US and its allies deploy ships to the region under the Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) to counter and challenge China’s sovereignty claims. There have been reports of the PLAN’s vessels trailing and intercepting U.S, Japan, and NATO ships. In September 2018, a Chinese destroyer intercepted

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and approached a U.S Navy vessel, the USS Decatur, in “an unsafe and unprofessional maneuver” while the Decatur was patrolling near one of China’s artificial islands\textsuperscript{217}. Overall, the Chinese government has undermined international practices and norms in the region, thus weakening the legitimacy of neighboring nations’ claims in the dispute. These tactics stopped “under-the-red-line” of any conventional navy operations. Nonetheless, they made foreign navies more reluctant to challenge formally Chinese actions. A gap was created, and China was able largely to conduct coercive operations unhindered \textsuperscript{218}.

Since capturing the Paracel and Spratly islands, China has upgraded, and turned these positions into artificial islands. These upgraded locations have strategic military implications. Some of these positions are armed with long-range anti-ship and anti-air missiles, long airstrips for long-range bombers, and massive piers, which can harbor capital ships. (Figure 3.2), Seven artificial islands stand out: Cuarteron Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, Mischief Reef, Gaven Reef, Hughes Reef, and Johnson Reef. The images below and analysis are drawn from reports of the Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), which belongs to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) \textsuperscript{219}.


Figure 3.2

Map of outposts in the Spratly island

Figure 3.3
China’s Artificial Islands in the SCS

Cuateron Reef

Latest satellite image on June 09, 2016

Satellite image taken on December 13, 2014
The aerial images of Cuarteron Reef are somewhat older than all of the other images in the photo set, dating to June 09, 2016. (Figure 3.3) Construction on the smaller four of the seven Spratly outposts appears largely complete, however, so the base looks mostly the same in 2018. Facilities visible include a tall tower housing a sensor/communications facility topped by a radome, completed in early 2016, a lighthouse built in 2015, one of the first buildings constructed on the reef, one of two points defense emplacements completed in 2016, a large administrative building, similar to ones built on Gaven, Hughes, and Johnson Reefs, and second point defense emplacement also completed in 2016.
Fiery Cross Reef

Latest satellite image on November 28, 2017

Satellite image taken on January 22, 2006
The Inquirer aerial photography of Fiery Cross Reef is dated November 28, 2017 and includes a compelling look at the northern portion of the base’s runway and its large communications and signals intelligence facilities. Fiery Cross is the smallest of China’s “Big 3” artificial islands in the Spratlys, but it saw the most construction during 2017 (with work on buildings covering 27 acres, or about 100,000 square meters). The important facilities apparent in the aerial photos include the northern end of the base’s 3,000-meter runway, which was completed in late 2015; hangars to accommodate four combat aircraft. Hangar space for another 20-combat aircraft and four larger hangars, capable of housing bombers, refueling tankers, and large transport aircraft, have been built farther south along the runway. All the hangars were completed in early 2017; a tall tower housing a sensor/communications facility topped by a radome, completed in late 2016, and a field of upright poles erected in 2017. The original notations on the aerial photos identify this only as a communication facility, but it is most likely a high frequency radar array like the one built on Cuarteron Reef two years earlier.
Subi Reef

Latest satellite image on October 10, 2017

Satellite image taken on June 27, 2012
The aerial imagery of Subi Reef is dated October 10, 2017 and includes close looks at facilities on both the northern and southern arms of the base (but not the majority of the airstrip that runs along its western side). Subi has been of particular concern to Manila because of its location just over 12 nautical miles from the main Philippine-occupied feature of Thitu Island. The facilities apparent in the aerial imagery include buried storage facilities, presumed to be for fuel, water, or other base necessities, a sensor/communications facility topped by a radome, mobile shipping crane used to transfer cargo between ships and dock facility. In the satellite image, it can be seen at the middle of the dock next to several ships, while in the Inquirer photo it is at the eastern end of the dock, and one of the four-point defense facilities built around the base in 2016.
Mischief Reef

Latest satellite image on October 30, 2017

Satellite image taken on January 24, 2012
The aerial photos of Mischief Reef are dated December 30, 2017 and focus on the runway and other facilities along the western side of the outpost. Mischief is the largest of China’s artificial islands and the closest to the Philippines. An arbitral tribunal in 2016 ruled that the reef was entirely underwater prior to China’s reclamation and is therefore a piece of the Philippines’ continental shelf. Facilities visible in the aerial imagery include a large sensor/communications facility topped by a radome, completed in 2017, one of the four-point defense facilities built around the base in 2016, three towers housing sensor/communications facilities topped by radomes, completed in 2017, and underground storage tunnels, likely for ammunition and other materiel, built during 2017. In the Inquirer’s photo, the tunnels are already buried, but AMTI’s satellite image shows the tunnels in an earlier, exposed state. Identical buried storage facilities have been constructed at Fiery Cross and Subi Reefs. There is also more underground storage built along the north side of Mischief (and at Fiery Cross and Subi).
Gaven Reefs

Latest satellite image on November 28, 2017

Satellite image taken on September 01, 2007
The Inquirer aerial shot of Gaven Reef was taken on November 28, 2017. Unlike most of the other outposts, all of the point defenses at Gaven are attached to the administrative building, not installed on separate structures. Facilities that can be seen on Gaven Reefs include, a solar panel array constructed in tandem with the administrative building in 2015, the headquarters/administrative center on Gaven Reefs, built in 2015. The octagonal structures jutting out from each corner sport gun emplacements, which are covered up in the aerial Inquirer photos, a communications tower, with accompanying blue radomes. The tower went up in 2015, followed by the radomes in the first half of 2016, and three of six wind turbines on Gaven Reefs (the other three can be seen between the communication tower and administrative building). All six turbines appear to have been erected in 2015.
Hughes Reef

Latest satellite image on November 28, 2017

Satellite image taken on March 12, 2008
The aerial shot of Hughes Reef is also from November 28, 2017. Hughes Reef, like Gaven Reefs, does not have standalone point defense emplacements. The Inquirer photos of Hughes specifically point out one of the gun emplacements jutting off of the administrative building, identifying it as a 100mm/56 caliber gun. Visible facilities include the administrative/headquarters building constructed in 2015, and a communications tower with accompanying blue radomes. The tower went up in 2015 and the radomes were installed by the middle of 2016, and a tall tower with a sensor/communications facility topped by a radome, completed in the same year.
Johnson Reef

Latest satellite image on November 28, 2017

Satellite image taken on January 18, 2012
Like Gaven and Hughes Reefs, the aerial photo of Johnson Reef comes from November 28, 2017. The Inquirer shot provides an excellent angle on the point defense emplacement that highlights the staggered heights of each section of the structure and radome, something difficult to discern from satellite images. Facilities visible on Johnson include a point defense emplacement completed in 2016. The guns on the structure are covered up in the images, a communications tower with accompanying blue radomes. As on Cuarteron, Gaven, and Hughes Reefs, the tower was built in 2015 and the radomes completed in 2016, a solar panel array built in late 2015 or early 2016, and two wind turbines installed in late 2015.
By looking at the Paracel and Spratly islands in a big picture, one factor needs consideration. The map below, also drawn from the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), illustrates the association between the constructions of two islands and China’s strategic maritime planning.

**Figure 3.4**

*Chinese Radar Range in Outposts in the SCS* *(Source: CSIS/AMTI)*

Putting these locations in a strategic view, it shows how much they contribute to the Chinese A2/AD strategy. Figure 3.4 identifies Chinese radar’s coverage from these islands. There
have been several reports of Chinese long-range bombers and anti-ship cruise missiles deployed on the Spratly and Paracel islands. From these bases, the PLAN can cover a large area of the South China Sea, which can threaten any opponents on land and sea.

**Figure 3.5**

**Combat Radius of Chinese Strategic Bombers from the SCS (Source: CSIS/AMTI)**

As shown in Figure 3.5, from bases in the Spratly islands, Chinese H-6 bombers can reach as far as Taiwan, and most of the South China Sea. When they take-off from bases in the Spratly, their expected range is expanded to the Strait of Malacca. The main SLOC from the Indian Ocean to Pacific Ocean is under China’s surveillance. It can use this to exert power and protect its economic-political interests.

China’s artificial islands are strategic outposts for the PLAN in the South China Sea. From these positions, Chinese military planes and vessels can reach every location around the sea, and
the Strait of Malacca. This reinforces the explanation in previous parts on the PLAN’s strategy of offshore defense, using the navy for both A2/AD and power projection. These islands serve as fire bases for A2/AD strategy and supply bases for naval contingents during power-projection missions, and the PLAN’s anti-piracy Task Forces frequently make port visits before and after finishing a deployment in the Horn of Africa, and Indian Ocean.  

These investments and their strategic implications partly explain the dynamic of the PLAN’s aggressiveness in the SCS. More than sovereignty claims and diplomatic debates, the artificial islands serve strategic roles in China’s grand strategy. They are the centerpiece of the China’s A2/AD strategy, which China relies on to protect its economy and to expel any intruders from harming its political stance in the Indo-Pacific region.

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(Accessed on December 2018)
Chapter Four

Conclusion

The thesis comprehensively assessed the PLAN’s role and activities, as well as its behaviour particularly in the SCS, as an element of China’s grand strategy, in which the OBOR initiative is central. Its aggressive behaviour in the South, as well as East China Seas and its rapid naval modernization can only be conceived and understood within the context of the OBOR. The PLAN coherently reflects China’s strategic guidelines and ambitions as a world-class superpower. The PLAN’s relentless modernisation, the procurement of advanced naval armaments and the establishment of new bases in the SCS are driven by its sophisticated A2/AD strategy as a mean to control its adjacent waters, at least out to the first island chain, and if necessary to expel U.S Navy. In the Indian Ocean, China has expanded its influence and interests. By sending naval anti-piracy taskforces, gaining accesses to naval bases and commercial ports under the SoP, China seeks to protect its vital import/export sea routes.

The OBOR is clearly supported by its military and political system. The grand strategy ultimately seeks to create a Chinese hegemonic zone in Central and South Asia. The roads and pipelines of OBOR are also designed to ensure a secure source of energy for Chinese economic development and make the peripheral nations dependent on China to. The new OBOR’s Chinese ecosystem, is clearly designed to compete with the Western democratic system led by the U.S.

The activities and aggressive behaviour of the PLAN around the adjacent waters of East and South East Asian can be understood as China’s approach to establish a strategic defense zone. This zone includes first and second island chains. By securing the SCS, Taiwan, and the Senkaku islands, China would obtain control of the first island chains. This is the inner barrier of China’s strategy to expel the USN. With its active defense strategy, or A2/AD, China also plans to keep the USN out of the second island chain, which is around the Marshall Islands. With the development of long-range anti-ship missiles, both cruise and ballistic, new surface vessels, and nuclear submarines, China has adopted a deterrence posture in the Western Pacific. With its quantity and distance advantage, China’s aim to defeat the USN in a short and lightning maritime conflict, where strategy and capabilities can offset the USN’s superiority. The artificial islands, with their specific locations in the SCS, are key to China’s A2/AD.
These artificial islands also play a key role in China’s expansion onto the Indian Ocean. Related to its strategic defense posture in the Western Pacific, China has expanded its political, economic and military influence into the Indian Ocean. These artificial islands serve as initial supply bases for the PLAN prior to sailing into the Indian Ocean. The first step was the deployment of PLAN task forces into the region, as part of the international anti-piracy mission, and also provide humanitarian support. The development of these taskforces led to a series of naval bases in the region, which is known as the SoP. With these bases, the PLAN’s vessels can operate longer, and increase their presence, both militarily and politically in the Indian Ocean. With sustainable facilities in the Indian Ocean, China has ability to protect its national interests, and compete with India. These moves reflect China’s ambition to become a superpower, in military, political and economic terms.

Supported by an expanding navy and the SoP, China’s future ascension to superpower status is the central goal of the OBOR grand strategy. The OBOR creates a foundation for China’s expansion to Central and South Asia and subsequently reaching Europe. It provides new markets for the Chinese economy, through infrastructure, commercial, telecommunication investments. Under the OBOR, partner countries are to be tied into Chinese ecosystem. A network of infrastructure, finance, labor, commerce and diplomatic ties are to emerge centered upon China. The OBOR connects countries together through Chinese investments, where democracy and human values are replaced with low interest loans and long-term debt traps. In so doing, these countries will become economically and politically dependent upon China.

Overall, China’s objective is to become a superpower and establish Chinese hegemony over Central and South Asia to be achieved through its OBOR grand strategy, with its land component, the SoP and the PLAN as key components. Whether it will be successful is difficult to predict. There are numerous internal and external forces that can affect the outcome. Among these in particular will be the response of China’s four primary competitors – ASEAN, the US, Japan and India.

Several ASEAN countries have disputes with China over the SCS. They are Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia, which remain unresolved. Although a Code of Conduct (COC) in the SCS is in place between China and these ASEAN nations, there has been no further progress due different political aims and interests among them. Nor has the attempt by
the Philippines to resolve the disputes with China through an appeal to the International Court been successful. While the court ruled in the favour of the Philippines, China has simply ignored the verdict and called it “a piece of paper that is destined to come to naught”\textsuperscript{222}.

For China, the SCS is a vital strategic asset for its security and linked directly to its political ambitions. The SCS SLOC must remain under Chinese control. To do so, China continues to employ its naval and coast guard assets to survey, police and dominate the region. Moreover, the COC from China’s perspective is designed to further this objective relative to China’s grand strategy. This evidently coherent with the Chinese concept “Set aside dispute and pursue joint development” stated by Deng Xiaoping in the past \textsuperscript{223}. It is a mean to encourage ASEAN rivals to become partners. As long as these states recognise China’s sovereignty and control of the SCS, they can share its economic exploitation. In other words, China’s approach to the dispute is no different from other elements of the OBOR. In addition, the ASEAN nations have little choice because the PLAN is the dominant regional security force.

The PLAN is much bigger and many times more capable than all the ASEAN claimants’ navies combined. A maritime conflict between China and the ASEAN, or each ASEAN claimant is irrational. As such, China will continue to strengthen its dominance in the region, regardless of the political situation. The 9-dash-line will continue to be promoted by the Chinese media, diplomats, and coast guard units. China’s outposts in the Spratly will likely expand, in quality and quantity, making them more permanent, robust, and integrated with the PLAN. The activity of the PLAN’s vessels will be intensified, and possibly even more aggressive, owing to the strategic value of the water and the outposts. Yet, there may also more naval cooperation between China and the ASEAN nations to strengthen mutual understanding and transparency. Diplomatic and economic ties will likely grow. China will seek to keep the disputes within regional parameter and prevent as best as possible outside intervention and mediation. Overall, these moves are a modern duplication of old styled Chinese tribute system.


As the global sea power, the U.S pays close attention to the SCS dispute. For now, it has never recognized the legitimacy of any claims per se. The U.S seeks to protect the freedom of the oceans, and the USN is the key mean to enforce this. To counter Chinese claims in the SCS and the Spratly islands, the USN carries out these patrols in the international waters under the Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP). These patrols provoke strong reactions from China, both on diplomatically and at the sea. There have been several near-collision incidents between the PLAN and the USN. To China, US vessels sailing in the SCS poses a direct challenge to its security and sovereignty, it reacted in an aggressive and “unprofessional way”, according to a USN officer224.

In other words, the operation is the US means to prevent China from becoming the regional hegemon, backed up the reality of the US as the strongest naval power in the world. In challenging in this way, the US also provides a political alternative for the relevant ASEAN nations. Indeed, China must be careful in terms of its aggressive behaviour in the SCS lest they drive these nations into the arms of a US led containment alliance.

While detailed assessment of US policy responses and options is beyond the scope of this thesis, the American response om the SCS can not be disassociated from its overall strategic response to the OBOR, the SoP, the PLAN, and thus Chinese grand strategy. In so doing, the possibility of a large US coalition in which includes Europe and India, cannot be underestimated. In these terms, the recently expanded US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) will be the leading force. A greater presence of the USN can be expected from the Pacific to Indian Ocean, foreshadowed by the Asian Pivot during the Obama Administration. Of course, US actions, directly at odds with Chinese objectives contain the seeds for a major confrontation, and possibly war. This result, of course, is not inevitable, but will be a major concern for the future.

Besides the US, Japan lies in Chinese grand strategy as the first obstacle in reaching out to the Western Pacific, because Japan belongs to the first island chain, in which the PLAN aims to dominate. It is the first and key opponent of the PLAN in the Asia. By maintaining a presence in the Senkaku islands, Japan seeks to counter Chinese domination. At the same time, the SCS is

Japan’s strategic SLOC as well. Japan aims to keep this SLOC open and beyond the control of any nation. As a result, Japan has strengthened its maritime cooperation with the ASEAN claimants. Vietnam and the Philippines have been provided with Japanese built patrol vessels, and their technicians and officers are trained with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF).

It is likely that Japan will take more initiatives to counter and check the expansion of China in the region. The JMSDF is also a key partner of the USN in the Western Pacific and the SCS, and Japan is likely to invest in more naval vessels to counter the PLAN. The Japanese islands in the first island chain will likely be fortified, and strengthened as a mean to check, and contain Chinese military operations. The JMSDF will also likely undertake more port visits to the ASEAN nations. Cooperation between the JMSDF and ASEAN might tighten. Like the U.S, Japan’s ultimate goal is to balance Chinese and the PLAN through cooperation and keep the SCS open.

While the U.S and Japan are committed to keep China in check and maintain freedom of navigation in the SCS. India is committed to keep Chinese influence out of the Indian Ocean. With the OBOR and the SoP, China’s move into the Indian Ocean is designed to expand its economic and political strength. These actions undermine India’s objective to be the regional hegemon. The Indian government regards China’s expansion into Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri-Lanka as a threat to its national security. From India’s perspective, Chinese facilities in these locations are dual-purpose. In a conflict scenario, these ports might be used as logistic bases for the PLAN. They can also work as surveillance outposts to check the Indian Navy. For India, China’s expansion into the Indian Ocean is considered as the most threatening part of Chinese grand strategy. Simply, significant Chinese resources come through the Indian Ocean, and there are many Chinese investments in East Africa. The OBOR is expected to reach as far as the Mediterranean. For India, this region is China’s ultimate goal, and explains why the SOP exists. Most of Chinese OBOR investments are in the West, not East, and potential Chinese dominance has to be checked.

It is likely that India will invest more in its security, both in land and maritime domains. It might use economic and political influence to reverse the situation in Pakistan, Sri-Lanka and Bangladesh. One should also expect deeper strategic cooperation with Japan, U.S.A, and NATO to check, control and push back Chinese influence in the Middle East, East Africa and the Indian Ocean. India will also likely increase its presence in the ASEAN through port calls, naval cooperation, economic investments and diplomatic exchanges.
Overall, this thesis places the PLAN and the SCS within the context of China’s OBOR grand strategy. By aggressively claiming its sovereignty in the SCS with naval and coast guard forces, China has created an ‘unfriendly’ image for many in the world. It is seen to have ignored and violated international law and norms. It has escalated the situation by harassing, ramming and expelling foreign vessels. While China views its action as protecting its territories and sovereignty, the result has largely been politically counterproductive. Instead of settling the dispute through negotiations, the Chinese government has used coercion and grey-zone tactics to gain control over the area. It has created frustration and confusion among ASEAN countries. At the same time, it is also challenging the USN with the growth and modernization of the PLAN. In effect, this regional issue has become a global one.

With the launch of the OBOR, the unresolved situation of the SCS became the focal point of the whole initiative. The problem has gotten bigger and it cannot readily resolve by regional negotiations or forums. China’s behaviour has largely generated suspicion and instability. An unstable SCS, however, will potentially lead to a weak OBOR. In other words, the grand strategy might be in danger.
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