

CHINA'S SEA POWER STRATEGY IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Abstract

China's Sea Power projection fundamentally contrasts with traditional Western thinking. The paper first looks into Mahan's theory of Sea Power and then analyses China's naval strategy and argues that China's interest in developing naval capabilities is primarily economic and China has no ambitions of hegemony or expansionism and believes in freedom of navigation. It concludes that first, China has built its PLA Navy to secure the legitimate maritime rights and interests of China. Second, for resolving maritime disputes, China believes in diplomatic means of negotiation and legal means by applying United Nations Convention of Law of Sea and other international maritime law. Third, China will not protect SLOCs and its overseas interests by acquiring naval bases and overseas possessions all over the world, but by establishing close cooperation with its strategic partners in different regions.

Keywords: *Sea Power, PLAN, UNCLOS, SLOCs, China, Maritime Strategy*

Introduction

The sea covers over seventy one percent of the earth's surface.¹ The ability to "traverse, explore, and share this vast expanse is crucial to the security and prosperity of every nation around the world. The maritime domain is essential to global mobility and trade, and is an abundant source of vital resources, from food to energy."² Sixty-five per

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¹ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, "Ocean" (Washington, DC: Department of Commerce, n.d.), www.noaa.gov/ocean.html.

² Gordan E. Van Hook, "Maritime Security Consortiums," in *Conflict and Cooperation in the Global Commons: A Comprehensive Approach for International Security*, ed. Jasper Scott (Georgetown University Press, 2012), www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2tt578.17.

cent of the world's population lives less than 180 miles from the coast, and eighty-seven per cent live within three hundred miles.³ This concentration is due in part to the generally temperate climate near the sea, the effectiveness and efficiency of maritime trade, and the strong capacity of world sea ports for growth and communications with inland areas. More than ninety per cent of the world's trade is conducted through water, and the world's waterways are and will remain the most efficient means for transporting goods. Especially with the exhaustion of natural resources on land, the human beings pay more attention to the sea, giving it an increasingly important role in economic development and national and international security.

The 21st century is also called "the Century of Sea", and 'blue economy' is one of the emerging popular concepts in the world, which is based on harnessing oceanic resources for economic growth. Owing to the great significance of seas for national economies, states need to take necessary means to protect and safeguard their maritime resources for continuous, unhindered and sustainable economic development. Traditionally, the function of providing safety and security of maritime resources fell into the hands of state security-providing agencies. States increased their naval capabilities to protect their maritime resources, and to safeguard themselves from traditional and non-traditional security threats emanating from sea. Therefore, the sum total of a state's naval power and maritime power together becomes the 'Sea Power' of a state.

China has been traditionally regarded as a land power. However, China is also a large littoral state with 18000 km long coastline, and claims three million sq. km Exclusive Economic Zone according to the United Nations Convention of Law of Sea (UNCLOS). Hence, the seas are becoming exceedingly important for China's economic development and national security. Considering this, China has over the years embarked upon a programme to match its naval capabilities with the increasing demand of securing its maritime interests. This paper first looks into Mahan's theory of Sea Power and then analyses China's naval strategy; it argues that China's interest in developing naval capabilities is primarily economic and China has no ambitions of hegemony or expansionism, and believes in freedom of navigation in the high seas.

Western Concept of Sea Power

Sir Walter Raleigh pointed out in *A Discourse of the Invention of Ships*: "For whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself."⁴ Historically, great powers struggling for

³ Guy Labou rie, "The Oceans and Geopolitics: A World United," *Naval War College Review* 46, no. 4 (Autumn 1993), 96.

⁴ Quoted in Van Hook, "Maritime Security Consortiums," 173.

supremacy have invariably focused their attention on the ocean and spared no efforts in pursuing their maritime supremacy. The struggle for maritime supremacy among early Egyptian, Cretan, Phoenicians, Carthaginian, Greek and Roman empires in the Mediterranean Sea started in ancient times. At the end of the eighteenth century, Napoleon attempted to cut England off from its foreign markets and natural resources by way of the Persian Gulf and advanced into the Mediterranean on the southern flank. It maintained its alliance with Russia and controlled the command of Mediterranean Sea. Russia, in order to gain maritime access seized the control of the northern flank, and expanded its outreach to the Black Sea and the Persian Gulf region. A new great game began between Russia and England for maximizing influence and power. "Russia's strategic goal was to rise beyond the Baltic littoral and the Black Sea to break through England's blockade line. England's goal was to contain Russia's westward and southward advance, while at the same time preserving maritime hegemony in the Mediterranean Sea and also the Indian Ocean."⁵ The British Royal Navy held command of the sea for most of the period between the 18th to the early 20th centuries, allowing Britain and its allies to trade and to move troops and supplies easily during wars, while its enemies could not.

After studying the history of naval dominance, especially the history of British Empire's global hegemony, Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), an American historian and president of the U.S. Naval War College, believed that "national greatness was inextricably associated with the sea, with its commercial use in peace and its control in war, ... in peacetime, states should increase production and shipping capacities and acquire overseas possessions".⁶ Sea Power is vital to a nation's development, prosperity and security. A world power must have a well-equipped and trained navy with operational bases abroad, which enjoy freedom of manoeuvres on the sea. He stressed that the command of the sea, especially the control of important straits, peninsulas, islands and international sea-routes with strategic significance is the key to world hegemony.

Mahan advocates securing overseas territories for their purposefulness as he observed, "in peace [naval strategy].....may gain its most decisive victories by occupying in a country, either by purchase or treaty, excellent positions which would perhaps hardly be got by war."⁷ As per Cropsey and Milikh, "Peace for Mahan is a breather, a time when

⁵ Xu Qi, Andrew S. Erickson and Lyle J. Goldstein, "Maritime Geostrategy and the Development of the Chinese Navy in the Early Twenty-First Century," *Naval War College Review* 59, no. 4 (Autumn 2006), 46-67.

⁶ A.T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783* (US: Boston Little, Brown and Company, 1890).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

architects of foreign policy look to the direct and indirect effects of far-flung sea power in a future when gun ports are once again opened".⁸ In Mahan's opinion, the primary role of a country's navy was to gain the command of sea, that is to ensure the access of sea for one's own ships and deny them to one's enemy. Control of the sea could be achieved not by destruction of commerce but only by destroying or neutralizing the enemy fleet. Mahan divided his analysis of naval strategy into four areas: (1) concentration of force; (2) the necessity of central positions or lines; (3) the necessity of movement relative to central positions; and (4) the bearing of communication upon a force's ability to maintain itself and to operate.⁹ After considering all the elements which comprised naval strategy, Mahan concluded that "the proper main objective of the navy is the enemy's navy."¹⁰ This theorem is the foundation of his strategy. He felt that in order to assure oneself of free communications (i.e., the use of the sea), the destruction of the enemy's fleet must be attained. He wrote: "A crushing defeat of the fleet, or its decisive inferiority, when the enemy appears, means a dislocation at once of the whole system of colonial or other dependencies, quite irrespective of the position where the defeat occurs."¹¹ To administer such a crushing defeat upon an enemy necessitates, of course, a fleet superior to any force it has to face.

Mahan held that American greatness depends on sea power by pointing out the close connection between domestic prosperity and maritime pre-eminence. He thought the United States enjoyed favourable geographic position: located in the geographical centre of the world, facing two oceans and far from Eurasia. As the United States had the geographic features for becoming a sea power, he suggested that, if the United States wanted to become a world power instead of a regional power, it must vigorously develop its navy to control the Isthmus of Central America. also should develop Panama Canal to link the two oceans, which can become the strategic pivot to control the two oceans. The United States should also control Hawaii, the Caribbean Sea, the Philippines, all-important strategic passages, and expand towards Eurasia.

Mahan's theory drew a lot of attention from American political and military leadership. Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States, was a faithful disciple of Mahan; he expanded the U.S. naval force greatly during his tenure of office. Consequently, the U.S. navy leaped to the 2nd place in the world. In accordance with Mahan's recommendations,

⁸ Seth Cropsey and Arthur Milikh, "Mahan's Naval Strategy: China Learned It, Will America Forget It?" *World Affairs* 174, no. 6 (March/April 2012): 85-92.

⁹ Alfred T. Mahan, *Naval Strategy* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), 25; quoted in Thomas R. Pollock, "The Historical Elements of Mahanian Doctrine," *Naval War College Review* 35, no. 4 (July-August 1982) : 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

the U.S. occupied Hawaii, Guam and established military bases in Porto Rico, the Philippines, the Virgin Islands in 1898, controlled Panama in 1903, and dug Panama Canal to link the Pacific and the Atlantic in 1914. The other world powers followed suit in expanding their naval armament leading to a global naval arms race. One American historian said: "Mahan had greater influence on the policies of world governments than anyone else of his time."¹²

China's Sea Power Strategy

The aforementioned analysis shows that the crux of Sea Power Theory in the west is to seek command of the sea and maritime supremacy through a powerful naval force. China's Sea Power theory on the contrary is focused on protecting China's legitimate maritime rights and interests rather than seeking command of the sea and maritime supremacy. It is China's economic interest which necessitates China to develop its naval fleet to protect its offshore interests.

At the turn of the 21st century, the sea is becoming exceedingly important for China's economic development and national security. As the world's economic and strategic centre continues to shift towards the Asia-Pacific, the region has become a focus of major powers competition, bringing uncertainties for regional security. The United States is strengthening its Asia-Pacific military alliances and reinforcing military deployment and intervention, thus adding complexity to the regional security structure. In an attempt to circumvent the post-WWII framework, Japan has adjusted its military and security policies, becoming more outward-looking in its military endeavours. Regional hotspots and disputes are yet to be resolved.

The Korean Peninsula still faces uncertainty despite some sporadic positive progress. Disputes over territorial and maritime rights and interests as well as ethnic and religious discord still exist among regional countries. Hence security hotspots arise from time to time in the region. USA is reinforcing her partnerships in the Pacific: the 'Quad' is the name given to this association of USA, Japan, India and Australia. India and USA conduct major Naval Exercise MALABAR in the Bay of Bengal. Japan has joined in as a permanent member since 2015. Australia continues to strengthen its military alliance with the USA and its military engagement in the Asia-Pacific, seeking a bigger role in security affairs. It can be concluded that China faces diverse and complex security threats and challenges from the sea.

Given the context, it is imperative for China to develop its sea power strategy to circumvent the emerging challenges and threats to its

¹² Michael T. Corgan, "Mahan and Theodore Roosevelt: The Assessment of Influence," *Naval War College Review* 33, no. 6 (November-December 1980), 96.

rise. However, Chinese Sea Power Strategy is different from the traditional western concept of sea power which seeks the command of seas or maritime supremacy by a powerful naval force. China's Sea Power Strategy is based on its distinct civilizational past, geographical characteristics, and its legitimate maritime rights and interests. The key objectives of China's Sea Power Strategy are to safeguard China's national security, advance legitimate maritime rights and interests and protect the safety of SLOCs and overseas interests. The main strategic means for China to achieve these objectives are developing a strong naval force and promoting international security cooperation.

So the main purpose of developing a strong naval force for China is not to gain the command of sea by force, but to address various security threats and challenges to China's national security from the sea. This naval force to be used as a last resort to safeguard her territorial integrity and legitimate maritime rights and interests when all political and diplomatic means fail.

To fully comprehend China's Sea Power Strategy, it is important to review China's distinct strategic culture vis-à-vis the sea, which provides the foundation for China's naval strategy in the Twenty-first century.

China's Strategic Culture

China is traditionally regarded as a land power not only because of its vast territory of 9.6 million square kilometres; the fourth largest in the world, but also because it has been an agricultural society since ancient times. The land area of ancient China was vast; its power and level of cultural development invariably surpassed many other civilisations. The primary threat to the imperial court in the central plains was from the northern nomad invaders. Successive dynasties built up the Great Wall in order to resist this continental threat. This kind of land-oriented survival compulsions restricted China to its own territory and borders. Moreover, China was self-sufficient and with its vast territory, it had no interest in expansionism or formation of overseas colonial empires. Therefore, with no immediate threat from sea and presence of rivals on land, Chinese geostrategic thought emphasized land power at the expense of sea power. The exception, however, was Admiral ZHENG He of Ming Dynasty, who had embarked upon seven voyages into the Western Ocean opening a maritime silk route. In these brief but glorious times, China emerged as a maritime power. This preceded the Western great age of discovery by almost a century. In modern history, China has faced various threats and challenges from the sea; the abandonment of naval power led the other powers to invade China. This can be analysed from the fact that "China's shores were invaded by external powers more than 470 times since the

Opium War (1840) till the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.”¹³

China's approach towards sea power and also its strategic culture is shaped by the Chinese philosophy of 'Confucianism' which considers peace and harmony as fundamentals. The historical lessons of the failure of some countries seeking hegemony show that though a country may become strong, bellicosity will lead to its ruin. The bitter suffering of Chinese people due to foreign aggressions in modern history not only teaches them the value of peace and the pressing need for development, but also reminds them that one should not impose on others what he himself does not desire. Therefore, China does not intend to inflict such sufferings on any other country. In the 71 years since the founding of the People's Republic, China has successfully grown from a weak country to be the world's second largest economy through hard work and efforts for peace.

Chinese traditional philosophical thinking and past experiences of China and other countries fully demonstrate that peaceful development, not the competition with other major powers for hegemony, is in the fundamental interest of the Chinese nation. That's why China has reiterated commitment to the path of peaceful development and declined the pursuit of hegemony. China's sea power strategy in the 21st century aims to protect China's legitimate maritime rights and interests mainly by applying international laws and promoting international cooperation while building a strong maritime force. Therefore, the aim of China's sea power strategy is not to seek the command of the sea or maritime supremacy in order to dominate the whole world, but to safeguard China's national security, maritime rights, and overseas interests.

Role of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)

The navy is the armed force with which a nation can resist threats from the sea: "Defending national sovereignty and upholding national maritime rights and interests are sacred duties with which the navy has been entrusted."¹⁴ Naval strategy is the overall strategy for employing naval force, including the movement and disposition of naval forces and the planning and conduct of military operations at sea. Naval strategy is an important component of and is determined by the Sea Power Strategy. For instance, the Sea Power Theory in the West is to seek command of the sea and maritime supremacy, so the naval strategies of the Western powers are offensive in nature with an aim to achieve victory at sea by destroying the enemy's fleet, controlling a certain portion of the sea and occupying the coastal areas. Since China's Sea Power Strategy is to safeguard China's

¹³ Bradley Hahn, "Third Ranking Maritime Power—And Growing," *Pacific Defence Reporter* XV, no. 4 (October 1998): 46–49.

¹⁴ Xu Qi, Erickson and Goldstein, "Maritime Geostrategy," 60.

national security, maritime rights and overseas interests, so its naval strategy is defensive in nature with an aim of offshore waters defence and far seas protection.

The diverse and complex security threats and challenges to China from the sea highlight the necessity for China to develop a modern maritime military force/ structure commensurate with its national security and development interests. This is imperative in order to safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, protect the security of strategic SLOCs and overseas interests, and participate in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a maritime power.

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has an important standing in China's national security and development framework: "It comprises submarine, surface ships, aviation, marine, and coastal defence forces. The PLAN consists of Northern Theatre Command (NTC) Navy (Beihai Fleet), Eastern Theatre Command (ETC) Navy (Donghai Fleet), Southern Theatre Command (STC) Navy (Nanhai Fleet) and the PLAN Marine Corps. Under the Theatre Commands (TC) there are naval bases, submarine flotillas, surface ship flotillas and aviation brigades."¹⁵ The PLAN is speeding up transition of its tasks from defence in the offshore waters to protection missions on the far seas. It is also improving its capabilities for strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime manoeuvre operations, maritime joint operations, comprehensive defence and integrated support, so as to build a strong and modernized naval force.¹⁶

The key mission of China's navy is to protect China's three-fold legitimate maritime rights and interests which include: i) safeguarding China's Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity; ii) protecting China's legitimate maritime rights and interests in its Exclusive Economic Zone; iii) protecting the security of SLOCs and overseas national interests. These three-fold maritime rights and interests also shape Chinese naval strategy and reflect China's concept of sea power.

Safeguarding China's Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity

National sovereignty and territorial integrity are fiercely safeguarded by China. China is a huge littoral state with a coastline of over 18000 km; it has more than 6500 islands, each over 500 meters². Protection of its huge coastline and territorial waters is one of the core interests of China. This includes important maritime zones, islands, and reefs in the East and South China Sea and Yellow Sea.

¹⁵ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defence in the New Era*, (Beijing: China, July 2019).

¹⁶ Ibid.

China has a maritime interest in unification with Taiwan, the largest offshore island of China. The unification of the Island with the mainland is one of the core interests of China; it is of paramount importance to the country. China adheres to the principles of peaceful reunification' and 'one country, two systems', and also promotes peaceful development of cross-Straits relations. However, unification will remain a challenge for China as "the Taiwan authorities, led by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), stubbornly stick to 'Taiwan independence' -- the policy of separating Taiwan formally and permanently from China mainland--and refuse to recognize the 1992 Consensus, which embodies the one-China principle."¹⁷ Moreover, China considers Taiwanese independence movement a threat to its territorial integrity: "The 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces and their actions remain the gravest immediate threat to China's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Yet if there is either external forces interference or the separatist activities w.r.t. 'Taiwan independence', China makes no promise to renounce the use of force, or the option of taking all necessary measures."¹⁸

Although China has settled border issues with 12 of its 14 land neighbours except India and Bhutan through consultations and negotiations, and also signed treaties with 8 countries on its periphery, China still has maritime disputes over the sovereignty of islands and reefs, and maritime delimitation issues with some maritime neighbours. China enjoys sovereignty over Diaoyu Islands in East China Sea and its affiliated islands which Japan calls Senkaku and also claims sovereignty over. China also has sovereignty over the South China Sea Islands and over the internal waters, territorial sea, contiguous zone, exclusive economic zone and continental shelf based on the South China Sea Islands. China has historic rights within the nine dash-line in the South China Sea.¹⁹ Some coastal states in the South China Sea also have overlapping claims over those islands and maritime areas.

China refuses to accept or recognize the award rendered on 12th July 2016 by the Arbitral Tribunal on the South China Sea arbitration undertaken at the unilateral request of the Philippines. The reason is that as early as in 2006, pursuant to Article 298 of the UNCLOS, China excluded from the compulsory dispute settlement procedures of UNCLOS disputes

¹⁷ "White Paper: The One-China Principle and the Taiwan Issue: The Taiwan Affairs Office and the Information Office of the State Council, February 21, 2000," *China Report* 36, no. 2 (May 2000): 277-92.

¹⁸ The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defence in the New Era*.

¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Statement of the Government of the People's Republic of China on China's Territorial Sovereignty and Maritime Rights and Interests in the South China Sea* (Beijing: China, December 2016), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/snhwtlcwjl_1/t1379493.htm

concerning, among others, maritime delimitation, historic bays or titles, and military and law enforcement activities. The subject-matter of the arbitration in essence constitutes part of the territorial and maritime delimitation dispute between China and the Philippines, over which the Tribunal has no jurisdiction. Therefore, the Chinese assert that "The Tribunal's awards are groundless both in fact and in law, thus null and void, and have no binding force."²⁰

China is opposed to the invasion and illegal occupation by certain states of some islands and reefs of China's South China Sea Islands, and also activities which infringe upon China's rights and interests in relevant maritime areas under China's jurisdiction. The Chinese official stance is that "China fully acquires situation awareness of adjacent waters, conducts joint rights protection and law enforcement operations, handles maritime and air situations, and responds to security threats, infringements and provocations on the sea. China has maintained maritime peace, stability and order as of 2012 by deploying over 4,600 maritime security patrols, 72,000 rights protection and law enforcement operations."²¹ In these waters, China exercises its "national sovereignty to build infrastructure and deploy necessary defensive capabilities on the islands and reefs in the South China Sea, and to conduct patrols in the waters of Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea."²²

Major power competition in the region and the United States' policies towards China has increased Beijing's sensitivities towards its territorial waters. In 2018, US warship USS Mustin entered into territorial waters of South China Sea evoking forceful response by China. Chinese media reported: "China always respects and safeguards the freedom of navigation and overflight in the South China Sea all countries are entitled to under international law, but firmly opposes any country or person undermining the sovereignty and security of littoral countries under the pretext of 'freedom of navigation and over flight.'"²³

Moreover, India along with the United States and Japan conducted MALABAR exercises near the disputed Diaoyu Islands. Though China was not named, the exercise was entirely in the framework of helping Japan

²⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, *Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China on the Award of 12 July 2016 of the Arbitral Tribunal in the South China Sea Arbitration Established at the Request of the Republic of the Philippines* (Beijing: China, July 12, 2016), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/snhwtlcwj_1/t1379492.htm

²¹ Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, *Defence Policy: China's Defensive National Defense Policy in the New Era*, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/defense-policy/index.htm>.

²² Ibid.

²³ "China Hits Out at US Provocation in South China Sea," *CGTN*, March 24, 2018, https://news.cgtn.com/news/306b6a4d306b7a6333566d54/share_p.html

against an assumed Chinese naval offensive. India and the USA have arranged defence oriented strategic treaties. They can use each other's land, air and naval bases for rest, repair and supplies. It will be naïve to assume that these treaties are not China-specific. India's dream of *Akhand Baharat*,²⁴ a state stretching from Afghanistan well into South East Asia, and also including large parts of Chinese territories makes it quite evident.

Protecting China's Legitimate Maritime Rights and Interests

China - the most populous nation of the world - needs enormous resources to sustain its rapid development. With rapid growth of the Chinese economy and the exhaustion of natural resources on land, the sea provides an alternative source of resources and their transportation for sustainable economic development. China can claim three million km² sea area of Exclusive Economic Zone under her jurisdiction according to the United Nations Convention of Law of Sea (UNCLOS). As per Chinese scholars, "Along with the accelerating process of economic globalization, China's maritime economy is moving toward the great oceans. By the end of 2020, China's maritime commerce will exceed \$1 trillion US dollars."²⁵ Moreover, as per Minghui Gao, "The maritime industry has employed more than 34 million workers, and reported a total production value of 5 trillion yuan in 2012, which contributed almost 10 percent of the country's GDP and is thus seen as 'a new engine for growth.'"²⁶ China's economic dexterity can be assessed from the fact that "China has developed more than twenty clusters of industrial groupings, while maintaining the relatively rapid pace of overall development".²⁷ In 2018, China's maritime output reached 8.35 trillion yuan, accounting for 9.3 per cent of the total GDP whereas it engaged more than 36.84 million people in economic activities.²⁸ Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) have thus become a lifeline for national existence and development.

Protecting the Security of SLOCs and Overseas National Interests

China's national defence aims to safeguard China's overseas interests and ensure free access to high seas. China's sustainable economic

²⁴ Shayam Yadav, "RSS and the Idea of Akhand Bharat," *Indian Express*, January 4, 2016, <http://indianexpress.com/article/explained/rss-akhand-bharat/>.

²⁵ Wai Ming To and Peter lee, "China's Maritime Economic Development: A Review, the Future Trend, and Sustainability Implications," *Sustainability* 10 (December 2018), DOI: 10.3390/su10124844.

²⁶ Minghui Gao, "Maritime clusters in China," Electronic Publications of Pan-European Institute, March 2014. https://www.utu.fi/sites/default/files/media/drupal/PEI%20Pub%20Minghui%20Gao%203_2014.pdf.

²⁷ Xu Qi, Erickson and Goldstein, "Maritime Geostrategy," 62.

²⁸ The State Oceanic Administration, *China Marine Economic Statistics Bulletin 2018*, accessed May 3, 2020, http://gi.mnr.gov.cn/201904/t20190411_2404774.html.

development also depends upon the security of SLOCs and its overseas interests. Being the largest trading nation, Chinese economy is heavily dependent upon imports and exports. China imports almost three quarters of its oil from overseas. The SLOCs have become the nation's main artery of foreign trade and their security is crucial for China's sustainable economic development. The country's prosperity, nation's existence and great resurgence all increasingly rely on the sea. To provide necessary protection for strategic SLOCs and maritime national interests, it is necessary for China to build a blue-water naval force, develop logistical facilities, and enhanced capabilities for accomplishing diversified military tasks.

Instead of following in the footsteps of Western powers, China seeks guidelines from its strategic culture and believes in promoting international security and military cooperation rather than seeking dominance or imperial expansionism. China has no intention or ambition to acquire worldwide naval bases and overseas possessions unlike the previous colonial powers or superpowers, but seeks to establish close security and military cooperation with its strategic partners in different regions. China's naval forces are tasked to ensure freedom of navigation and to protect the rights and interests of Chinese people, organisations and institutions by conducting vessel protection patrols, anti-piracy operations and counter-terrorism missions.

China has been dispatching naval ships to carry out regular vessel protection operations in the Gulf of Aden and the waters off the coast of Somalia since December 2008. Till August 2019 in the vessel protection operations, over 106 vessels and 28,000 officers and sailors have been regularly deployed in 33 convoys, each consisting of three to four ships. They have provided security protection for over 6,700 Chinese and foreign ships, and rescued, protected or assisted over 70 ships in distress."²⁹

Peaceful Resolution of Maritime Disputes

Building a strong navy does not mean China wants to resolve the unsettled maritime disputes with neighbouring countries by force. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and a responsible stakeholder in the international community, China upholds international law and norms governing international relations based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter, and is committed to resolving related disputes through negotiations.

China respects the legitimate maritime rights of other nations as per maritime international law. China firmly believes that maritime disputes should be resolved through peaceful means according to the

²⁹ Ministry of National Defence, the People's Republic of China, *China sends New Naval Fleet for Escort Mission*, (Beijing : China, August 29, 2019), http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2019-08/29/content_4849309.html.

relevant international law and UNCLOS. China is committed to building an amicable relationship and partnership with other states and believes in peaceful resolution of disputes over territory and maritime delimitation through negotiation and consultation.

To maintain the stability of its neighbourhood, China considers it a priority to manage differences and enhance mutual trust. It endeavours to deepen military partnership with its neighbours in order to promote strategic mutual trust. China has initiated defence and security consultations as well as meeting mechanisms with 17 neighbouring countries to keep exchange and communication channels open. Moreover, as per the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "China and the ASEAN countries have executed the Declaration of Conduct (DOC) and advanced the consultations on the Code of Conduct (COC). They are committed to enhancing practical maritime security cooperation, extending regional security mechanisms and transforming the South China Sea into a sea of peace, friendship and cooperation."³⁰ China has been in dialogue with Philippines since 2016 to address South China Sea issue through friendly consultation. It also signed a memorandum of understanding with Japan in 2018 on maritime and air liaison.

China will spare no effort to resolve the relevant disputes peacefully through negotiation and consultation with the states directly concerned, on the basis of historical facts and in accordance with international law. Pending final settlement, China is ready to make every effort with the relevant states to enter into provisional arrangements of a practical nature, including joint maritime development maritime areas, in order to achieve win-win results and jointly maintain peace and stability in both the East and the South China Seas.

China's International Maritime Security Engagements

Based on the principle of 'shared neighbourhood' and 'common destiny', China has been actively engaging South East Asia through different maritime initiatives. China's Belt and Road Initiative has also revived the Maritime Silk Route (MSR) which integrates South East Asia with South Asia, West Asia, Africa and Europe. The MSR is based on strategic, commercial, and naval posts so to build a network of bases to facilitate smooth and secure trade. In addition to strengthening bilateral security cooperation with the MSR countries, China has also tried to strengthen such cooperation, pragmatic exchanges and military-to-military relations with other countries, especially its strategic partners in different regions such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean, in

³⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People Republic of China, *China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation* (Beijing: China, January 2017), https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1429771.shtml.

line with the principles of mutual trust, mutual benefit and win-win cooperation.

Moreover, China has also been conducting joint military exercises and training on “counterterrorism, peacekeeping, search and rescue, and tactical skills with its neighbouring countries. China has also carried out extensive exchanges and practical cooperation on border and coastal defence, academic institutions, think tanks, education, training, medical science, medical service, and equipment and technology.”³¹ It has also increased its interaction with ASEAN states. The China-ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Informal Meeting and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) plays a positive role in enhancing trust among regional countries through military exchanges and cooperation. China has proposed a China-ASEAN defence ministers hotline. China actively participates in multilateral dialogues and cooperation mechanisms including the ADMM-Plus, ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), Shangri-La Dialogue, Jakarta International Defence Dialogue and Western Pacific Naval Symposium. It regularly holds China-ASEAN defence ministers informal meetings, and proposes and constructively promotes initiatives to strengthen regional defence cooperation. The first ASEAN Maritime Exercise between Chinese and ASEAN militaries was held in October 2018 and demonstrated the determination for maintaining regional peace and stability.³²

Chinese officials assert that “China will fulfil its international responsibilities and obligations, and provide more public security goods to the international community to the best of their capacity consolidating the win-win principle”.³³ China’s armed forces regularly participate in Humanitarian and Disaster Relief Operations (HADR) and UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKOs). China is the “major contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget and makes the largest troop contribution amongst the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. China has participated in 24 UN peacekeeping missions and has contributed more than 39,000 peacekeepers by December 2018.³⁴ PLAN takes an active part in the international efforts for HADR, and has “participated in the search for the missing Malaysian Airliner MH 370, and in the relief operations for Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines and the water scarcity in Maldives. Since it entered, service a decade ago, the PLAN’s hospital ship – ‘Ark Peace’ has fulfilled 7 voyages coded as ‘Mission Harmony’ and visited

³¹ Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Negara Brunei Darussalam, *Joint Efforts to Safeguard Regional Peace and Prosperity* (August 3, 2020), <http://bn.china-embassy.org/eng/sgxws/t1803406.htm>

³² Ibid.

³³ The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s National Defence in the New Era*.

³⁴ Ibid.

43 countries. During these visits, it provided medical services to the local communities, organized medical exchanges, and helped over 230,000 people.”³⁵

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that there is a stark difference in Western and Chinese concepts of sea power. Firstly, the fundamental objective of China's Sea Power is not to seek the command of seas or maritime supremacy, but to safeguard China's national security, advance legitimate maritime rights and interests and ensure the safety of SLOCs. Secondly, China will protect its legitimate maritime rights and interests by diplomatic means of negotiation and legal means as per UNCLOS and other international law; and thirdly, China will not protect SLOCs and its maritime interests by acquiring naval bases and overseas possessions all over the world, but by establishing close cooperation with its strategic partners in different regions.

The contemporary security threats and challenges emanating from the maritime realm compel China to not rely on the good will of others to safeguard its own national security and territorial integrity, making it imperative for China to develop powerful armed forces, including a modern maritime military force commensurate with its national security and development interests. This is the need of the hour to safeguard its national sovereignty and maritime rights, protect strategic SLOCs and maritime security through participating in international maritime cooperation, so as to provide strategic support for building itself into a 'maritime power'.

³⁵ Ibid.

