CHINESE MARITIME TRANSFORMATION AND SEA POWER: A NET ASSESSMENT

by
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Abstract

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) grand strategy is undergoing a sweeping reorientation toward maritime power. Its leaders have declared becoming a “maritime great power” a vital objective. Its naval modernization has produced the largest navy in the world, and its investments in ostensibly civilian assets such as foreign ports and sensors able to track ship movements proliferate across the Indo-Pacific region. To what end? Prior efforts to explain the CCP’s bid for sea power and assess the threat it poses to the United States tend to extrapolate CCP intentions from observed capabilities. These explanations do not align with the CCP’s stated intentions and have not been predictive of its current fleets. This thesis uses a net assessment approach to align CCP capabilities with its intent over a span of decades to arrive at a different characterization of the threat CCP maritime transformation poses to U.S. interests. It finds that the CCP has been engaged in unannounced strategic competition with the United States since before the turn of the century, and its object in this competition is to displace U.S.-led security architecture in pursuit of national rejuvenation. The accumulation and exertion of sea power plays a critical role in strategies to meet this objective; as a result, the CCP has undertaken significant efforts to accumulate and exert sea power to great effect against the United States. Continentalist interests in the CCP bureaucracy have imposed necessary modifications to how the CCP’s sea power manifests, giving rise to potential vulnerabilities in how the CCP builds and uses sea power.

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Committee Member: Dr. Carla P. Freeman

Committee Member: Dr. Thomas G. Mahnken
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I am especially grateful to Caitlin McDermott, whose extraordinary patience and support were vital throughout this process. I started writing this thesis during a global pandemic, which posed challenges to and beyond my writing this thesis. Because of Caitlin, I did not face any of those challenges alone.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronyms</th>
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<tr>
<td>ADIZ</td>
<td>air defense identification zone</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASBM</td>
<td>anti-ship ballistic missile</td>
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<td>ASCM</td>
<td>anti-ship cruise missile</td>
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<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
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<td>BRI</td>
<td>Belt and Road Initiative</td>
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<td>CCG</td>
<td>China Coast Guard</td>
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<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>CICA</td>
<td>Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures</td>
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<tr>
<td>CMC</td>
<td>Central Military Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>DMO</td>
<td>Distributed Maritime Operations</td>
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<tr>
<td>DoD</td>
<td>U.S. Department of Defense</td>
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<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>State Council Development Research Center</td>
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<tr>
<td>DSR</td>
<td>Defense Strategy Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>DWP</td>
<td>defense white paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>EEZ</td>
<td>exclusive economic zone</td>
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<tr>
<td>FON</td>
<td>Freedom of Navigation</td>
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<tr>
<td>FONOP</td>
<td>freedom of navigation operation</td>
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<tr>
<td>IOR</td>
<td>Indian Ocean Region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPCSA</td>
<td>International Port Community Systems Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISR</td>
<td>intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCS</td>
<td>littoral combat ship</td>
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<tr>
<td>LRASM</td>
<td>long-range anti-ship missile</td>
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<tr>
<td>MLRS</td>
<td>multiple launch rocket system</td>
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<td>MSG</td>
<td>military strategic guidance</td>
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<td>MSRI</td>
<td>Maritime Silk Road Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSC</td>
<td>National Security Council</td>
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<td>ONA</td>
<td>Office of Net Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>PAFMM</td>
<td>People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAP</td>
<td>People’s Armed Police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLA</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLAAF</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army Air Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLAGF</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army Ground Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLAN</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army Navy</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLARF</td>
<td>People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRC</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
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<tr>
<td>RMA</td>
<td>revolution in military affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAM</td>
<td>surface-to-air missile</td>
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<tr>
<td>SLOC</td>
<td>sea line of communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOE</td>
<td>state-owned enterprise</td>
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<tr>
<td>SSF</td>
<td>Strategic Support Force</td>
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<tr>
<td>THAAD</td>
<td>Terminal High Altitude Area Defense</td>
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<tr>
<td>USG</td>
<td>United States government</td>
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<tr>
<td>VLS</td>
<td>vertical launch system</td>
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</table>
Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................................ iii
List of Tables ................................................................................................................................. vii
List of Figures ................................................................................................................................ viii
List of Maps ...................................................................................................................................... ix
I. Executive Summary .................................................................................................................. 1
II. Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 3
   Research Question and Hypothesis ............................................................................................ 6
   Previous Scholarship on Chinese Maritime Transformation ................................................... 7
      Naval Nationalism .................................................................................................................. 8
      Shifting Geopolitical Threat .............................................................................................. 11
      Survival ................................................................................................................................. 14
   Gaps in Explaining PRC Maritime Transformation .................................................................. 18
      Nationalism and Border Threats? ....................................................................................... 20
      Securing Maritime Trade? ................................................................................................. 22
      Survival? ............................................................................................................................... 24
   Framing CCP Intent ................................................................................................................... 26
      Cheap Talk and Grand Strategy: Identifying Authoritative Sources ................................. 27
      Principal-Agent Problems in CCP Authority ...................................................................... 31
   Research Approach: Net Assessment ....................................................................................... 33
      Organization of the Study .................................................................................................... 36
III. Parameters: How to Think about the USG-CCP Maritime Balance ...................................... 37
   Sea Power .................................................................................................................................. 39
   Time Frame ............................................................................................................................... 41
   Theater ....................................................................................................................................... 42
IV. Objectives: The Maritime Turn in CCP Grand Strategy .......................................................... 43
   CCP Grand Strategy: Resolving Contradictions Toward National Rejuvenation ................... 44
      Prelude: Toward Strategic Opportunity, 1993 to 1999 ....................................................... 49
      Toward Striving for Achievement, 2000 to 2013 ............................................................... 55
      Toward Naked Ambition, 2014 to Present .......................................................................... 63
   CCP Maritime Strategy: Becoming a Maritime Great Power ................................................... 69
      Jiang Zemin’s Maritime Terminology .................................................................................. 70
      Hu Jintao’s Great Power Ambitions and Maritime Transformation ................................... 74
      Hu Persists with Land-Sea Integration .............................................................................. 79
      Xi Jinping Continues PRC Maritime Transformation ........................................................ 82
CCP Military Strategy: Toward a World-Class Navy ................................................................. 86
V. Competitor: USG Maritime Interests and Operations ......................................................... 97
  Sustaining U.S. Primacy ........................................................................................................ 99
  Enduring USG Maritime Interest: Freedom of the Seas ...................................................... 108
VI. Trends and Asymmetries ............................................................................................... 113
  China’s Economic Future ................................................................................................... 113
    Trend: Diminishing Returns on Chinese Fixed-Asset Investment .................................... 115
    Asymmetry: Defense Budget Trajectories ......................................................................... 121
    Asymmetry: The Costs of PRC Stability Maintenance ...................................................... 124
  Indo-Pacific Strategic Geography ...................................................................................... 129
    Asymmetry: Two Maps: USG and CCP Views of Asia’s Strategic Geography ................. 130
    Trend: Consolidating PRC Commercial Power at Western Maritime Chokepoints ........... 134
  Naval Power ......................................................................................................................... 146
    Trend: PLAN Modernization: More Hulls, Better Missiles ............................................. 149
    Asymmetry: Land-Based Sea Denial and the PLAN Fortress Fleet ................................. 158
    Trend: Outgrowth of PLAN Aviation Toward Sea Control ............................................. 165
    Asymmetry: CCP Paranaval Forces and Gray Zone Activities ....................................... 170
  Navies and their Defense Establishments .......................................................................... 175
    Asymmetry: The Party Military and Dual-Command Structure ...................................... 177
    Trend: Ground Force Dominance and Resistance to Reform ........................................ 182
VII. Case Study: Southeast Asia and the South China Sea .................................................... 193
  South China Sea .................................................................................................................. 193
    Disputes over Scarborough Shoal, 2012-2018 ................................................................. 195
    Consequences of Diminishing Strategic Influence in Southeast Asia ............................. 206
VIII. Alternative Futures ........................................................................................................ 214
  Scenario 1: Triumphant CCP ............................................................................................. 218
  Scenario 2: Ascendant CCP ............................................................................................... 220
  Scenario 3: Stagnant CCP ................................................................................................ 223
  Scenario 4: Imploping CCP ............................................................................................... 226
IX. Implications for Policymakers and Conclusion ............................................................... 227
  Review of the CCP’s Maritime Transformation ............................................................... 227
  Key Findings ....................................................................................................................... 230
  Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 243
References ............................................................................................................................ 245
List of Tables

Table 1: Drivers of PRC Maritime Transformation and Resultant Types of PLAN Forces...........18
Table 2: CCP Grand Strategic Shifts, 1993–2020.................................................................49
Table 3: China Coast guard Force Levels by Ship Displacement, 2005-2020.........................173
Table 4: PLA Promotions to General [上将] By Service and Year, 2012-2020.....................188
Table 5: U.S. Military Footprint in the Western Pacific......................................................210
Table 6: Alternative Scenarios for CCP Maritime Transformation in 2049............................217
List of Figures

Figure 1: PLAN Warships Commissioned, 1994-2019 .......................................................... 90
Figure 2: Senior-Level Military Visits Abroad by Geographic Region, 2002-2019 ................. 94
Figure 3: Total PLA International Military Exercises by Service, 2002-2019 ........................... 95
Figure 4: The CCP’s Argument: Percentage Share of the World Economy Between Advanced Economies and Emerging Markets ................................................................. 114
Figure 5: Annual PRC GDP Growth Rate and Growth Target, 1999-2019 ............................ 116
Figure 6: Economic Growth and Declining Returns on Capital Investment in the PRC, 1999-2018 .......................................................................................................................... 119
Figure 7: Contribution of fixed asset investment to growth in the PRC, 2005-2018 ................ 120
Figure 8: U.S. and PRC Military Expenditures as a Percentage of GDP, 1999-2019 ................ 123
Figure 9: Share of Military Expenditure in Constant (2018) U.S. Dollars, 1999-2019 ........... 124
Figure 10: U.S. Proportion of Global Naval Tonnage and Number of Ongoing Maritime Claims ............................................................................................................................... 148
Figure 11: Office of Naval Intelligence Estimates of U.S. Navy and PLAN Battle Force, 2005-2020 ................................................................................................................................ 150
Figure 12: U.S. Navy and PLAN Surface Combatants and Aircraft Carriers Commissioned, 1999-2020 .................................................................................................................. 152
Figure 13: Full Load Displacement of U.S. Navy and PLAN Surface Combatants Commissioned, 1999-2020 ............................................................................................................. 152
Figure 14: Projected U.S. Navy and PLAN Surface Fleets, 2020-2050 ................................. 155
Figure 15: Shifts in Philippines Public Opinion on the PRC, 2015 and 2017 ............................ 201
List of Maps

Map 1: Map of USG Focus: The First and Second Island Chains ……………………………131
Map 2: Map of CCP’s Focus: China’s Energy Import Transit Routes (2016 Data) …………………133
Map 3: Visualization of the Maritime Silk Road ……………………………………………………135
Map 4: Maritime Silk Road Project Clusters Along Eurasian Chokepoints …………………137
Map 5: The South China Sea ……………………………………………………………………………195
Map 6: U.S. Military Presence in the Pacific ……………………………………………………………212
I. Executive Summary

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) describes itself as the main stabilizing force and power source of the world economy. From that status, it is attempting to lead what it argues is a necessary reshaping of interstate relations with a new model that displaces U.S. influence and elevates the CCP toward its objective of national rejuvenation. The frictions over whether U.S. influence will be displaced or maintained constitutes strategic competition between the CCP and the United States government (USG). CCP leaders further believe that accruing and exerting sea power is a prerequisite to national rejuvenation, and since 2012 the CCP has undertaken a sweeping maritime transformation reorienting its grand strategy from its continentalist roots to include a maritime vision.

This thesis adopts the net assessment approach to characterize the threat CCP maritime transformation poses to U.S. interests and how that threat is likely to develop over a long-running competition. The net assessment approach rejects efforts to derive an actor’s intent from the capabilities it develops on the grounds that doing so risks mistaking transient developments for the enduring nature of a competition. In a strategic competition, making such mistakes can lead to crippling delays in policy responses. Given that reshaping a military force in response to a changing threat takes years to decades, such delays may close windows of opportunity once available to the USG and instead open opportunities for the CCP. To accurately assess threat in context of strategic competition, a broad analytical framework is needed.

The CCP has historically been a continental power, and its current maritime transformation faces continuing bureaucratic opposition from continentalist interests. Not least of these is the People’s Liberation Army Ground Force (PLAGF), still the dominant service in the CCP’s military. The CCP’s maritime transformation can be identified by an inter-domain land-sea integrated approach made necessary by those continental interests. With this approach, the CCP has developed a robust sea denial capability within the First and Second Island Chains
and part of the Indian Ocean Region. However, the CCP does not yet have a sophisticated capability to gain and exploit sea control for useful periods in a kinetic conflict, and the PLAGF’s persistent influence threatens the PLA Navy’s ability to develop one.

The CCP has also exerted its sea power through ostensibly civilian assets with dual-use purposes. A maritime militia comprised of fishing vessels, concerted investments from Chinese state-owned enterprises targeting strategically-located deep water ports, and maritime research satellites with ship tracking capabilities all mobilize civilian assets—in China and other countries—to advance the CCP’s military power. These civilian investments augment the CCP’s ongoing military modernization to cut into the U.S. military’s margin of military superiority, calling into question the credibility of U.S. security guarantees and thus stressing the U.S.-led security architecture in the Indo-Pacific.

The following findings emerge from this assessment:

1. There is no future in which CCP maritime transformation poses a low threat to U.S. interests.
2. PRC economic growth determines the intensity of maritime transformation, but it is not the object of such.
3. Sea control in the Indo-Pacific is on track to become prohibitively costly.
4. The CCP’s vision of sea power is one that is deeply integrated across domains and elements of national power, military and civilian.
5. The USG’s focus on high-end threats takes a narrow view of the maritime competition’s decisive terrain and does not adequately account for the peacetime implications of the CCP’s military and paramilitary power.
6. Converting power into strategic influence remains a weakness for the CCP.
7. The PLA Ground Force’s continentalism remains an enduring vulnerability for CCP sea power.
II. Introduction

Chinese Communist Party (CCP)\(^1\) grand strategy\(^2\) is undergoing a sweeping reorientation toward the sea. Once a continental power that considered China’s long land borders its preponderant international security concern, the CCP has demonstrated remarkable consistency in building commercial maritime and naval power. In 2020, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) declared the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy (PLAN) and the China Coast Guard (CCG) the “largest navy in the world,”\(^3\) and “by far the largest coast guard force in the world,” respectively.\(^4\) These fleets are not simply numerous. The PLAN and CCG have well-armed, cruiser-sized warships\(^5\) that the services misleadingly term “destroyers” and “cutters,” respectively.\(^6\) In 2020, the PLAN launched its first such destroyer, the lead Type 055, which

\(^1\) Throughout, this thesis refers to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) when discussing China’s state apparatus and the CCP when discussing political leadership. The term “China” where used refers to the geographic landmass and its inhabitants.


\(^3\) The topic of grand strategy is discussed further in the section “CCP Grand Strategy: Resolving Contradictions Toward National Rejuvenation.”


\(^5\) Modern definitions for destroyers and cruisers—a class of naval combatant typically larger and more capable than destroyers but smaller than aircraft carriers and battleships—have been inconsistent. The 1930 London Naval Treaty set destroyer displacement at 1,850 tons, with larger ships classified as cruisers up until 10,000 tons, at which point it was classified under the 1923 Washington Naval Treaty as a capital ship, e.g., battleship. The London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies currently classifies cruisers as warships displacing over 9,750 tons and destroyers as warships displacing between 4,500–9,749 tons. China’s Type 055 warship is expected to displace approximately 14,000 tons, and the U.S. Department of Defense classifies it as a cruiser. Nonetheless, the PLA classifies the Type 055 as a destroyer, following precedent set by the U.S. Navy’s 14,000-ton Zumwalt destroyers, the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force’s 24,000-ton Izumo-class helicopter destroyers, and the Republic of Korea Navy’s 11,000-ton Sejong the Great-class destroyers. See Keith Patton, “That’s a destroyer?” The Navalist, April 10, 2017, https://thenavalist.com/home/2017/4/10/that-s-a-destroyer.

features stealth capabilities and armaments exceeding those of the U.S. Navy’s Arleigh Burke-class destroyers.\textsuperscript{7}

PRC maritime development extends beyond naval and paranaval activities. Since 2016, Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have proliferated ostensibly civilian but inherently dual-use sensors that improve Chinese maritime domain awareness in China’s maritime periphery.\textsuperscript{8} Since 2013, other Chinese SOEs have committed strategic investments in global maritime shipping infrastructure, seizing on potentially dual-use infrastructure in waters further from China’s shores.\textsuperscript{9} An expansive fleet of survey vessels operated by the PRC and its research institutions suggests CCP ambitions for undersea capabilities as far-reaching as Chinese maritime commerce.\textsuperscript{10}

To what end? Like that of any other governing regime, the CCP’s pursuit of maritime power is a political choice, and one that affects the United States.\textsuperscript{11} Fleet building is necessarily an “interactive enterprise”; states build the fleets they believe they need to secure—or seize—their interests in the teeth of their adversaries.\textsuperscript{12} Whether and what sort of threat the CCP’s fleets pose to the United States government (USG) depends on PLAN capabilities as well as

\textsuperscript{11} Alfred Thayer Mahan, The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783, (1890; reprint, New York: Dover, 1987), 82.
CCP intentions.\textsuperscript{13} Recent indicators of PLAN force employment suggest those intentions are bellicose: in 2018, a PLAN destroyer’s aggressive maneuvers nearly forced a collision with a U.S. Navy destroyer, and in 2020, another PLAN destroyer lased a U.S. Navy maritime patrol aircraft, threatening harm to the aircraft’s systems and crew, over international waters.\textsuperscript{14} Still, the contours of CCP maritime strategy remain to be defined.

The question is complicated by a puzzle: why have regional states begun vocally aligning themselves against the CCP’s maritime posture now? Traditional balance of power theory approaches to international relations suggest that a state might improve its own military capabilities or seek security assurances in a coalition of allies balancing against a neighbor’s growing power.\textsuperscript{15} Seeing that East Asian states did not join such a coalition in response to growing PLA capabilities in the past two decades, balance of power theorists further elaborated that the “stopping power of water” reduces threats conveyed or perceived where states do not share a border, and as such, maritime East Asia is “defense dominant,” with most states in the region content to let the United States manage regional security issues without the aid of a balancing coalition.\textsuperscript{16} However, states on China’s maritime periphery have begun taking steps toward this balancing coalition. Japan, Vietnam, and the Philippines have all begun or accelerated naval modernization efforts in response to the CCP’s maritime posture.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{13} Thomas C. Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}, (1966 reprint, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 36.
2020 several states in and beyond Southeast Asia for the first time began coalescing around a 2016 international tribunal ruling that deemed illegal much of the PRC’s actions and claims in the South China Sea. Decades into PLAN modernization, a balancing coalition has begun to form. Traditional theories and approaches to analyzing CCP sea power have not provided an accurate threat assessment, and a new approach is needed.

**Research Question and Hypothesis**

This thesis has two aims: 1) to understand the strategic logic and political drivers of the CCP’s approach to building maritime power and 2) to assess this process as a dimension of USG-CCP strategic competition, including its impact on U.S. allies and partners. To meet the former objective, this thesis investigates CCP strategic planning and PRC foreign policymaking processes. To meet the latter objective, this thesis draws on balance of power theory at its intersection with sea power theory in order to investigate the extent to which recent PRC maritime developments bolster CCP strategic influence counterposed to the United States.

This thesis approaches its research questions through the lens of maritime transformation, defined as the reorientation of a regime’s grand strategy from a continentalist vision to a maritime vision. To that end, this thesis poses the following research question: what is the driver of CCP maritime transformation, and what sort of threat does it pose to the United States? To answer this question, this thesis uses the net assessment approach to examine CCP intentions for maritime transformation and any proclivities with which the policy of maritime transformation is implemented.

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I hypothesize that CCP maritime transformation indicates a CCP objective to advance its strategic influence in a zero-sum competition against the United States by building Mahanian sea power; however, while the CCP effectively secures public Chinese support for this objective, ossified continentalist interests distort CCP maritime strategic planning and hinder implementation at the bureaucratic level, collectively posing an enduring challenge for maritime competition against the United States. This hypothesis addresses CCP intent as well as PRC and PLA capabilities. Thomas Schelling observed that “it is a tradition in military planning to attend to an enemy’s capabilities, not his intentions.” This thesis attempts both.

**Previous Scholarship on Chinese Maritime Transformation**

The topic of PRC maritime transformation has a robust but fragmented literature. Chinese policy documents do not discuss a cohesive maritime strategy. In fact, the term rarely arises in CCP official statements or strategy documents. While this may indicate compartmentalization in planning and implementing PRC maritime transformation, what is certain is that much of the analytical literature reflects this same compartmentalization by focusing largely on PRC, especially PLA, maritime capabilities, with much less attention given to CCP strategic intentions. A common approach in the literature is to adopt a structural realist view of domestic politics as black boxes, with instruments of power as the key measurable variable. Following this approach, much of the literature defines CCP intentions in terms of threat perceptions and the military capabilities which respond to them. Leading existing

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20 Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914) was an officer in the U.S. Navy whose publications on sea power remain highly influential in maritime strategy. A definition and detailed discussion of Mahanian sea power is given on pages 39-41.


23 One marked exception is the 2009 edited volume by Andrew Erickson, Lyle Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, which takes a comparative approach to understanding PRC maritime transformation which explicitly considers the development of Chinese maritime capabilities alongside its domestic dialectic on choosing sea power. See Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, eds., *China Goes to Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009).
explanations for PRC maritime transformation which consider both intention and capability fall into three broad categories: 1) naval nationalism, 2) responding to shifts in geopolitical threat, and 3) survival.

**Naval Nationalism**

One interpretation of PRC maritime development is that it is not maritime transformation at all. PRC maritime development could be explained as one component of a prestige strategy, in which the CCP remains a continental regime with an invariably continentalist vision but faces rising domestic pressures to build a navy. Under this framework, the CCP builds capital ships to appeal to the national impulses of Chinese citizens without committing to maritime competition with the United States. Robert Ross calls this approach “naval nationalism.”

According to naval nationalism, the CCP faces outsized continental threats along its land borders and an insurmountable maritime obstacle in the U.S. Navy. As such, it eschews direct naval competition with the United States and instead invests in a small number of high-profile warships, including aircraft carriers. This “prestige fleet” feeds popular support among Chinese citizens for a prestigious navy and offers some minor capabilities to complicate U.S. naval operations near China’s shores without incurring the prohibitive defense spending and opportunity cost to border security that would be required of a genuine naval buildup. PLAN expert Bernard Cole, elaborating on Ross’s explanation, offers that the CCP does not attempt to surpass or supplant the United States but nonetheless invests in its prestige fleet in an effort to “reestablish its country and culture as central to the region and possibly to the world.”

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The PRC remains a land power by necessity of its geopolitical status: China’s greatest security threats remain on its extensive land borders, which it shares with 14 countries including Afghanistan, India, North Korea, Russia, and Pakistan. These continental threats are exacerbated by domestic instability threatening China’s territorial integrity in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia. PLA force structure reflects this threat assessment: despite repeated personnel cuts, the PLA Ground Force’s (PLAGF) nearly 1 million active duty servicemen makes up approximately half of the active duty personnel in the entire PLA. Further, PLAGF officers continue to dominate operational leadership, leading three of the PLA’s five theater commands. The PLAGF is supplemented by yet another million personnel in the paramilitary People’s Armed Police (PAP), who fulfill a primary mission of maintaining domestic stability under CCP rule. By comparison, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimates the PLAN has only 250,000 active duty personnel. These continental threat perceptions and army building tendencies represent the latest iteration of Imperial China’s long history of a continentalist strategic culture. Moreover, the gap between the U.S. Navy and the PLAN in force structure, technological sophistication, and seamanship is also prohibitive of any serious CCP consideration for maritime competition against the United States. In fact, CCP leaders understand that investment in blue water naval capabilities would invite competition with the United States, ultimately undermining rather than bolstering CCP security. As such, the

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CCP’s security calculus remains overwhelmingly and enduringly focused on continental threats, and any increase in maritime focus for PLA strategic planning or resource allocation must come on the margins of continental considerations.

Despite the absence of clear national defense reasoning and prohibitive technology limitations, the Chinese public grew increasingly interested in a Chinese aircraft carrier. As Ross rationalizes, “aircraft carriers are a symbol of great-power status, so realization of the China dream required China to develop a fleet of them.” Ross further demonstrates the link between Chinese public nationalism and PLAN force structure by pointing out that public support in the PRC for building an aircraft carrier emerged in the early 2000s. Beginning then and continuing thereafter, civilian CCP and PLA officials began publicly endorsing the notion of a Chinese aircraft carrier for reasons of national pride, most prominently when PRC Minister for National Defense Liang Guanglie reportedly said in a 2009 visit to his Japanese counterpart, “among the big nations, only China does not have an aircraft carrier. China cannot be without an aircraft carrier forever.” Accordingly, PLAN force development is shaped by the CCP’s decades-long pursuit of a highly specific form of naval power: one supplementary to border security and which rode a swell of public demand for capital ships.

Following the framework of naval nationalism, CCP maritime development, merely the strategically unimportant outgrowth of a continental power, poses a decidedly manageable threat to U.S. interests. The CCP maritime objective is to bolster its domestic support by feeding Chinese public nationalism through the visible launch and operation of capital ships.

33 Ibid, 32.
Accordingly, the purpose of any Chinese aircraft carriers or large warships is to show the flag and contribute to fervent propaganda narratives of the CCP championing Chinese interests and restoring national pride. While this objective may pose some risks as warships from the U.S. military and PLA operate in proximity to one another, as well as insofar as nationalism also shapes how these warships will be used, PLAN capital ships are not designed to address a perceived maritime threat, and as such, U.S. security interests are untargeted and largely unthreatened.

**Shifting Geopolitical Threat**

A second explanation for CCP maritime transformation could be that CCP leaders observed a geopolitical shift in the CCP’s threats and interests. Michael Glosny and Phillip Saunders cogently argue that “as continental pressures on China have diminished, strategic pressures from the sea have become more salient,” so driving the CCP’s investment into its navy.  

China’s long land border with Russia was an overwhelming security concern for PLA planners following the Sino-Soviet split in 1960. However, the record of PLA military strategic guidelines (MSGs), which are the irregularly-issued but authoritative documents which detail the PLA’s strategic opponent and associated war planning concepts, reveal a decisive shift away from concern over China’s land borders. Every MSG promulgated between 1964 and 1980 identified the Soviet Union as the CCP’s primary strategic opponent and further identified that the center of gravity for PLA defense planning was to China’s north. These perceptions began

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to shift in the early 1980s. For several months in 1985, the PLA’s Central Military Commission (CMC), its highest decision making body, and Chinese paramount leader Deng Xiaoping met to assess the strategic situation and revise PLA strategy accordingly. On June 6, 1985, Deng authoritatively declared, “we have changed our view that the danger of war is imminent,” a judgment that the CCP’s security challenges, primarily threats along China’s northern border, were unlikely to include total war. Following this declaration of the CCP’s revised threat perception, the PLA recalibrated its attentions. Liberated from single-minded preparation to repel a Soviet overland invasion, the PLA was charged in 1988 to reorient toward local wars on China’s coast, including toward ongoing sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea.

At the same time China’s continental threats receded, its economic maritime interests grew. In 1979, Deng identified four “special economic zones,” (SEZs) wherein both taxes and certain restrictions of China’s planned economy were relaxed, to be established along China’s coast: Shenzhen, Shantou, Zhuhai near Hong Kong, and Xiamen, across the Strait from Taiwan. These SEZs lowered the cost of production and increased the amount of capital flowing into the PRC, financing China’s early industrialization and eventually growing to become regional and global hubs of investment that drove remarkable economic growth in China for over three decades. As of 2017, the activity through only three clusters of port systems accounted for approximately 36 percent of China’s gross domestic product (GDP).
Receding continental threats and growing maritime economic interests drove Chinese naval investment. Recognizing that the PRC has growing overseas interests, then-CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao issued the “New Historic Missions,” in 2004, charging the PLA with a slate of new missions, including safeguarding PRC economic interests along sea lines of communication (SLOCs), which Hu described as “a strategic resource treasure-house for the sustainable development of humanity.” Changes to PLA force planning reaffirmed these new missions. In 2006, the PRC released a Defense White Paper (DWP), a document released approximately every two years detailing PLA perceptions and reforms, announcing that the PLA will transition from focusing on territorial defense to instead focus on offshore defense operations by investing in the PLAN’s and PLA Air Force’s (PLAAF) strategic depth. All subsequent DWPs have echoed this call for strategic depth as well as for additional investment in naval and air capabilities. In this context, strategic depth is constabulary, not expeditionary. PLA force structure adhered to force planning: PLAN and PLAAF projected force structure for the next decade strongly suggests focus on protecting overseas investments, not operating in contested environments.

Following the geopolitical framework, PRC maritime transformation is not a concerted, long-term competitive strategy but rather a recent response to two shifts in CCP perceptions: 1) diminishing threats along China’s land border, and 2) increasing economic interests along

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SLOCs to be protected. The PRC is undergoing a maritime transformation only insofar as it reflects the CCP’s efforts to minimize threat and maximize economic gain. While PLAN investments are clearly intended to secure Chinese commercial shipping and not to wage a high-end kinetic war against the U.S. Navy, the probability of accidental escalation increases with PLAN capabilities, as PLAN escorts continue further along their SLOCs, and as the U.S. and PLA navies operate in closer proximity to one another. Moreover, the CCP’s interest in operating its own navy suggests a disinterest in relying on the U.S. Navy to secure its SLOCs, suggesting potential CCP suspicion or distrust of the United States military, which can contribute to risky military interactions. Nonetheless, the United States is not the CCP’s designated adversary, and any PLAN capabilities built up are intended for escort, not warfighting. So long as the United States and the CCP foster robust mil-mil communication mechanisms and have de-escalation procedures in place to manage any friction that arises as the CCP builds its naval capabilities, the United States enjoys minimal threat from the CCP’s benign, economically-minded intentions.

Survival

A third explanation for CCP maritime transformation is that the CCP faces existential threat from historically imperial powers and must build a defensive naval capacity to deny these countries’ attempts to impinge upon the PRC’s rejuvenation as a great power. This interpretation, pervasive in current research from Chinese analysts, is particularly common in PLA literature and has been explored at length by Lt. Colonel Dr. Shi Xiaoqin 师小芹 and Senior Colonel Wu Xiaoyan 吴晓燕. Both researchers are also members of the PLA Academy of Military Science, a top-level PLA research institute which reports directly to the CMC, suggesting these perspectives are part of the discussion among top PLA decision-makers. This explanation is not a strictly military perspective. It is shared by civilian academics participating in state-affiliated think tanks such as Ju Hailong 鞠海龙, a researcher supporting the Academy of
Ocean of China [中国海洋发展研究中心] and the China Association of Marine Affairs [中国海洋发展研究会].

According to this explanation, any assessment of the drivers behind PRC maritime transformation must begin with China’s historic military defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), which was a critical turning point in the Qing Dynasty’s colonization by other countries. As Col. Wu explains, “without a strong maritime defense and a well-trained navy, China lost the wars in resisting foreign aggressors.” Similarly, the PLAN’s top officer and top commissar claimed that inadequate naval power during that period left China helpless against imperialist forces, which proceeded to invade China over 470 times and force the ruling Qing dynasty into signing extractive and nationally humiliating treaties. External imperialism remains a persistent threat. Western sea powers, such as the United States and United Kingdom, and their acolytes such Japan, continue to prosecute strategies aligned with Alfred Thayer Mahan’s approach to sea power, which takes as its foundation the imperialist idea that a state must either expand or collapse and, as such, makes an interstate conflict an inevitability. In this reading of Mahanian sea power, states leverage offensive maritime strategies in zero-sum competitions to maximize their own interests. Upon reaching an unspecified critical point, this competition for sea power becomes one for “sea hegemony.”

45 Both of these institutions are affiliated with state agencies. The Academy of Ocean of China is a think tank under the joint leadership of the PRC’s State Oceanic Administration and Ministry of Education, while the China Association of Marine Affairs is jointly managed by the State Oceanic Administration, the Ministry of Land and Resources, and the Ministry of Civil Affairs. See Academy of Ocean of China [中国海洋发展研究中心], “Center Overview” [中心概况], http://aoc.ouc.edu.cn/9807/list.htm; Sun Shuqing, “Inaugural Meeting of the Marine Strategic Planning and Economic Research division of the China Association of Marine Affairs and the forum on ‘Community of Common Marine Destiny and Becoming a Maritime Great Power’ is held in Tianjin” [中国海洋发展研究会海洋战略规划与经济研究分会成立大会 暨“海洋命运共同体与海洋强国建设”高端论坛在津召开], China Oceanic Information Network [中国海洋信息网], November 27, 2019, http://www.nmdis.org.cn/c/2019-11-27/69847.shtml.


48 Shi Xiaoqin [师小芹], Seapower and U.S.-China Relations [论海权与中美关系], (Beijing: Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], 2012), 56-58.

49 Ju Hailong, China’s Maritime Power and Strategy: History, National Security and Geopolitics, (Beijing: China Social
In this strategic environment, the PRC’s maritime transformation is a bid for survival, not domination. China’s maritime economy is a critical part of the “grand strategy of China’s rise” through peaceful development, and to succeed, the CCP must ensure China’s economic development by safeguarding its SLOCs. Yet the CCP’s strategic interests are complicated by China’s ethno-nationalist character. The Chinese people are inherently peaceful: CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping declared, “the blood of the Chinese people carries no gene for invading others or proclaiming oneself a global hegemon,” and the eunuch Zheng He’s peaceful maritime expeditions as early as 1405 demonstrate this peaceful national character has a long history. Moreover, Western countries, like the United States, as well as non-Western countries that would learn from them such as Japan, do have imperialist genes. The CCP thus faces a tension between China’s peaceful national character and the strategic pressures thrust upon the CCP by Western sea powers vying for hegemony.

Reflecting both influences, Chinese maritime power is built with single-mindedly defensive or “anti-aggressive” intentions. While China’s peaceful national character precludes the CCP from adopting an offensive maritime strategy as those exhibited by Western powers,

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53 Shi Xiaoqin [师小芹], Seapower and U.S.-China Relations [海权与中美关系], (Beijing: Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], 2012), 217.
the CCP is also decidedly abandoning the naval passivity which enabled China’s colonization after the First Sino-Japanese war. A yawning gap in power between the coalition of sea powers and the PLAN reinforces China’s peaceful national character to ensure that the PLAN’s development is strictly defensive. PLA strategic guidelines all embody the principle of “active defense,” which Taylor Fravel describes as “how to conduct operations when facing a superior enemy, numerically or technologically, and thus when on the strategic defensive.” As such, while Western powers may use a Mahanian lens to mistakenly interpret the CCP’s pursuit of maritime power as a potential threat, the Chinese national character anchors Chinese sea power as the strength necessary to deter foreign expansionist interests from obstructing China’s rise.

Following the framework of national survival, PRC maritime transformation builds a limited conventional deterrent against the expansionist policies of other countries. While such actions may be threatening when undertaken by countries with imperialist genes, the national survival framework suggests the PRC’s maritime ambitions are characterized by China’s peaceful national character rather than Mahan’s imperial-era strategic logic. Rather than bidding for maritime hegemony, the PRC’s maritime transformation is in service to a CCP grand strategy of peaceful development and rising back to great power status. The absence of expansionist CCP intent means that PRC maritime transformation’s threat to the United States is entirely nonexistent, regardless of whatever defensive capabilities the PLAN may or may not develop. Under this framework, to avoid conflict between the U.S. Navy and the PLAN, the USG

57 Shi Xiaoqin [师小芹], Seapower and U.S.-China Relations [论海权与中美关系], (Beijing: Military Science Press [军事科学出版社], 2012), 219-220.
should restrain its own hegemonic ambitions and avoid encroaching on China’s peaceful development, as failure to do so will force the PLAN to defend its interests.

**Gaps in Explaining PRC Maritime Transformation**

Taken separately, each of these three drivers for maritime transformation would have distinct influences on PRC maritime planning, especially PLAN force structure. These characteristics are summarized in Table 1 below.

| Table 1: Drivers of PRC Maritime Transformation and Resultant Types of PLAN Forces |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| CCP intent                                      | PLAN force type  | Threat to the United States |
| Naval nationalism                               | Appeal to rising domestic nationalism | Prestige fleet of capital ships | Low; prestige fleet has little warfighting capability |
| Geopolitical shift                              | Secure economic growth through maritime trade | Constabulary force with growing power projection capabilities | Low-moderate; U.S. and CCP interests are not in conflict, but navies operating in close proximity along SLOCs increases chance of miscalculation |
| Survival                                        | Deter imperialism | Capable of deterring an expeditionary force near China’s shores | Scales to U.S. interests in threatening Chinese sovereignty or territorial integrity |

Naval nationalism’s driver would produce a prestige fleet with a few, well-publicized capital ships but fewer of the escorting, comparatively less-prestigious supply ships needed to operate a functional carrier strike group. The geopolitical driver would produce a blue water

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58 While definitions for blue water naval capabilities elude rigid boundaries, blue water navies are typically regarded as being able to conduct sustained operations in waters far from a home country, including the high seas, and without shore-based support. In contrast, green water navies are generally regarded as being able to operate in regional seas with shore-based support, and brown water navies are restricted to littoral zones. See, for example, Geoffrey Till and Patrick Bratton, *Sea Power and the Asia-Pacific: The Triumph of Neptune?*, (London: Routledge, 2012), 150.
but largely constabulary force shaped to deter or defeat pirate elements but unable to effectively engage the U.S. Navy. The survival driver would produce a fleet capable of prevailing in a high-end kinetic conflict against the United States near China’s shores but may not include expeditionary capabilities. In reality, all of these drivers likely explain aspects of PLAN force structure and employment, by extension also explaining some aspects of PRC maritime transformation. Reflecting the nationalist influence in PLAN activities, the PLAN continues to produce capital ships to great fanfare, and any development regarding either PLAN aircraft carrier, the currently solitary Type 055 destroyer, and the hospital ship Peace Ark feature prominently in official propaganda.⁵⁹ Reflecting the geopolitical driver, the full PLA has been engaged in a decades long turn away from a primarily continental military to a primarily maritime one, and the theme is a recurrent feature in published strategic documents, defense white papers, and service reforms.⁶⁰ And the notion of defensive intentions facing existential threats has been a staple of CCP propaganda regarding the PLA, certainly the PLAN, for decades.⁶¹

Still, no combination of these explanations completely explains PRC maritime transformation. None of these proposed drivers specifically explains the timing or extent of PRC investment in a blue water navy over the last decade. Moreover, with the exception of the semi-regular defense white paper publications, these explanations largely eschew use of top-level CCP strategic documents in determining CCP maritime objectives or threat perceptions. This section overviews gaps in the explanatory and predictive power of each proposed driver.

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Nationalism and Border Threats?

Naval nationalism is unlikely to explain, or explain away, PRC maritime transformation. The explanation’s proposal that PLAN force structure reflects a prestige strategy meant to address growing Chinese nationalism does not accurately reflect military or civilian realities in China.

The narrative that popular nationalism in China is potent enough to shape top-level CCP decisions, such as building a prestige fleet, appears empirically unsubstantiated. Research from Alastair Iain Johnston and, separately, Andrew Chubb using survey data in China find that popular nationalist sentiment in China has not grown or disapproved of PRC policy over the last two decades. Rather, the opposite appears to be the case: Johnston found that “most indicators show a decline in levels of nationalism since around 2009,” the same year Ross first published his argument on naval nationalism.62 Chubb similarly found Chinese citizens who get their information from traditional media are more likely to favor compromise, suggesting significant PRC ability to manage domestic opinions.63 One analyst commenting on Chubb’s research noted that the narrative that CCP decision makers are constrained by Chinese public nationalism appears to be largely promulgated, perhaps fabricated whole cloth, by representatives of PRC state institutions interested in convincing foreign observers of this narrative.64

Elite discourse and PLA reform similarly offer an account of CCP threat perception which naval nationalism cannot explain. While domestic propaganda supports the argument that the PLA’s prestige matters to the CCP, state media has since 2006 been increasingly critical of the

PLA’s actual warfighting capability. These criticisms, including charges that PLA officers are incapable of accurately assessing a combat situation or making any operational decisions, being published in popular state-run outlets such as the PLA Daily or Xinhua directly undermines the CCP’s ability to benefit from PLA prestige. Nor does the emphasis on warfighting capability over prestige support Ross’s characterization of the PRC as deeply insecure and facing serious threats along its borders. The CCP has openly declared that its external security environment has significantly improved from when it perceived significant overland threats: observing that a Soviet invasion was unlikely, in 1978 Deng Xiaoping declared “peace and development” the “main theme of the era,” and every subsequent CCP General Secretary has evaluated and reaffirmed this determination. Reflecting this assessment, PLA reforms on improving warfighting capability have prioritized strategic depth past China’s coast rather than hardened defenses along its land borders. The PLAGF continues to shrink with each reform as the CCP invests in PLAN, PLAAF, and PLA Rocket Force (PLARF) strategic depth. Naval nationalism predicts a small prestige fleet secondary to PLAGF units securing China’s borders. It is not the fleet the PLAN has built.

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Securing Maritime Trade?

The explanation of shifting geopolitical pressures is similarly inadequate for PRC maritime transformation. Although this explanation has a more accurate perception of CCP threat perception than naval nationalism, its image of a PRC developing naval capabilities proportionate to its needs to guard its growing interests in maritime trade does not align with the reality of the CCP strategic ambitions and steps the PRC and PLA have taken to realize them.

PLAN force employment in the Western Pacific has been provocative in ways that would undermine a supposed strategy of conflict management in order to ensure PRC economic interests. While SLOC protection has long involved escorts and naval exercises intended to deter potential adversaries, PLAN aggressions against Southeast Asian states and the United States stretch well beyond these missions.69 PLA aviators and captains have demonstrated an enduring behavioral pattern of provocatively engaging U.S. assets in the Western Pacific: in 2001, a PLA pilot undertook dangerous maneuvers around a U.S. Navy EP-3 reconnaissance plane flying over the South China Sea, resulting in a collision fatal to the Chinese pilot.70 In 2009, Chinese vessels similarly harassed the USNS Impeccable, an unarmed surveillance vessel.71 In 2018, a PLAN destroyer’s aggressive maneuvering threatened a collision with a U.S. Navy destroyer.72 The PLAN escalated these provocations to new heights in 2020 when a PLAN destroyer lased a U.S. Navy P-8A surveillance aircraft, conducting a directed energy attack threatening damage to the aircraft’s systems.73 Nor is the United States the sole target of aggressive Chinese behavior: CCG vessels aggressively patrol the South China Sea, in several

cases sinking and threatening to fire on fishing boats and patrol vessels from Southeast Asian countries. In none of these instances was the PLAN or CCG acting to defend maritime shipping. Moreover, the United States is not a claimant in the South China Sea, and U.S. policy during these provocations did not support or deny CCP claims to sovereignty over the South China Sea. The CCP has used maritime power for reasons beyond those offered by the geopolitical explanation: SLOC protection or unresolved sovereignty disputes. Rather, the PLAN and CCG appear to be executing an operational vision in which no military, certainly not that of the United States, can operate with impunity near China’s shores.

What exactly it means to be “near” China’s shores appears to be changing. With the 2001 incident, the U.S. crew of the EP-3 was close enough to China to execute an emergency landing on Hainan. By the 2020 lasing incident, the U.S. Pacific Fleet reported the lased P-8A was flying approximately 380 miles west of Guam, or around 1,500 miles from China’s coast. The 2015 DWP for the first time referred to “open seas protection” as a “strategic requirement” and declared that the PLAN will develop expeditionary capabilities to meet this strategic requirement. Despite some PLA force structure appearing shaped to support overseas investments, PLA force employment has already demonstrated aggressive intentions in conflict with U.S. interests to operate where permitted under international law, and

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public PLA force planning information appears tailored to building the blue water navy needed to realize these intentions on a larger scale. The shifting geopolitical pressures explanation predicts the PLAN will be deployed to secure its SLOCs and ensure growing economic development. However, PLAN operations have indicated that the CCP has greater maritime ambitions than trade and prosperity.

Survival?

A CCP bid for survival through naval power leaves many gaps as an explanation for PRC maritime transformation. Because this explanation largely regards threat perceptions and does not specify needed naval capability or capacity, it is consistent with any PLAN able to pose a credible threat to militaries threatening to invade China. However, this narrative runs counter to the stated threat perceptions of CCP leaders. Moreover, arguments turning on claims of ethno-national character are difficult to substantiate, and the argument’s proponents do not succeed in doing so.

The narrative that the PRC faces existential threat from Western powers that never deviated from Mahanian imperialist approaches does not accord with CCP pronouncements. Deng Xiaoping’s 1978 declaration that “peace and development” were characteristics of the modern era was the CCP leadership’s determination of fundamental dynamics of international relations, indicating a significantly lower probability of war with other major powers. Deng’s “peace and development” line replaced his predecessor Mao Zedong’s assessment that the international security environment was one of “war and revolution” in which the PLA should

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expect “early war, major war, and nuclear war.” By contrast, “peace and development” indicated “the possibility of a world war was remote, the chance of a nuclear war between the superpowers was slight, China did not face the prospect of imminent invasion, and China would enjoy at least two decades of a peaceful international environment.” In 2002, Deng’s successor CCP General Secretary Jiang Zemin renewed this assessment for another two decades by declaring at the CCP’s 16th National Congress that the PRC is enjoying a “period of strategic opportunity,” when it will be free to develop unencumbered by the threat of major war. In 2020, the CCP Politburo, led by Xi Jinping, reaffirmed that the PRC remains in a period of strategic opportunity even despite unspecified new developments and challenges. These are authoritative pronouncements which maintain Deng’s assessment that the PRC is not facing threat of a major war, including invasion by Western maritime powers.

 Appeals to the absence of expansionist genes in “Chinese blood” and the presence of such genes among U.S., UK, and Japanese citizens are similarly not predictive of PLAN and CCP behavior, including the aggressive actions PLAN and CCG captains have taken against the United States and Southeast Asian countries, noted in the prior section. The CCP has demonstrated a distinct willingness to, even a proclivity toward, using force when the balance of forces permits. The PLA are commonly aggressors in interstate conflict, having initiated wars against India in 1962 and against Vietnam in 1979 after intervening in the Korean War in 1950; Chinese accounts maintain both were defensive wars despite their being fought on foreign or

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82 Ibid.
disputed soil. PLA strategy and doctrine also facilitate escalatory behavior. Some PLA literature suggests even firing direct shots on foreign vessels may be reasonable crisis control activities for persuading a foreign vessel to leave an area. Further, PLA strategists develop bellicose doctrine that does not reflect a largely defensive strategy. The last two editions of the PLA Academy of Military Science’s *Science of Military Strategy* include discussions of the PLA’s need to develop capabilities of “war control,” an operational concept describing controlling, even escalating or extending, military crises for political benefit rather than seeking de-escalation. Ethno-nationalist claims of an inherently peaceful Chinese national character appear distinctly disconnected from national history and modern doctrine, lending credence to Andrew Scobell’s assessment that the CCP is an entity that “assertively protects and aggressively promotes its own national interests, up to and including acts of war, but that rationalizes all military moves as purely self-defensive.” If any military act can be rationalized as self-defensive, then when facing a marked Chinese naval buildup, the United States cannot interpret claims that the CCP is without “expansionist genes” as an absence of threat.

**Framing CCP Intent**

Each of the three existing explanations for PRC maritime transformation are predicated on a belief that the PRC’s and PLA’s activities, and any developments therein, largely reflect

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and can be used to determine CCP intentions. However, the explanations’ inability to offer interpretations of CCP intentions that are predictive of PLA activities reveal limits to this assumption, which ultimately confuses enduring intentions with transient approaches. While the naval nationalism and geopolitical explanations may have appeared more likely in the early 2000s given then-contemporary PLAN force structure and force employment, they have not been robust to uncertainty over time. Instead, these approaches overinterpreted transient factors such as rising PRC domestic nationalism and the CCP’s risk-minimization approach to economic development. Explanations which overinterpret transient factors as enduring political intention have limited predictive power for determining long-term policy trajectories involved in maritime transformation, such as reshaping a navy. To accurately assess the threat PRC maritime transformation poses to the United States, any analysis must examine proclivity towards conflict or competition in enduring CCP intention while accounting for the obfuscating but ultimately transient effect of limited resources or capabilities. Drawing on expert analytical views, this section argues that CCP intention can be most accurately derived from select official Party and government documents, while current or developing PLA activities are, taken alone, unreliable indicators of enduring CCP interests.

**Cheap Talk and Grand Strategy: Identifying Authoritative Sources**

Maritime transformation is a shift in grand strategic vision, necessarily emerging from enduring interests and intentions. The record of elite CCP policy speeches and planning documents offer open source accounts of the CCP’s enduring intentions and should be given outsized influence in assessing intention and threat. Given their public nature and often-

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90 Michael Kofman makes a cogent argument to similar effect: “Defense planners tend to incorrectly infer adversary intentions and strategy from military capabilities, and wrongly believe that the impetus behind the *fait accompli* [strategy] is an adversary’s reading of the military balance...Interpreting political intent or military strategy on the basis of select military capabilities has led to planning for fights that don’t make much sense, or fights that do make sense, but where the adversary strategy and political rationale does not seem well understood.” See Michael Kofman, “Getting the Fait Accompli Problem Right in U.S. Strategy,” *War on the Rocks*, November 3, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/getting-the-fait-accompli-problem-right-in-u-s-strategy/.
belligerent tone despite robust economic ties between the United States and the PRC, some scholars\(^91\) dismiss elite CCP policy pronouncements as “cheap talk,” or information sharing in which the sharer has not substantiated or otherwise made credible a position by accepting costs to maintain it.\(^92\) The caution is salient given rife overestimation of cheap talk among U.S. analyses of CCP policy: books such as *Unrestricted Warfare*, written by two PLA colonels in their personal capacities, and exhortations by CCP General Secretaries to “prepare for war” are commonly misinterpreted as authoritative indicators of CCP intent.\(^93\) These examples do not undermine the authority of consensus-driven, bureaucracy-directing policy pronouncements delivered from the highest echelons of the CCP.

The CCP’s authoritative policy pronouncements are products of a costly consensus-building process necessitated by the regime’s authoritarian nature. Without meaningful elections renewing the CCP’s absolute control over offices with governing authority in the PRC, the Chinese Party-society relationship lacks an obvious means of legitimizing CCP rule.\(^94\) As such, CCP elites must continuously prosecute strategies of inclusion with Party and state elites to maintain their ruling legitimacy, thus opening opportunities for bargaining within the Party as well as between Party, state, and society in the CCP’s policymaking process.\(^95\) The scale of this

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\(^91\) See, for example, Josh Shifrinson, Twitter thread on CCP documents as cheap talk, May 11, 2020, https://twitter.com/shifrinson/status/1259862258030727171.


bargaining should not be understated: David Lampton described the bureaucratic aspects of the CCP's governing system as distinctive for how frequently a decision might require many individuals or groups to reach consensus before action can be taken.\textsuperscript{96} Lucian Pye observed that factionalism in the CCP has previously given rise to political "immobilism" while intraparty conflicts are resolved out of public view.\textsuperscript{97} Bargaining and the leverage to do so is rife between CCP elites as well as between CCP principals and their agents in the state bureaucracy. PRC academics recognize the leverage members of state and society have when bargaining with the CCP elite, noting the popular refrain, "the higher ups may have policies, but those below have countermeasures" [上有政策，下有对策], is a reality of governing in China.\textsuperscript{98} The phrase's entry on Baidu Baike, an online encyclopedia subject to PRC content requirements, describes it as a mentality "pervasive through all levels of Party and government work committees in China."\textsuperscript{99}

Pressures to achieve consensus among key stakeholders constrain the CCP elite policy making process while simultaneously lending authority to their products. The Political Work Report delivered every five years at the National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party\textsuperscript{100}
is “the most significant document of governance in contemporary China,” endowed with the authority to “set the fundamental guidelines for the Party in the years to come” precisely because it is the product of a consensus-building process designed to secure buy-in across the Party elite; according to Wu Guoguang [吴国光], who in 1987 participated in drafting the 13th Party Congress Work Report as a member of the CCP central policy group on political reform, the consensus-building ahead of the Party Congress is far more important in setting the CCP’s agenda than the proceedings of the Party Congress itself.101 The Work Report’s yearlong consensus-building process is one that constrains the CCP General Secretary from exercising plenary power and in exchange reflects a broad leadership consensus in its concessions.102 The authority-conferring process of consensus-building is not exclusive to setting five-year guidelines delivered at Party Congresses; the same process legitimizes the CCP’s day-to-day governance on national and regional levels.103 For example, the Central Foreign Affairs Commission and its predecessor, the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group,104 does not submit recommendations to the Politburo until consensus is reached among its members, which

103 For a systematic account of how PRC government work reports are uniformly produced through a consensus-building consultative process which bolsters support for CCP governing legitimacy, see Wang Zhen, “Government Work Reports: Securing State Legitimacy through Institutionalization,” The China Quarterly 229, (March 2017), 195-204, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741016001521.
104 Leading Small Groups [领导小组 or 党组] are policy coordination groups which facilitate CCP consensus-building efforts along the current set of leaders’ policy inclinations by including senior CCP leaders as well as likely candidates for next-generation leadership. The most important groups, including the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group, are chaired by a member of the Politburo. In 2018, the CCP promulgated wide-ranging government reorganization regulations which elevated the Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group into the newly-created Central Foreign Affairs Commission [中央外事工作委员会] chaired by Xi Jinping. While Leading Small Groups are restricted to coordinating policy discourse [议事协调], Commissions are authorized to make policy decisions [决策]. On leading small groups, see Alice Miller, “The CCP Central Committee’s Leading Small Groups,” China Leadership Monitor 26, September 2, 2008, https://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/CLM26AM.pdf. On the 2018 government reform plan, see Xinhua, “The CCP Central Committee Issues the ‘Deepening Party and State Institution Reform Plan’” [中共中央印发《深化党和国家机构改革方案》], March 21, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/21/c_1122570517.htm. On the policymaking powers accorded to commissions, see Xinhua, “(Authorized Release) CCP Central Committee Decision on Deepening Reform of Party and State Institutions” [（受权发布）中共中央关于深化党和国家机构改革的决定], March 4, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-03/04/c_1122485476.htm.
includes comparatively junior Party members being prepared for the next generation of leadership. The policy pronouncements and official documents produced from these consensus-building processes are not without authority or cost. In fact, the opposite is true: the CCP’s consensus-building process is so laborious and often brittle that the costs associated with changing or reversing course on a decided policy are often prohibitive.

CCP leader speeches and official documents produced from a consultative process are not cheap talk. They derive authority from a laborious process by which the Party maintains its authoritarian regime. As such, these documents are authoritative sources of CCP intentions, and the long-running record of these documents reveal the CCP’s enduring interests.

**Principal-Agent Problems in CCP Authority**

One tradeoff of the CCP’s consensus-driven authority is that the most authoritative documents are also the most bargained over and therefore the most vague. The CCP and PRC are aggregate entities of networked constituencies and as such are subject to principal-agent problems common to any policymaking network: network actors with bargaining power have discrete interests and incentives, share asymmetric interdependencies, and can expect those interests, incentives, and interdependencies to change over time. Vague guiding documents which different actors can interpret according to their own interests facilitate

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consensus-building, making these documents more authoritative while creating room for misalignment between national and bureaucratic interests. The CCP attempts to manage this misalignment as a form of federalism, continuing a Maoist legacy of vague leader decisions that empower regional and local implementers to innovate. More recent CCP leaders temper the governing chaos that characterized Mao’s governance with a well-defined hierarchy of central government document types (e.g., orders [命令], decisions [决定], regulations [规定], opinions [意见], and so on) in which documents issued at the highest ranks must be implemented without delay, while lower-ranked documents offer growing degrees of flexibility in implementation.

Despite the CCP’s efforts to manage its principal-agent governance problem, some gaps between CCP interest and PLA interest exist. PLA resistance to CCP reforms has been a consistent issue. A 1998 CCP directive that the PLA must divest from operating businesses using military resources was largely ignored, inciting the need for a renewed order in 2015. Similarly, modern PLA training exercises exhibit weaknesses which longtime analyst Dennis Blasko argues represent “multiple systemic failures to execute Jiang Zemin’s guidance from two decades ago” to improve the quality of PLA equipment and training. Beyond resisting CCP reforms, the PLA has occasionally exhibited outsized influence in shaping the CCP foreign

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112 For a recent study on PLA institutional interests and ability to act as an interest group, see Isaac B. Kardon and Phillip C. Saunders, “Reconsidering the PLA as an Interest Group,” in PLA Influence on China’s National Security Policymaking, eds. Phillip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 33-53.


policy agenda. Beginning in the late 1980s, for example, a PLAN interested in expanding its mission set successfully cornered CCP elites into pursuing an aggressive military expansion in the South China Sea, forcing the CCP leaders to set aside concerns of budgetary limits and risks of diplomatic isolation. As such, PLA actions and capabilities may reflect their own bureaucratic interests or create within the CCP a transient interest of placating PLA interests.

PLA actions and capabilities are not reliable indicators of CCP intentions. In fact, PLA actions and capabilities may obfuscate enduring CCP interests insofar as the PLA’s bureaucratic interests conflict with or prevail over CCP political interests. Reflecting the authority of elite CCP documents produced by a consultative process and recognizing the obfuscating nature principal-agent problems may pose to analysts attempting to understand CCP intent through PLA capability, this thesis will consider PRC and PLA capabilities as either reinforcing or countervailing CCP intentions, not reliable indicators of such, when assessing the threat of PRC maritime transformation to the United States.

**Research Approach: Net Assessment**

This thesis draws on the net assessment approach. For the purposes of this research, net assessment is a comparative analysis, comprehensive across military and nonmilitary variables, which diagnoses problems and opportunities in long-running strategic interaction between national security establishments. These establishments, once informed of their problems and opportunities, can formulate competitive strategies around the disadvantages and advantages on which a competition turns. A net assessment’s diagnosis thus serves as the foundation of “a system of competitive strategy based on long-term interaction between national security establishments along with an advanced understanding of organizational dynamics.”

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In short, net assessment is a way to understand a potential adversary’s enduring political intentions, evaluate their bureaucratic performance in light of those intentions, and from that evaluation identify threats to the assessor as well as potential vulnerabilities in the assessed. Competitive strategies can then be developed from that understanding of threat to oneself and opportunity to exploit vulnerabilities in others.

Net assessment is an approach rather than a method, and as such, it is also a concept that has been varyingly defined. A DoD directive describes it as the “comparative analysis of military, technological, political, economic, and other factors governing the relative military capability of nations,” typically to understand a military balance between two or more competitors or to understand the landscape of international strategic competition.117 The same DoD directive further argues the purpose of net assessment is to identify “problems and opportunities that deserve the attention of senior defense officials.”118 However, the scope of net assessment extends beyond the defense bureaucracy to consider all variables relevant to competitions taking place between national security establishments in both war and peace.119 As former net assessors James Roche and Thomas Mahnken explain, “senior officials have a compelling need to assess the posture of the United States vis-à-vis potential adversaries taking into account the relevant non-military variables.”120

Net assessment’s scope is necessarily broad because it is a precursor to developing competitive strategies. Competitive strategies focus on the “peacetime use of latent military power...to shape a competitor’s choices in ways that favor our objectives. Specifically, the competitive strategies approach focuses on peacetime interaction among and between defense

118 Ibid.
establishments.”121 The competitive strategies approach begins with the assumption that large organizations, including national security establishments, are intended to systematize activities and so are designed not to change; as such, these establishments may be locked into static routines unsuited to long-term changes in a dynamic security environment. These gaps between established routines and the changing world become vulnerabilities in strategic competition, and because no two national security establishments are identical, the gaps will inevitably vary and constitute organizational asymmetries.122 That is, all national security establishments have gaps, but they are not likely to be the same gaps. If these gaps are enduring, they become strengths and weaknesses on which long-term strategic competition might turn. A state locked in strategic competition with an adversary can shape its competitor’s choices by driving the competition to areas in which it has enduring strengths but its adversary has enduring weaknesses and by resisting any developments to the contrary. Net assessment uses comprehensive comparative analysis to identify these gaps. Because these gaps arise from complexes of variables specific to particular competitions between certain national security establishments at specific points in time, there is no universally applicable template, formula, or method for conducting a net assessment.123

Using the net assessment approach, this thesis rejects the unitary rational actor assumption in which capabilities indicate intent and thus threat to other states.124 This thesis’s approach lowers the unit of analysis from a unitary state to the national security establishments of interacting states to assess whether and how PRC maritime transformation has changed the peacetime strategic environment at sea and what the future trajectory of this change might be.

The assessment will also consider enduring strengths and weaknesses endogenous to how the CCP’s national security establishment conceptualizes and implements its ongoing maritime transformation.

Organization of the Study

Until this point, this thesis has only discussed CCP intentions and PLA capabilities. However, maritime transformation is a shift in grand strategy, not defense planning. As such, this net assessment will not be a traditional study of a military balance but rather a broader examination of USG-CCP\textsuperscript{125} strategic competition in the maritime space, to include military, political, and economic lines of effort. As will be demonstrated in the next sections, both U.S. and CCP policy planners understand their bilateral relationship in these terms.

Eliot Cohen, once a Military Assistant to the Director of Net Assessment, offers a valuable guide for conducting net assessments measuring military balances between two or more competitors. This thesis will modify Cohen’s template to consider a strategic balance rather than strictly a military one. Cohen lists four key points for net assessment: 1) frame the nature of the balance, 2) identify long-term trends, 3) understand differing concepts of operations, and 4) identify asymmetries in objectives and capabilities.\textsuperscript{126} This thesis will largely follow Cohen’s structure. The first two sections of this net assessment comprise an executive summary and introduction of the research question, existing literature, and research approach. The third section will address the assessment’s geographic, functional, and temporal parameters. The fourth section will describe the evolution of PRC grand strategy, its maritime transformation, and the military strategy necessary to implement CCP strategy over time.

\textsuperscript{125} Several instruments of Chinese sea power, including the naval and paranaval services, are controlled through Party, not State, instruments. As such, an accurate view of Chinese sea power regards the competition between the USG and the CCP, not the PRC.

fifth section will contextualize this maritime transformation by introducing competing U.S. interests and capabilities in the relevant theater. Taken together, the third, fourth, and fifth sections address the nature of the balance. The thesis proceeds from the strategic level to the operational level in the sixth section, which details significant trends and operational asymmetries shaping the trajectory of USG-CCP maritime competition. The seventh section will contextualize these trends with case studies of U.S. and CCP policy interactions in the South China Sea. A final section will leverage the assembled information to conduct an alternative futures analysis.

III. Parameters: How to Think about the USG-CCP Maritime Balance

This thesis argues that PRC maritime transformation takes place in the context of USG-CCP strategic competition. The USG and CCP have published strategic documents describing the United States as the world’s dominant power and the PRC as an emerging power challenging the global status quo. As the following sections will demonstrate, the object of this challenge is relative strategic influence, defined in this thesis as a state’s ability to compel desired behaviors from other states. Arguably, the most significant international strategic influence is exerted through security cooperation agreements, up to and including formal military alliances.\(^\text{128}\)

The current state of play reveals the stakes of USG-CCP strategic competition: under General Secretary Xi Jinping, the CCP has consistently championed an explicitly-stated objective of advancing a “new model of interstate relations” [新型国际关系] defined by a multipolar system fostering “win-win cooperation” that would displace the current U.S.-


dominated model, which CCP officials and documents describe as a Cold War-era relic tantamount to a hegemonic power structure.\textsuperscript{129} Xi's latest Work Report, delivered to the CCP 19th Party Congress in 2017, announced that the PRC will "encourage the transformation of the global governance system."\textsuperscript{130} The PRC's State Council Information Office released a subsequent white paper clarifying that evolution as one to a multipolar world in which no one country or bloc, implying the United States and its allies, is globally dominant. This proposed evolution has consequences beyond global security architecture: the same white paper articulates the CCP's argument that the world has entered a "new era" defined by the economic rise of developing countries such as the PRC and retrenchment in the overextended West.\textsuperscript{131}

The "new era" narrative claims Chinese economic growth is catalyzing an ongoing, fundamental change to the world economic and political system, and the U.S. and its allies must make room for the now rich and powerful PRC by abandoning military alliances to which the United States is party.\textsuperscript{132} For its part, the USG considers the CCP a revisionist power leveraging


\textsuperscript{130} The official English translation of Xi's work report strikes a somewhat softer tone than the Chinese version. The official English translation of this quote calls for the "evolution" rather than "transformation" of the global governance system. Yet Xi calls on the CCP to "transform" [变革] the global system, connoting a more urgent process of greater scale than "evolution," [演变] which implies a more gradual process. The full sentence reads, "倡导构建人类命运共同体，促进全球治理体系变革。” Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era [习近平：决胜全面建成小康社会 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利——在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告]" (speech, Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017), http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm.

\textsuperscript{131} This thesis refers to security architecture as defined by William Tow and Brendan Taylor: "an overarching, coherent and comprehensive security structure for a geographically-defined area, which facilitates the resolution of that region's policy concerns and achieves its security objectives." See William T. Tow and Brendan Taylor, "What is Asian security architecture?" Review of International Studies 36, iss. 1, (2010), 95-116, 96, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509990020.


\textsuperscript{133} PRC State Council Information Office, China and the World in the New Era, September 27, 2019, 30-33,
its increasing capabilities to reorder the Indo-Pacific geopolitical dynamic to Chinese strategic advantage and in accordance with authoritarian principles.\textsuperscript{134} To the extent that the USG resists the CCP’s destruction of its security architecture, the U.S. and PRC are locked in competition for strategic influence. As will be demonstrated in this thesis, the USG aspires to preserve its strategic influence broadly to thicken, expand, and internetwork existing alliance systems, while the CCP aims to accrue strategic influence vis-à-vis the U.S. and undermine the security partnerships which affords the U.S. outsized strategic influence.

\textbf{Sea Power}

The USG-CCP competition for strategic influence involves a significant maritime component, in which sea power will confer a significant advantage. This thesis uses Alfred Thayer Mahan’s concept of sea power, which has two key components: 1) market access to overseas resources and 2) battlefield command which guarantees such access when challenged.\textsuperscript{135} More simply, sea power describes a state’s ability to securely benefit from the oceans. According to Mahan’s classic formulation, a state with sea power necessarily has domestic industry, overseas markets, the ships to access them, and navies able to secure that access.\textsuperscript{136} Yet sea power is something a state can have as well as exert. Each component has strategic implications: market access facilitates economic interdependence, navies confer threats or reassurances, and fleet sizes determine the scale of those implications. A state pursues sea power for economic gain but develops a sea power strategy to advance political

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objectives, including changing a regional or global balance of power.\textsuperscript{137} In this way, international strategic competition in the maritime domain is animated by competing sea power strategies.

These strategies are shaped by the nature and objects of their competition. The CCP asserts that the PRC is the primary force stabilizing and powering the world economy.\textsuperscript{138} From that status, it claims the right to lead what it argues is a necessary reshaping of interstate relations, including the eventual breakup of U.S. alliances.\textsuperscript{139} Whether other nations agree or can be persuaded to act in agreement with this assertion to the detriment of U.S. strategic influence defines the essential character of the overall USG-CCP strategic competition. The extent to which maritime theaters can be leveraged to gain an advantage defines the character of the USG-CCP maritime balance. How the CCP plans to gain that advantage defines its sea power strategy.

The CCP’s sea power strategy draws on the PRC’s still-emerging sea power. The PRC and Imperial China before it are historically continental powers pursuing grand strategies with continentalist visions. The CCP’s turn toward sea power in strategic competition is a comparatively new phenomenon which constitutes a maritime transformation. PRC maritime transformation serves to build the CCP’s sea power and exert it in strategic competition, not least against the United States.

Sea power is not the same as naval power, and maritime transformation is not a strictly military endeavor.\textsuperscript{140} Similarly, neither the CCP or USG pursue sea power or command of the

\textsuperscript{137} Alfred Thayer Mahan, \textit{The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783}, (1890; reprint, New York: Dover, 1987), 82.
\textsuperscript{140} Mahan’s classic formulation of sea power includes 1) domestic production, 2) commercial shipping and the navies to protect them, and 3) colonies and markets abroad. Naval power alone is at best one half of one link in the chain of sea power. Alfred Thayer Mahan, \textit{The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783}, (1890; reprint, New York: Dover, 1987), 70-71. For additional discussions on this perspective, see Andrew S. Erickson and Lyle J. Goldstein, “Introduction: Chinese Perspectives on Maritime Transformation,” in \textit{China Goes to Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective}, eds. Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2009), XIV; James R. Holmes, \textit{A Brief Guide to Maritime Strategy}, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press,
seas as ends in themselves. Rather, states develop sea power strategies to exert sea power in pursuit of continental political objectives. As such, sea power itself is not strategic influence, nor is completing a maritime transformation the end goal of strategic competition. It is a means, not an end. In the context of competing sea power strategies, sea power is the latent economic and military resources and capabilities that a state can leverage to accrue strategic influence in maritime theaters.

**Time Frame**

To capture long-term trends, this assessment’s temporal scope will run from approximately 1999 to 2049, both dates marked by CCP objectives for strategic competition. Specifically, the CCP anticipates that the bulk of USG-CCP strategic competition will take place between these years. While neither the USG nor this thesis need to subscribe to this perception, that the CCP appears to believe it makes these dates bookends to an important range of USG-CCP strategic competition.

1999 is the year the CCP modulated Deng Xiaoping’s policy axiom, that “peace and development are the theme of the times,” [和平与发展是当代世界的主题] to allow for active strategic competition with the United States. If CCP leaders believe 1999 is the start of long-term USG-CCP strategic competition, they almost certainly believe it will end by 2049. That year marks the centennial anniversary of the PRC’s founding, and General Secretary Xi Jinping’s

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141 Mahanian sea power regarded the maritime domain as a commons for trade and considered navies necessary only insofar as they secure that trade. This concept emphasizes the use of the sea as a commons and the means to secure that use for a country’s political purposes and does not call for countries to construct political identities dependent on long-term sea control. In this way, Mahanian sea power is in the service of continental objectives and not an end in itself. See Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, (1890; reprint, New York: Dover, 1987), 25-27; Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict That Made the Modern World*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 4 & 18. For a similar argument, see Wayne P. Hughes Jr. and Robert P. Girrier, *Fleet Tactics and Naval Operations 3rd ed.*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 24-25.


143 This will be addressed in detail in the section “Prelude: Toward Strategic Opportunity, 1993 to 1999.”
2017 Work Report strongly implied it is the deadline for the CCP to realize its ultimate, loosely defined goal of “national rejuvenation” [民族复兴].

**Theater**

This assessment’s geographic scope will cover the Indo-Pacific region and distinguish between theater waters nearby and distant from continental China. The U.S. Department of Defense and Department of State have both identified the Indo-Pacific as top priorities. Similarly, the latest (2013) edition of the PLA Academy of Military Science’s *Science of Military Strategy*, an authoritative publication on PLA strategic thought which one leading scholar describes as “the apex of the PLA’s professional military literature on the study of war,” identifies a corresponding “two oceans region” [两样地区] which at minimum covers an “arc shaped strategic zone that covers the western Pacific Ocean and the northern Indian Ocean” but may also describe an expanse beyond the full breadth of the Indian and Pacific Oceans.

The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* describes interlinked strategic spaces with continental China as support and backstop [本土为依托], the two oceans region as the focal point [两样地区为重点], and space and cyber domains as the crux [太空和网络空间为关键]. Within the Indo-Pacific, the PRC additionally distinguishes between its coastal “near seas” [近海], comprising


the Bohai, Yellow, East China, South China Seas, and waters east of Taiwan, and the “far seas” [远海] beyond. Of the near seas, the South China Sea merits special attention following its designation as a “core interest” by CCP officials in 2010 and 2016. Of secondary but significant importance is the East China Sea, where CCP officials have reportedly described sovereignty over the disputed Senkaku islands as a core interest. Of the far seas, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) deserves special attention. Chinese media refers to PLA operations in the IOR, particularly operations in the Gulf of Aden, as implementing its “far seas strategy”.

IV. Objectives: The Maritime Turn in CCP Grand Strategy

The CCP has three nested objectives pertinent to maritime transformation: 1) achieving “national rejuvenation,” 2) making the PRC a “maritime great power,” and 3) making the PLA a “world-class military.” Under General Secretary Xi Jinping, achieving national rejuvenation is clearly situated as the CCP’s primary objective from which lower objectives particular to


149 The CCP designates its nonnegotiable issues “core interests” [核心利益]. While the CCP initially only designated unification with Taiwan as its core interest, the list of these interests has grown to include the South China Sea and other areas. See Michael D. Swaine, “China’s Assertive Behavior Part One: On ‘Core Interests.’” China Leadership Monitor 34, February 22, 2011, https://www.hoover.org/publications/china-leadership-monitor/winter-2011.


implementing entities are derived.\textsuperscript{154} Attending to national rejuvenation are supporting national- or ministry-level objectives, such as building the PRC into a “maritime great power” [海洋强国], which in turn requires the PLA, particularly the PLAN, to become a “world-class military” [世界一流军队] underpinning the CCP’s maritime power.\textsuperscript{155} As will be demonstrated, the process by which the CCP’s approach to national rejuvenation has increasingly incorporated maritime goals, including the objective of building the PRC into a maritime great power, constitutes PRC maritime transformation. This section offers a diachronic description of the plans and strategies that Chinese policymakers and military leaders have put into place to identify and realize these objectives.

**CCP Grand Strategy: Resolving Contradictions Toward National Rejuvenation**

This thesis defines strategy as how an actor arrays its resources in space and time to achieve its aims against its competitors.\textsuperscript{156} What makes strategy a grand strategy is the addition of a third variable: scale.\textsuperscript{157} When the scope of the actor’s competition grows to a scale at which an individual mind “would ordinarily miss or would perceive only after long study and reflection” the nature and outcome of the contest’s motions, it is grand.\textsuperscript{158} Yet competition is a dynamic process, and the inherently competitive element of a grand strategy precludes time-consuming study and reflection before taking action. As such, a grand strategy cannot be a long-considered, detailed plan with a rigid formulation of ends, ways, and means. Rather, grand


\textsuperscript{155} Xinhua, “Xi Jinping: Building a strong modern navy will provide strong support for realizing the Chinese dream of a strong military [习近平：努力建设一支强大的现代化海军 为实现中国梦强军梦提供坚强力量支撑],” May 24, 2017, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2017-05/24/content_5196520.htm.

\textsuperscript{156} I am grateful to Tom Mahnken for this definition.


strategy is a coherent conceptual framework that clarifies an actor-of-scale’s competitive ambitions, remains flexibly tethered to changing operational realities, and proves robust to uncertainty over time. It is “the intellectual architecture that gives form and structure” to competitive policy, but it is not the policy itself.\textsuperscript{159}

The CCP’s bid for national rejuvenation is a grand strategic objective. While “national rejuvenation” is modern terminology for a flexible conceptual framework which has been varyingly named over time, the consistent defining theme of CCP top-level policymaking is of aggrandizing the PRC in opposition to identified adversaries—particularly the United States.\textsuperscript{160} Across the scale of competing states, these objectives, paired against designated opponents, became what is now recognizable as a CCP grand strategy of national rejuvenation.\textsuperscript{161}

Chinese state media authoritatively describes the PRC as from its 1949 inception consistently opposed to behaviors it perceived as U.S. imperialism.\textsuperscript{162} This top-level strategic concept offered an objective to achieve as well as an opponent against whom to achieve it. In 1949, then soon-to-be Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai articulated the CCP’s chief objective as reclaiming once-controlled territories lost in war, such as Tibet and Taiwan, together into a


\textsuperscript{161} For a brief overview of existing literature on CCP grand strategy, see Andrew Scobell et al., \textit{China’s Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition}, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2020), 9-11, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2700/RR2798/RAND_RR2798.pdf.

single “China,” a statement of national invention which overlays the imported idea of a nation-state over a militarily unified territory. CCP Chairman Mao Zedong identified the United States as the CCP’s key opponent in its national invention when he used Marxist-Leninist terminology to label the United States to be the PRC’s “principal contradiction” [主要矛盾]. This intellectual architecture guided CCP foreign policy, including shaping Mao’s decision to enter the Korean War to secure a military buffer against the United States, until the principal contradiction changed again. In the 1970s, worsening Sino-Soviet relations, culminating in what the CCP considered Soviet invasions into Chinese territory, made the United States the PRC’s “secondary contradiction” [次要矛盾] relative to the Soviet Union. This was a shift in emphasis, not strategy: at no point did the CCP adopt an approach which was not competitive or not competitive against the United States. So long as CCP national policy continues to pursue a comprehensive objective such as national rejuvenation against an opponent such as one designated in its principal contradiction, the CCP is prosecuting a grand strategy.

The most recent versions of the CCP’s principal contradictions, revised in 1981 and 2017, continued to indicate CCP pursuit of national rejuvenation against an American


164 Mao Zedong uses the Marxist-Leninist terminology of contradictions to refer to ubiquitous matters which must be resolved in the interrelation of things, in so doing realizing objective scientific progress. According to Mao, there is only ever one “principal contradiction,” with an outsized role in the interrelation of things, to which other contradictions are subordinate. Marxist-Leninist theory in CCP thought will be discussed in greater detail in the section “Toward Naked Ambition, 2014 to Present.” See Mao Zedong, “On Contradiction” [矛盾论], August 1937, http://staff.ustc.edu.cn/~zuojin/arts/MPRC-MDE-193708147.pdf.


antagonist. While these revised contradictions focused on economic development and are not as obviously competitive as prior indicators involving military threat, the CCP’s transient prioritization of economic development belied enduring CCP interests in international competition which carry military risk. During the 1981 revision, the perspective that the United States was in decline dominated CCP discourse, leading CCP leaders to conclude that an insular focus on PRC economic development would be how the PRC would catch up with the developed economies of the world and, implicitly, restore China to great power status—in modern terminology, achieve national rejuvenation. Notably, even as the CCP in the 1980s continued to consider economically catching up to the United States a distant objective, it nevertheless benchmarked its progress against the United States economy, implicitly targeting American power in the CCP’s explicit goals to “catch up and surpass” the economies of developed countries. The CCP’s designation of seemingly non-confrontational economic principal contradictions enabled the PRC to build economic foundations for strategic competition without appearing to do so, and CCP propagandists sought to preserve that advantage with narratives of “China’s peaceful rise” or “peaceful development” while castigating any concerns of analysts in the United States and elsewhere as “China threat theory.”

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The CCP has a grand strategy. Its ambitions for national rejuvenation and competitive perspective against the United States form a coherent intellectual architecture spanning space, time, and scale, from which the PRC’s national- and ministry-level competitive policies are derived. Like all grand strategies, the CCP’s is consistent in intellectual frame-working and flexible in approach in the way necessary to respond to a dynamic world. While competitive elements targeting the United States have been present in CCP strategy and policy since the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, the post-Cold War incarnation of strategic competition began in ideation around 1993 and in earnest after 1999. The following section overviews three shifts in the CCP’s approach to its grand strategy of rejuvenation: 1) a turn toward actively prosecuting strategic competition from 1993–1999, 2) trends toward increasing international leadership from 2000–2013, and 3) the modern era of the CCP’s naked ambition beginning in 2014. The section is summarized in Table 2 below.


Table 2: CCP Grand Strategic Shifts, 1993–2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shift</th>
<th>Change in CCP guiding ideology</th>
<th>Revised CCP security assessment</th>
<th>Revised CCP policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shift 1: 1993–1999</td>
<td>“Peace and development” → “Peace and development” in a “period of strategic opportunity”</td>
<td>The United States will not decline precipitously and will continue to be a threat to CCP interests for decades</td>
<td>Concerted effort to build capabilities in an unannounced competition against the United States during a period of strategic opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift 2: 2000–2013</td>
<td>“Hide and bide” plus “make a difference” → “Strive for achievement”</td>
<td>The PRC economic model contrasts unexpectedly favorably against that of liberal democracies</td>
<td>Growing but still-restrained interest in an international leadership role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift 3: 2014–Present (ongoing)</td>
<td>“Strive for achievement” → “Strive for achievement” plus “profound changes unseen in a century”</td>
<td>Growing USG-CCP tensions may be closing the period of strategic opportunity</td>
<td>Open advocacy for the CCP to lead a global effort to replace U.S.-led alliances with a new global security architecture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Prelude: Toward Strategic Opportunity, 1993 to 1999

The CCP’s first grand strategic shift, completed in 1999, was one which recharacterized the threat it faced from the United States. In 1993, CCP leaders released official speeches and guidance that once again identified the United States as its primary strategic adversary on its path to national rejuvenation. This determination was a response to CCP perceptions of converging trends in the global balance of power, which CCP leaders believe positioned them well to begin a concerted long-term competition against the United States in pursuit of national rejuvenation. The CCP’s decisions reflected three of its perceptions: 1) a sharp reduction in the Soviet Union’s threat to PRC territory and to the CCP regime, 2) an important but nonurgent increase in the United States’ threat to CCP long-term interests, and 3) a long-term trend of decline for U.S. power.
From the CCP’s perspective, developments in the 1980s began a broad and enduring trend of easing security pressures on Beijing. In a series of meetings from May through July 1985, the Central Military Commission including paramount leader Deng Xiaoping determined that the intensity of bilateral U.S.-USSR military competition made the Soviet Union no longer likely to invade China, and as such, the CCP could plan long-term policy that did not need to account for total war.\(^{173}\) The following year, Chinese officials began announcing another assessment that both the Soviet Union and the United States were in the midst of long-term decline and that a multipolar international structure was emerging in the space once dominated by the two states’ military competition.\(^{174}\) The year after that, the CCP formally adopted Deng’s *tifa* [提法]\(^{175}\) which assessed that “peace and development are the themes of the times” [和平与发展是当代世界的历史] would characterize the CCP’s experience for several years to come.\(^{176}\) This *tifa* expresses a fundamental strategic assessment that the CCP enjoys a low threat of war and as such would be able to dedicate its efforts toward economic development for at least two decades.\(^{177}\) Deng first proposed this assessment at the Third Plenary Session of the CCP


Central Committee in 1978, and he continued publicly giving this assessment until it was formally adopted by the Party at the 13th National Party Congress in 1987.\textsuperscript{178}

The converging trends underpinning the “peace and development” assessment began to fray in the early 1990s. The Soviet Union’s 1991 collapse removed the military threat on China’s northern border but also upended the careful bipolar detente on which the CCP’s peaceful assessment rested.\textsuperscript{179} The CCP’s official postmortem on USSR collapse also identified political factors, including a U.S. strategy of “peaceful evolution” to force regime change in countries under Communist Party rule, as a new threat the United States posed to the CCP.\textsuperscript{180} Further tilting the global balance of power, the U.S. military’s performance in the Gulf War struck PLA researchers as the beginnings of a revolution in military affairs (RMA) [军事革命],\textsuperscript{181} or a significant shift in the nature of warfare which affects how future wars are likely to be fought.\textsuperscript{182}

Mounting CCP perceptions of the United States as a threat were significant enough to return the United States to primary competitor status in CCP strategy but, despite measured dissent among CCP leaders, did not change the official CCP position that the U.S. remains in decline. Two of General Secretary Jiang Zemin’s 1993 speeches show the CCP’s relative


\textsuperscript{180} Although the official postmortem was not published until 2004, accusations of U.S. efforts at regime change through “peaceful evolution” pervaded CCP and PRC discourse before the USSR’s official collapse. See David Shambaugh, China’s Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation, (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008), 48 & 60-69.

\textsuperscript{181} The RMA, which is varyingly defined but consistently regards a fundamental shift in how modern warfare will be conducted, originated as a Soviet idea which has become a salient strategic planning concept in U.S. and PLA defense establishments. See You Ji, “The Revolution in Military Affairs and the Evolution of China’s Strategic Thinking,” Contemporary Southeast Asia 21, no. 3 (December 1999), 344-364, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25798464.

ambivalence about the new opponent it designated. The first, delivered to PRC diplomats stationed abroad, noted that the USG-CCP diplomatic relationship will be one of "struggle and compromise."\(^{183}\) Jiang echoes Mao’s identification of the United States as the CCP’s principal contradiction by using this speech to label the United States as the CCP’s "principal adversary in foreign affairs for a long time to come," suggesting this adversity cannot end so long as the United States holds a globally preponderant position.\(^ {184}\) All the same, Jiang notes that the United States’ prosecution of a global strategy creates economic demands such that the United States has no choice but to cooperate with the CCP in order to access the PRC’s markets.\(^ {185}\) In Jiang’s telling, the same global stature which brings the United States into systemic competition and conflict with the PRC also fosters American dependence on Chinese markets, giving the CCP an outsized advantage in the competition.

Jiang’s other 1993 speech, which provided the PLA with guidance as it adopted a new military strategy, offered an equally optimistic military analysis. According to Jiang, despite deepening issues between and within Western countries that worked contrary to global peace, the PRC in 1993 was enjoying the "best" regional security environment since the founding of the People’s Republic.\(^ {186}\) While the CCP faced few current security threats, Jiang emphasized an emerging threat to CCP long-term ambitions in delivering his assessment that “hegemonism and power politics have become major obstacles to world peace and development,” using the

\(^{183}\) "既要有斗争也要有妥协“ See Jiang Zemin, “Diplomatic work must unswervingly safeguard the highest interests of the country and the nation” [外交工作要坚定不移地维护国家和民族的最高利益], (speech, at the 8th Meeting of Chinese Diplomatic Envoys to Foreign Countries, July 12, 1993), http://www.reformdata.org/1993/0712/5626.shtml.

\(^{184}\) "在今后一个较长时期内，美国仍是我国外交上打交道的主要对手" Jiang Zemin, “Diplomatic work must unswervingly safeguard the highest interests of the country and the nation” [外交工作要坚定不移地维护国家和民族的最高利益], (speech, at the 8th Meeting of Chinese Diplomatic Envoys to Foreign Countries, July 12, 1993), http://www.reformdata.org/1993/0712/5626.shtml.

\(^{185}\) “美国出于自身全球战略和实际经济利益的考虑，着眼于我国的巨大市场，又不得不在国际事务中寻求同我国合作，需要同我国保持正常关系，以便发展经贸合作。” Jiang Zemin, “Diplomatic work must unswervingly safeguard the highest interests of the country and the nation” [外交工作要坚定不移地维护国家和民族的最高利益], (speech, at the 8th Meeting of Chinese Diplomatic Envoys to Foreign Countries, July 12, 1993), http://www.reformdata.org/1993/0712/5626.shtml.

common Chinese pejoratives to refer to U.S. global presence and policy.\textsuperscript{187} This speech framed the introduction of new military strategic guidelines which reoriented the PLA toward war under “high-technology conditions,” reflecting the perceived RMA unveiled in the 1991 Gulf War, but also saw any potential conflict with the United States as a distant future possibility which would be deterred by economic interdependence, especially as the U.S. declines and a multipolar structure arises.\textsuperscript{188}

Speaking before the CCP’s diplomatic and military bureaucracies in 1993, Jiang issued policy guidance which revealed the CCP’s revised outlook as one which recognized the United States as the CCP’s principal strategic adversary. The assessment he offered was tempered by faith in U.S. decline, ultimately producing a grand strategy of nonurgent competition against the United States, in which rising military threats from a U.S. RMA are overtaken by economic interdependence, which only becomes more restrictive on U.S. policy decisions as the United States continues to decline.

The CCP’s grand strategic approach of nonurgent competition, as well as Deng Xiaoping’s “peace and development” \textit{tifa} underpinning it, came under fire in 1999. The CCP’s formal adoption of this \textit{tifa} in 1987 ran roughshod over meaningful dissent among Party leadership, and elements of the CCP continued to doubt whether the “peace and development” assessment was accurate in its displacement of previous paramount leader Mao Zedong’s earlier \textit{tifa}: that the international security environment was one of “war and revolution,” [战争与革命] and the CCP needed to prepare for near-term war with the United States and the Soviet


In 1999, a series of foreign policy disasters for the CCP, including closer U.S.-Japan ties on theater missile defense, renewed threats of Taiwan independence, and NATO intervention in Kosovo involving the inadvertent bombing of the PRC embassy, catalyzed quiet but longstanding doubts about “peace and development” within parts of CCP central leadership. The ensuing debate forced the CCP to reassess its official assessment of the international situation and was only resolved with a revision in CCP grand strategy.

Although the debate’s proceedings remain unclear, Jiang Zemin definitively settled the debate between August and September 1999 by promulgating a new analytic Party “line” upholding “peace and development” as the overriding trend of the times, though tempering that finding with three new findings: “hegemonism and power politics are on the rise, the trend toward military interventionism is increasing, and the gap between developed and developing countries is increasing.” These three findings describe the United States as a global hegemon that destabilizes the world with military intervention. While proponents of the “peace and development” tifa and the apparent shapers of CCP grand strategy in 1993 perceived the United States as in decline and therefore not a threat to their long-term ambitions, the new findings determined the United States would remain a hegemon able to threaten CCP interests for another two decades, and the CCP would need to prepare for bilateral competition as it developed. The findings did not reflect the assessment of the “war and revolution” tifa that a U.S.-PRC war was either imminent or unavoidable, but they did reveal sharply increased CCP suspicions of U.S. intentions. To account for this instability, the CCP pursued internal and external balancing strategies, investing heavily in the PLA while pursuing closer ties with

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Russia. A revised grand strategy responding to perceived near-term threats from the United States was in place.

The year following, Jiang Zemin delivered a Party Congress Work Report announcing that the PRC was enjoying a “period of strategic opportunity,” [战略机遇期] in which the PRC, enjoying a stable security environment while the United States was embroiled in conflicts outside East Asia, would be able to invest in domestic reforms without needing to expend significant resources deterring U.S. military activity on its periphery. While Jiang had made a similar announcement in his 1993 speech, and although discussions of the period of strategic opportunity commonly focus on economic development, the strategic imperatives emerging from the 1999 debate between Mao’s “war and revolution” and Deng’s “peace and development” make clear that the period is “strategic” insofar as it is an opportunity for the PRC to develop capabilities necessary to compete against perceived U.S. hegemonic activity and military intervention.

**Toward Striving for Achievement, 2000 to 2013**

The CCP’s second grand strategic shift since renaming the United States as its primary strategic opponent was the result of another debate over Deng’s *tifa: taoguang yanghui* [韬光养晦], commonly translated as “hide your capabilities and bide your time,” or simply “hide and bide.” Notably, the object of the “hide and bide” debate was not relitigating the determination of the 1999 debate. While the earlier debate, between “war and revolution” and “peace and development” was about accurately assessing the external threat facing the CCP, the debate

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over “hide and bide” regarded the PRC’s power and how the CCP should respond to its external threat as that power grows.

“Hide and bide” is a *tifa* reflecting a long running trend in Chinese foreign policy of predicating foreign policy interactions on the CCP assessment of the parties’ power relationship. While all diplomats of any country are likely to be aware of power dynamics at play in the international negotiations they join, the official Chinese approach to this assessment and how they permit negotiations to proceed afterward is distinctively formulaic. The CCP’s assessment of the USG-PRC power relationship produced the defining logic of the “hide and bide” approach: relative to the United States, the PRC was weak. As such, Deng Xiaoping in 1992 articulated a policy guidance that included a literary reference to a Qing Dynasty-era work, which became the now-famous *tifa*: “Only by hiding our capabilities and biding our time for several years can we become a true political power, and the PRC’s international pronouncements will carry a distinct weight. After we become more capable, we must improve our science and technology, national defense, and cutting-edge weaponry.”

Accurately assessing the CCP as having ambitions which outstrip the PRC’s capabilities, Deng emphasized that with the “hide and bide” approach, the PRC must also eschew any

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196 David Lampton describes four negotiation positions Chinese diplomats use pursuant to their assessment of the power relationship: 1) the PRC as the stronger country, in which its interlocutor has little leverage to shape CCP decisions, 2) the PRC as the weaker country, in which the interlocutor is morally obligated to assist or defer, 3) the PRC as likely to be in the stronger position in the future, in which negotiations are likely to be delayed until then, and 4) a reciprocal relationship in which both parties are mutually codependent. See David Lampton, *Following the Leader: Ruling China, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 201-204.

international leadership role and avoid the costs thereof, ensuring the CCP has the flexibility to exploit any opportunities, as they arise, to become an international political power. “Hide and bide” is necessarily competitive and suggests deception for strategic ends. As leading Chinese professors Chen Dingding and Wang Jianwei write, “it cannot be denied that the term [hide and bide] connotes trick and conspiracy in traditional Chinese culture.”

Jiang Zemin indicated his acceptance of a modification of the “hide and bide” approach in 1995 by pairing it with a second phrase: yousu zuowei [有所作为], a reference to the writings of Mencius, commonly translated “make a difference.” The added phrase connotes only modest ambitions, and Jiang offered this modification to “hide and bide” as a compromise, expressing that pairing “hide and bide” with “make a difference” reaffirmed the CCP behind Deng’s assessment of the international situation while loosening its restraints in the event the CCP finds immediate action more advantageous than hiding and biding. The resolution of the “peace and development” debate of 1999 and Jiang’s subsequent “period of strategic opportunity” only reinforced the prudence of “hide and bide” as the default Chinese foreign policy position, urging restraint in dealing with an adversary that CCP leaders now believe will wield hegemonic power for decades.

The 2008 global financial crisis sparked a second grand strategic debate within the CCP as some Party members, seeing U.S. economic fallout during the crisis, began to question whether “hide and bide” was still the correct approach to PRC foreign policy. Shortly after the crisis’ outbreak in September 2008, PRC state media began messaging that the crisis is a step

in the global trend toward multipolarity, as Deng predicted in his initial assessment of “peace and development” being the theme of the times, and that the PRC’s international stature is increasing in the midst of the crisis.202 Beginning one or two years after the effects of the crisis had subsided in the PRC, state media narratives emphasize the PRC’s increased significance in continuing to guide the global economy.203

CCP narratives of the PRC’s growing importance in the economic affairs of an increasingly multipolar world were simultaneously critical of U.S. political systems and the extent of American influence. Western analysts partially affirmed this impression with renewed interest in a possible “Beijing Consensus” by which developing countries align their economic policies with the PRC-inspired state control rather than the free markets and democratic elections which characterized the reportedly now-tarnished “Washington Consensus.”204 Liu He, who in 2008 served as the Deputy Director of the Office of the Central Leading Group for Financial and Economic Work [中央财经领导小组办公室] and has been a leading voice on PRC economic policy since his elevation to the Politburo in 2017, brought intellectual rigor to the disadvantages of liberal democracies and relative benefits of the CCP’s approach to resolving the financial crisis.205 Writing in a postmortem lauded by Harvard professors Graham Allison and Larry

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205 For Liu He’s background and policymaking role, see Brookings Institution, “Liu He 刘鹤,” March 18, 2018.
Summers, Liu described the 2008 crisis as exacerbated by “inability to reform and election considerations” as “governments tended to resort to populist policy announcements to appease the public” rather than taking decisive steps, as he suggests the CCP did, to stabilize the global financial system.206

Some elements of the CCP, seeing the global financial crisis as the beginnings of a global realignment of power away from the United States, questioned whether the USG-CCP power relationship was the same in 2008 as it was when Deng evaluated it in 1992, also calling into question whether “hide and bide” plus “make a difference” was still the most prudent guidance for PRC foreign policy.207 Recognizing this dispute, CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao attempted to split the difference in a 2009 speech to the PRC’s diplomats stationed abroad, in which he describes “hide and bide” and “make a difference” as a “dialectical unity” [辩证统一] to which he appended two modifiers: “persist in hide and bide and actively make a difference” [坚持韬光养晦，积极有所作为] (emphasis added).208

While the text of Hu’s speech seemed to simultaneously elevate both sides of the dialectical unity, Hu was reported to have personally insisted on the “actively” modifier to “make a difference,” suggesting a greater inclination toward the active foreign policy in line with “make...

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208 Hu Jintao, “Coordinate Planning for the Domestic and International Situations, Improve our Diplomatic Work Capabilities” [统筹国内国际两个大局，提高外交工作能力水平], (speech, Eleventh Meeting of China’s Diplomatic Envoys to Foreign Countries, July 17, 2009), in Selected Works of Hu Jintao Vol. 3 《胡锦涛文选 第三卷》, (Beijing: CPC Central Committee Document Editing Committee [中共中央文献编辑委员会], 2016), 236-238.
a difference” than with continued adherence to “hide and bide.” Hu’s other foreign policy initiatives indicated he preferred that the CCP increasingly “make a difference” in the world; in 2006, Hu delivered a speech to the United Nations envisioning a “harmonious world” which official Party documents describe as an expansive vision advancing a new security concept, reforming the international order, and reshaping norms of interstate behavior in opposition to “hegemonism and power politics,” an indirect but clear criticism of U.S. foreign policy. While not explicitly departing from Deng’s guidance to never seek international leadership, Hu’s “harmonious world” ambitions suggested growing interest among CCP leaders to take leading roles in international order-reforming and norm-reshaping. Still, Hu’s compromise did not settle the debate, and Chinese partisans toward increased global engagement selectively mixed Deng’s formulation with Hu’s, tacitly advocating for the CCP to “actively make a difference” while making perfunctory reference to the unmodified “hide and bide.”

The “hide and bide” debate was not resolved until current CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping took power and introduced two of his own policy-guiding phrases: “Chinese Dream” and “strive for achievement.” Xi’s initial contribution to the discourse was the “Chinese Dream,” a phrase melding Chinese ambitions for “national rejuvenation” with

212 For example, see M. Taylor Fravel, “Revising Deng’s Foreign Policy,” The Diplomat, January 17, 2012, https://thediplomat.com/2012/01/revising-dengs-foreign-policy-2/.
nationalist agitation and which he introduced in a speech given two weeks after his appointment as General Secretary.213 Xi’s speech, delivered at what John Pomfret describes as a “deeply xenophobic museum exhibition” called “The Road to Rejuvenation” [复兴之路], emphasized a “Chinese Dream” anchoring the objectives of PRC foreign and domestic policy in deeply-held historic grievances accumulated over 170 years.214 The “Chinese Dream” quickly became a CCP guideline around which important policy was organized, with Yang Jiechi leading the elaborations for foreign policy.215 Yang, previously the PRC Foreign Minister under Hu Jintao, enjoyed a dramatic elevation in stature in 2013 when he was appointed as a State Councilor and as the Director of the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Small Group, reporting directly to Xi Jinping on all matters of PRC foreign policy. While Yang’s early speeches to foreign audiences suggested that the prosperity-focused Chinese Dream was comparable to and compatible with the “American Dream,” which he left undefined, he also introduces a tacit competitive edge by pairing the Chinese Dream with “bottom line thinking,” [底线思维]216 which he describes as “working for the best but preparing for the worst.”217

216 CCP “bottom line thinking” is much more sinister than Yang presents. While Yang’s definition fosters mistrust, analysis from the CCP Party School finds that bottom line thinking also involves readiness to escalate should the CCP anticipate a potential conflict, further describing bottom line thinking as “walking on thin ice” and notes it is a “struggle” in which an actor must be prepared to take preemptive military action. See Xin Ming [辛鸣], “Practice Dialectics and Stick to Bottom Line Thinking” [学习时报：坚持底线思维的实践辩证法], Study Times [学习时报], January 23, 2019, http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0123/c40531-30586440.html.
Having established the Chinese Dream and all its grandeur as his policy objective, Xi’s foreign policy speeches in 2013 and thereafter abandoned the “hide and bide, make a difference” formulation. Instead, Xi’s new formulation, introduced in a speech delivered to PRC diplomats, emphasized “striving to achieve” the CCP’s objectives and marked a dramatic shift from the comparatively restrained “actively make a difference” or “hide and bide.”

This trend continued in 2014, as Xi’s major foreign policy speech to the Central Military Commission included a call to “strive for achievement” in pursuit of “grand rejuvenation” without reference to “hide and bide.” While the Xinhua readout of another similarly significant foreign policy speech Xi delivered that year, before the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference, did not specify a reference to “striving for achievement,” it does indicate he discussed the Chinese Dream, national rejuvenation, and a charge that Chinese foreign affairs work should advocate for new security concepts and models of great power relations in the world.

Xi Jinping effectively settled the CCP debate over whether PRC foreign policy should continue to adhere to Deng’s “hide and bide” tifa by displacing it entirely with a call to “strive for achievement.” Where Hu began measured departures from “hide and bide” by emphasizing “actively make a difference” and proposing a “harmonious world” concept of PRC foreign policy which implied increased PRC leadership in international relations, Xi has entirely cast aside Deng’s “hide and bide” guidance and instead called on the CCP’s military and foreign service to “strive for achievement” toward a Chinese Dream defined by nationalist fervor.

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The CCP’s grand strategic debates are parts of a dialectic process with compounding results: In 1993, the CCP determined the United States was once again its primary strategic adversary; in 1999, the CCP determined the United States would remain a dangerous competitor for decades more and that the CCP would need to invest in capabilities to compete; and in 2013, the CCP determined that the USG-PRC power relationship no longer required the CCP to eschew all international leadership positions, freeing the CCP to openly pursue its ambitions. Contiguous through these determinations is a common CCP ambition for greatness and international stature. Thereafter, CCP foreign policy under Xi Jinping has openly pursued a position at the top of a hierarchical global order.

*Toward Naked Ambition, 2014 to Present*

The CCP’s third grand strategic shift since 1993 remains underway as the implications of a CCP “striving to achieve” its objectives in foreign affairs unfolds. While analysts cannot know with certainty what debates may be taking place in Zhongnanhai, reports and several official speeches and documents suggest that CCP leaders, having adopted a posture in direct and largely unvarnished opposition to the United States, are reconsidering whether the intensifying competition with its primary strategic adversary has brought its “period of strategic opportunity” to an end. Likely consideration for CCP leaders may include whether the U.S. response to the CCP’s assertive posture following its shift from “hide and bide” to “striving to achieve” is an acceptable cost to the chosen policy, as well as how the CCP should respond.

Arguably the boldest new priority which the CCP under Xi is striving to achieve is the reordering of the Asia-Pacific security environment in direct opposition to U.S. regional influence. Speaking at the fourth Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures...
(CICA) summit in 2014, Xi explicitly called for Asian countries to “establish a new regional security cooperation architecture,” calling the existing U.S.-led alliance system the “outdated thinking from the age of Cold War and zero-sum game.” This narrative quickly promulgated the narratives of high-ranking PRC diplomatic and military policymakers, who expressed with urgency the need to build a “new model of great power relations” [新型大国关系] with the United States while simultaneously accusing the United States of being a destabilizing regional force.

The PRC began coordinating its foreign policy around undermining U.S. military ties in the region: for example, while negotiating a shared code of conduct in the South China Sea with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the CCP initially demanded that the code of conduct include a provision precluding any “foreign military power,” to include the United States, from having a military presence in the region. No longer was the CCP content with increasing its normative power in international affairs, as Hu Jintao’s “harmonious world” described. Under Xi Jinping, the CCP’s “striving to achieve” meant advancing a vision for international order which would displace the U.S. alliance network.

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The CCP’s nationalist turn toward ambitions of international leadership in opposition to U.S. alliance networks was clarified and extended to include the security architecture beyond East Asia in Xi Jinping’s 19th Party Congress Work Report. In his report, Xi unambiguously declared that the PRC will compete against the United States for global strategic influence and further claimed that CCP governance is entering a new era [新时代] in which the CCP would encourage the transformation of global governance to a multipolar system.226

The CCP adheres to a Marxist dialectical tradition that presupposes scientific natural laws [规律] by which the CCP can objectively understand and drive social progress.227 This progress is the resolution of contradictions [矛盾] which arise from misalignment of a society’s economic base and its politico-social superstructure, or political order; as the former develops, the latter must also evolve pursuant to natural law. Contradictions constitute the CCP’s theoretical conclusion that a political order is incompatible with emerging economic realities and must be rectified.228 Xi Jinping’s 19th Party Congress Work Report asserts that the principal contradiction facing Chinese society is one of inadequate development despite the populace’s growing needs.229 The CCP’s ongoing resolution of this contradiction is also Xi’s argument for global leadership: as the PRC develops in a way to successfully meet the needs of Chinese structure in East Asia, see Adam P. Liff, “China and the US Alliance System,” The China Quarterly 233, (2018), 136-165, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741017000601.


society, other states should replicate this success by adopting the “Chinese plan of action” [中国方案] for economic development. In Marxist terms, the PRC will lead other states to reshape the global economic base, creating an emerging economic reality which necessitates change in the global political order. In his 2017 Work Report, Xi called this a change one to a “new model of interstate relations” defined by a “community with shared future for mankind” [人类命运共同体].

The CCP further clarified this political change in a 2019 white paper reaffirming its belief that the global “economic structure is undergoing a profound adjustment,” specifically that “the rise of China and other...developing countries is fundamentally altering the international structure of power” such that one country or a bloc can no longer “exercise dominance in world affairs.” Xi claimed that in the new era of transition toward the new model of interstate relations, the PRC is approaching center stage in world affairs, where the CCP will exert greater leadership than before; his assessment on the changing structure of international power all but called on the United States to make room.

The change in PRC foreign policy under Xi Jinping


232 The 主要命运共同体 or “community with shared future for mankind” is often translated as “community of common destiny.” This thesis uses the official translation provided by the PRC. “明确中国特色大国外交要推动构建新型国际关系，推动构建人类命运共同体” Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era [习近平：决胜全面建成小康社会 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利——在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告], (speech, Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017), http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm.


234 “我国日益走近世界舞台中央、不断为人类作出更大贡献的时代。” Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era [习近平：决胜全面建成小康社会 夺取新时代中国特色社会主义伟大胜利——在中国共产党第十九次全国代表大会上的报告], (speech, Nineteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China,
should not be understated: in a December 2017 speech to PRC diplomats stationed abroad, Xi introduced what quickly became a new *tifa* when he said the new era is characterized by “profound changes unseen in a century” [百年未有之大变局].\(^{235}\) including the “irreversible” global trend toward multipolarization.\(^{236}\)

While Xi’s 2017 work report did not explicitly offer a revised security assessment, CCP foreign policy and military planning white papers issued in 2019 described the new era as one in which “the world is facing the danger of a relapse into fragmentation and even confrontation,” and the United States, by investing in its defense capabilities and strengthening its military alliances, is a significant driver of that danger.\(^{237}\) The CCP’s sense of increased danger because of the United States as portrayed in these white papers was not cheap talk; they appeared to reflect a growing debate beginning before Xi’s 19th Party Congress Work Report on whether tensions with the United States had effectively downgraded the PRC from a “period of strategic opportunity” to a “period of historic opportunity” [历史机遇期], with the salient change being

October 18, 2017), [http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm](http://www.gov.cn/zhuanti/2017-10/27/content_5234876.htm).


\(^{236}\) “放眼世界，我们面对的是百年未有之大变局。新世纪以来一大批新兴市场国家和发展中国家快速发展，世界多极化加速发展，国际格局日趋均衡，国际潮流大势不可逆转。" Hou Lijun [侯丽军], “Xi Jinping Receives and Delivers an Important Speech To the 2017 Conference of Diplomats Stationed Abroad” [习近平接见2017年度驻外使节工作会议与会使节并发表重要讲话], *Xinhua*, December 28, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2017-12/28/c_1122181743.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2017-12/28/c_1122181743.htm).

impressions among the CCP elite that they no longer enjoyed the permissive external environment Jiang Zemin highlighted in 2002. While Xi’s Work Report did reaffirm that the PRC remained in a period of strategic opportunity and not a historic one, subsequent speeches and other articles from Xi and other Party leaders referenced the “period of historic opportunity,” suggesting that the debate had not yet been resolved and that the voices calling for the end of the period of strategic opportunity may have grown louder since the 19th Party Congress.

The CCP’s communiqué following the 19th Party Congress’s Fifth Plenum, in October 2020, appears to indicate that CCP leaders have maintained confidence that they remain in a period of strategic opportunity while accepting the costs of winning strategic competition against the United States. The communiqué specifically states that despite significant new challenges and opportunities, the PRC will remain in a period of strategic opportunity because of the “profound changes unseen in a century,” including “profound adjustments to the international balance of power.” Even so, the CCP leaders who believe they remain in a period of strategic opportunity appear to be giving ground. While the communiqué’s description of adjustments to the international balance of power reaffirmed the CCP belief in multipolarization and U.S. decline, the 2020 document’s characterization is less sanguine than Xi Jinping’s speech at the 18th Party Congress Fifth Plenum in 2016, which described “unprecedented positive changes” in the international balance of power. Moreover, the 2020 communiqué introduced, and Xi’s

remarks at a subsequent Politburo group study session reaffirmed, a new emphasis on coordinating development with security [统筹发展和安全], apparently in recognition of the increased risks to development under a period of strategic opportunity that the CCP accrues as it continues to advocate a foreign policy at odds with the United States.242 This elevation of security interests alongside economic interests was reaffirmed in the 2020 revisions to the PRC National Defense Law; article 6 of the law was revised to describe “coordinated, balanced, and compatible development” between economic and national defense efforts, while the prior version243 stated that the PRC will “strengthen national defense while focusing on economic development,” clearly prioritizing economic development over security interests.244

**CCP Maritime Strategy: Becoming a Maritime Great Power**

CCP leaders have over the past decade described their pursuit of national rejuvenation as dependent on achieving a prerequisite goal of transforming the PRC into a “maritime great power,” [海洋强国]. When then-CCP General Secretary Hu Jintao first used the term in the 18th Party Congress Work Report in 2012, the phrase had, as Liza Tobin lays out, four

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characteristics: 1) the ability to exploit ocean resources, 2) a developed maritime economy, 3) preservation of the marine environment and 4) resolute protection of “maritime rights and interests” [海洋权益]. A few years afterward, General Secretary Xi Jinping described a broader concept involving economic development, international trade, ecological protection, and a modern navy as key constituents of the PRC becoming a maritime great power. Xi’s own policy pronouncements couch this pursuit in terms of “land-sea integrated planning” [陆海统筹] and further describes becoming a maritime great power as a critical step in realizing the CCP’s paramount objective of national rejuvenation.

This section will argue that Hu’s 2012 definition was a compromise which injected a new emphasis on sea power into elite CCP discourse at the highest levels despite having a definition drawing largely on Jiang Zemin-era terminology for maritime policy. Moreover, this compromise was a critical step for the CCP under Hu to begin envisioning its grand strategy in maritime terms rather than continental terms—in other words, to begin a maritime transformation.

Jiang Zemin’s Maritime Terminology

Jiang Zemin introduced into the PRC’s political discourse many of the foundational concepts of modern Chinese maritime policy and was the first CCP leader to establish “building


China into a maritime great power,” which he called an “important historical task” to be studied, as a national objective. This 2000 declaration sparked a surge of academic and policy articles in China attempting to define sea power and its application to the PRC. While the question of Chinese sea power was not settled during Jiang’s time as General Secretary, his leadership did anchor the debate in three interlinked phrases which persist in modern discourse on PRC maritime strategy: 1) the PRC’s “maritime rights and interests,” 2) Chinese “sea consciousness,” and 3) the “blue Chinese soil” that is the sea. Consistent with CCP grand strategic perspectives leading up to 1999, these terms referred largely to economic development without concerted efforts at international strategic competition.

Each of Jiang’s maritime terms is a flexible assertion of Chinese maritime sovereignty and right to exploit ocean resources for economic development. The PRC’s “maritime rights and interests” first entered Chinese legal parlance with passage of the 1992 PRC Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone Law as the plenary power to control foreign and domestic activity in China’s territorial seas and contiguous zone. The “rights” generally refer to exclusive rights to exploit maritime resources in waters over which the PRC lays claim, and the “interests” appear to secure SLOCs in China’s maritime periphery. Maritime rights

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and interests remain a staple of PRC policy, regularly appearing in official PRC five-year plans and responses to foreign governments over maritime disputes. Notably, these rights and interests are not rigorously bounded to PRC territorial waters, contiguous zone, or even China’s maritime periphery. As of 2010, the Director of the PRC State Ocean Administration referred to the PRC’s rights and interests in the polar regions, several thousand miles from China’s northernmost point, and by 2012 the SOA director insisted that it was necessary for the PRC to defend its maritime rights and interests beyond its territorial seas.

Chinese “sea consciousness” is less well-defined, seemingly referring to Chinese popular interest in and support for policies regarding these maritime rights and interests as well as other political, economic, and military applications of the sea. As early as 1995, Jiang Zemin had personally urged greater understanding of the ocean’s strategic value for the PRC’s long-term economic development and called for “enhancing the Chinese people’s sea consciousness.” A 1998 white paper on PRC maritime industry similarly described sea consciousness as necessary for advancing the PRC’s maritime economic development. Interest in building sea consciousness appears to be an enduring policy priority for the PRC, as

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five year plans in 2006 and 2016 include specific campaigns to build national sea
consciousness, with the latter plan setting an objective of building a national sea consciousness
propaganda-education-cultural system by 2020.258

Jiang and other top CCP officials under Jiang’s leadership made repeated reference to
China’s maritime periphery as “blue Chinese soil,” with U.S. and PRC experts alike assessing
that the CCP’s use of this phrase deliberately connotes an equivalence between territorial
claims and maritime claims in the way typical of a continental power.259 As early as 1991, Jiang
discussed as maritime strategic objectives protecting the “blue Chinese soil” and “blue treasure
house” [蓝色国土和蓝色宝库] of the ocean, conferring the PRC’s sovereignty and economic
maritime interests.260 In 1996, then CMC Vice Chairman and Politburo Standing Committee
member Liu Huaqing [刘华清] similarly called on the PLAN to develop its combat capabilities to
become “strong defenders of blue Chinese soil.”261 Like “maritime rights and interests” and “sea
consciousness,” “blue Chinese soil” has remained an enduring part of CCP discourse on
maritime policy, with PRC Ocean Development Reports [《中国海洋经济发展报告》] in 2010
and 2016 both using the phrase.262

258 PRC National People’s Congress, Outline of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan for Social Development [社会发展第十一个五年规划纲要], March 14, 2006, http://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2006/content_268766.htm; China News
Service [中国新闻网], “Thirteenth Five Year Plan for Publicity, Education, and Cultural Construction of National Sea Consciousness’ Published” [《全民海洋意识宣传教育和文化建设“十三五”规划》出台], March 8, 2016,
全民海洋意识宣传教育和文化建设体系” China Internet Information Center [中国网国情中心], “What is the Thirteenth
Five Year Plan for Publicity, Education, and Cultural Construction of National Sea Consciousness? [什么是全民海洋

260 Quoted in Shi Hongyuan [时宏远], “Jiang Zemin’s Thought and Practice on Sea Power: A Constructivist Analysis” [江泽民的海权思想与实践——基于建构主义的分析], Journal of Xuzhou Institute of Technology (Social Sciences Edition) [徐州工程学院学报 (社会科学版)] 27, no. 1 (January 2012), 24-26.
261 “只有领导和机关自身要求严, 做得好，才能抓好部队的战斗力建设，才能带领广大指战员做蓝色国土的坚强守卫
者。” Zhu Xuewen [朱学文], “Inspecting the East China Sea Fleet, Liu Huaqing Encourages the Navy to be Strong
Guards of China’s Blue Territory” [刘华清考察东海舰队时勉励官兵做蓝色国土的坚强卫士], Xinhua, May 20, 1996,
Hu Jintao’s Great Power Ambitions and Maritime Transformation

In the course of shaping greater international ambitions for the CCP, Hu Jintao began but could not complete within his tenure a PRC maritime transformation to realize those ambitions. Hu’s ambitions for the CCP to “actively make a difference” in shaping a “harmonious world” and his inability to set aside the Deng-era political restraints on CCP foreign policy paralleled his partial success in enlisting sea power as handmaid of the PRC’s rise in global power and influence.

Hu began clarifying a position that the CCP should openly seek great power status and that building sea power was the means to do so quickly after he took office in 2002. Having weak military credentials and ultimately spending much of his tenure attempting to earn the PLA’s goodwill rather than firmly directing their activities, Hu made outreach to the PLAN a key pillar of his sea power effort. After Jiang Zemin delivered his final Party Congress Work Report, which announced the period of strategic opportunity and spoke of maritime policy only with regard to economic development, Hu struck a more assertive tone, calling on the PLAN to expand its mission and capability set by making a “gradual transition to far-seas defense, enhancing the far-seas maneuvering operations capabilities.” He strengthened this call in 2004 when he announced the PLA’s “new historic missions,” which expand the PLA’s mission set to safeguard national interests in, among others, the far reaches of the maritime domain.

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The defense white paper released that year similarly introduced an imperative for the PLAN to be able to seize “command of the sea,” [夺取制海] a defining component of Mahanian sea power.266

Hu’s overtures to the PLAN ran parallel to a campaign he waged within the CCP to make becoming a maritime great power a defining objective. This effort began in 2003 with two steps: first, the PRC releases a long-term maritime development plan which describes the “overall goal of developing the maritime economy” as, among other things, “gradually building the PRC into a maritime great power.”267 While this specification, the last in a lengthy list of maritime economic development objectives, was released with little fanfare, it was an early articulation in a high-level planning document that becoming a maritime great power was now a PRC objective and no longer only a matter to be studied, as Jiang had directed three years prior. Second, Hu’s speech at the final Politburo group study session in 2003 regarded the history of the rise of great powers, and the study session concluded by commissioning a study into the factors giving rise to countries becoming great powers.268 While presently available open source documents do not offer any certainty that Hu intended to or did successfully shape the findings of this study, the results were congruous and fortuitously timed with other steps Hu took to urge the CCP to prioritize making the PRC a maritime great power.

Also in 2003, CCP propaganda outlets began previewing the 600th anniversary of Zheng He’s 1405 voyage, scheduled to fall in 2005; this propaganda campaign stressed an invented

narrative of China’s proud maritime tradition and associated it with “the greatness of Chinese Civilization.” The propaganda campaign included establishing July 11, 2005 as the first annual “Navigation Day,” during which state media outlets celebrate PRC themes such as PRC maritime greatness and the peaceful nature of Chinese civilization. In 2013, retired PLAN Admiral Zheng Ming stated openly that promulgating the Zheng He narrative was instrumental in increasing Chinese sea consciousness and building the PRC into a maritime great power.

After laying the foundations in 2003 and campaigning for greater sea consciousness in the years following, official documents and one of Hu’s own speeches published in 2006 appeared to reveal Hu’s bid to build a maritime vision into how the CCP pursues great power. First, the 11th Five Year Plans published in March offered new imperatives and challenges in PRC maritime development. The Five Year Plan for Social Development included a section acknowledging Jiang’s maritime terms of sea consciousness and maritime rights and interests before emphasizing in comparatively stronger terms the need to exploit marine resources in the PRC’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and seabed resources along China’s continental shelf and in international waters. The 11th Five Year Plan for the Development of Marine Science


and Technology specified that the PRC is a “maritime large power but not a maritime great power” [我国是一个海洋大国，但不是海洋强国].

As if to answer the new interests and challenges raised in the 11th Five Year Plans, the study on factors contributing to great power status commissioned in 2003, called *Rise of the Great Powers* [大国崛起] was completed and published in November 2006. As Andrew Erickson and Lyle Goldstein explain, the study “suggests that national power stems from economic development fueled by foreign trade, which can in turn be furthered by a strong navy... *The Rise of Great Powers* suggests that developing maritime power is necessary but not sufficient to support the rise of a great power.” Ensuring the findings are publicized, the study was published as an eight-volume book set and a twelve-part documentary on the state television network, where it received significant popular and expert attention.

In December 2006, Hu Jintao again spoke to the PLAN at the 10th PLAN Party Congress, where he explicitly called the PRC a “maritime large power” in need of a more powerful navy to ensure PRC security and sovereignty. The several threads of Hu’s messaging through CCP and PRC organs between 2003 and 2006 coalesce into three key points: 1) the PRC is a maritime large power but not a maritime great power, 2) the PRC should

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dedicate resources to and pursue in earnest a goal of making the PRC a maritime great power,
and 3) the components of sea power, including foreign trade safeguarded by a powerful navy,
are also components of great power status.

Although state media articles surrounding the release of *The Rise of Great Powers*
made reference to national rejuvenation, Hu’s campaign for the CCP to undertake a concerted
effort toward maritime great power status faced opposition from adherents to a continental
grand strategic vision and as such did not include a public, explicit statement that making the
PRC a maritime great power is necessary for national rejuvenation.\(^{277}\) When delivering his Work
Report at the 17th Party Congress in 2007, Hu was only able to offer that the marine industry is
among those which ought to be transformed from "large" to "strong" [促进工业由大变强].\(^{278}\)
Despite Hu’s apparent preference for a maritime transformation in the CCP’s grand strategy, his
efforts between 2004 and 2006 did not accrue enough political support to pass the consensus-
building process in advance of the 17th Party Congress.

Chinese academic and bureaucratic publications at this time generally agreed that sea
power was important, but whether it was so important as to displace a primarily continentalist
view of threat perception, economic and military investment, and diplomatic strategy remained
hotly disputed.\(^{279}\) In 2003, a recognizable “sea power school” among Chinese academics
asserting that command of the seas is a teleological evolution from command of land in the
course of human development began taking shape, drawing criticism from prominent

电视台 12 集大型电视纪录片《大国崛起》隆重推出]. November 14, 2006,

\(^{278}\) Hu Jintao, “Hold High the Great Banner of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics and Strive for New Victories in
Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in all Respects” [高举中国特色社会主义伟大旗帜为夺取全面建设小康社会
新胜利而奋斗]. (speech, Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 15, 2007),

Since the Early 1990s" in *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, eds. Phillip C. Saunders,
academics such as Ye Zicheng [叶自成] at Peking University and Xu Qiyu [徐弃郁] at the PRC National Defense University, who considered the informal group’s emphasis on sea power and deviation from a land power focus dangerously fallacious.\textsuperscript{280} The PLAGF, which as the largest PLA service dominated the military’s structure and readily used its bureaucratic heft to defend its mission sets and resource allocation, likely lodged similar protests in private, given the likely tradeoffs the PLAGF would endure if the PRC resourced the PLAN to pursue rejuvenation through sea power.\textsuperscript{281}

\textit{Hu Persists with Land-Sea Integration}

Writing in 2007, Peking University professor Li Yihu [李义虎] distilled the land power vs. sea power debate as one which required "establishing a holistic concept integrating land and sea priorities to replace the traditional mentality that the land outweighs the sea."\textsuperscript{282} While Li did not originate this concept or phrase, his proposed solution touched on a recurring theme in Hu’s second and final term as CCP General Secretary. Perhaps suggesting the influence of Li’s holistic concept, he was appointed to the Foreign Affairs Committee at the 11th National People’s Congress [全国人民代表大会外事委员会] the following year.\textsuperscript{283} In Hu’s second term, this holistic land-sea approach became a prominent message which defanged continentalist opposition to a greater maritime emphasis in PRC foreign policy planning and ultimately

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empowered Hu to include making the PRC a “maritime great power” a national objective in his 18th Party Congress Work Report.

Hu continued pressing forward with ambitions of beginning a maritime transformation, notably attending the 60th anniversary of the PLAN, which state media and foreign analysts described as the PLAN’s “coming out” as a modern navy.284 In the years following, several PRC state organs released high-level policy and strategic documents emphasizing the need for a holistic approach to the PRC’s continental and maritime priorities. In 2010, the National People’s Congress Vice Chair Chen Changzhi [陈昌智] described the primary task of PRC maritime economic policy as taking a holistic approach to continental and maritime development [首要统筹海陆发展].285 At the same time, State Oceanic Administration head Sun Zhihui [孙志辉] described the PRC maritime development strategy as one which adheres to a holistic land-sea approach [坚持海陆统筹].286 These themes return in 2011 as part of the PRC’s 12th Five Year Plan, which includes a chapter promoting development of the marine economy which, for the first time, describes greater PRC engagement in international maritime affairs.287 The 12th Five Year Plan also calls for formulating a maritime development strategy which implements a holistic approach to land and sea.288

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These efforts to defang continentalist objections partially paid off in 2012, when several elite CCP developments and statements, including the 18th Party Congress Work Report, appeared to reinforce parts of Hu’s interests in applying a concerted effort, including increased naval investment, toward transforming the PRC from a maritime large power into a maritime great power in pursuit of national rejuvenation. Although Hu-era messaging did not emphasize or develop Jiang-era terminology, Hu’s partial success came from framing the objective of becoming a maritime great power in those terms. Hu renewed Jiang’s focus on maritime rights and interests for the purpose of increasing CCP hard power at sea. In 2012, the CCP saw renewed interest in preserving these maritime rights and interests in the form of a newly-established Central Maritime Rights Protection Leading Small Group [中央海洋权益工作领导小组] as well as a newly-emboldened paranaval interest in securing those rights: in July 2012, PRC Maritime Surveillance [中国海监总队] Party Secretary Sun Shuxian [孙书贤] introduced a newly belligerent line in the PRC’s regard for its rights and interests by calling for use of military force, up to and including waging a war, to defend disputed maritime claims.289 When Hu announced in the 18th Party Congress Work Report that one of the CCP’s objectives was now to make the PRC a maritime great power, he characterized that objective as largely Jiang-era goals of maritime development, adding only a hard military edge to resolutely protect maritime rights and interests [坚决维护国家海洋权益，建设海洋强国].290


As delivered, Hu’s 18th Party Congress Work report tied the “maritime great power” objective back to Jiang-era sovereignty and economic development concerns rather than forward-looking ambitions of national rejuvenation and global leadership he exhibited when emphasizing the CCP should “actively make a difference” in global affairs. Hu was unable to overcome objections in the consensus-building process ahead of the 18th Party Congress and could not tie Chinese sea power to national rejuvenation. Some indicators that year following the Party Congress hint that these aspects of the Work Report represented a compromise position, and some bureaucratic elements expressed positions more in line with Hu’s vision for great power status rather than Jiang’s narrower focus on maritime rights and interest. State Oceanic Administration head Liu Cigui [刘赐贵] offered an authoritative interview in which he described becoming a maritime great power as the only way for the PRC to become a global great power and additionally offered that becoming a maritime great power is necessary for the PRC to defend its maritime rights and interests beyond its territorial seas. Similarly, the Chinese Academy of Sciences began publishing articles assessing the PRC as a maritime large power and discussing ways it could become a maritime great power.

Xi Jinping Continues PRC Maritime Transformation

Not unlike their respective efforts to turn the CCP toward a more activist foreign policy, Xi benefitted from and continued Hu’s work in driving PRC maritime transformation. Shortly after

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291 Hu Jintao, “Coordinate Planning for the Domestic and International Situations, Improve our Diplomatic Work Capabilities” [统筹国内国际两个大局，提高外交工作能力水平], (speech, Eleventh Meeting of China’s Diplomatic Envoys to Foreign Countries, July 17, 2009), in Selected Works of Hu Jintao Vol. 3 《胡锦涛文选 第三卷》, (Beijing: CPC Central Committee Document Editing Committee [中共中央文献编辑委员会], 2016), 236-238.
293 Li Naisheng [李乃胜], "From a Maritime Large Power to a Maritime Great Power [李乃胜：从海洋大国到海洋强国]," Chinese Academy of Sciences [中国科学院], November 11, 2012, http://www.cas.cn/xw/zjsd/201211/t201211120_3685601.shtml.
assuming power in 2012, Xi presided over a 2013 Politburo group study on increasing the CCP’s attention to oceanic affairs and unambiguously declared that becoming a maritime great power was necessary for PRC national rejuvenation. In the same speech, Xi struck a veiled bellicose tone when elaborating on resolute protection of maritime rights, saying the CCP needs to balance its interests in regional stability with its interest in safeguarding maritime rights, adjusting this policy to match the PRC’s national strength. Xi signaled that as the CCP strives for achievement and builds its national power, it would begin to adopt an increasingly confrontational maritime posture against foreign countries, including the United States. This was a tacit shift away from the passive power-building policy characteristic of Jiang Zemin’s “period of strategic opportunity”: under Xi, the PRC would amass as well as exert power.

Reinforcing these signals, that same year the PRC State Council formed a State Oceanic Commission [国家海洋委员会] under the State Oceanic Administration to “strengthen the holistic planning and comprehensive coordination of maritime affairs” [为加强海洋事务的统筹规划和综合协调] as well as “formulate a new national maritime development strategy” [制定国家海洋发展战略]. The same State Council reforms added a hard edge to this strategic planning by consolidating PRC constabulary and paranaval forces within the newly-created China Coast Guard, merging the State Oceanic Administration’s China Maritime Surveillance Force with the


Ministry of Public Security’s border defense and maritime customs police. Official PRC planning documents under Xi’s leadership would continue to emphasize the need to transform the PRC into a maritime great power and centralize maritime strategic planning. The 13th Five Year Plan, released in 2016, closes its section on maritime rights and interests with a line referencing strengthening top-level planning of an existing “maritime strategic plan” [加强海洋战略顶层设计]. The 13th Five Year Plan also distinguishes itself from its past two predecessors with greater international security ambitions, referring to the PRC’s overseas interests as well as an intention to build a system to protect those interests [海外利益保护体系]. In 2018, the CCP further empowered the Central Maritime Rights Protection Leading Small Group by elevating it to the Office of Maritime Rights and Interests [海洋权益工作办公室] within the newly-created Office of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission [中央外事工作委员会办公室]. As noted earlier, commissions wield policy decision making power that is denied to leading small groups, which largely serve a policy coordinating function between multiple implementing agencies.

Like Hu, Xi faced significant continentalist opposition in the PLAGF, and policy documents issued under his leadership continued situating maritime ambitions for the PRC in terms of a holistic land-sea approach: the 13th Five Year Plan and Xi’s first Work Report, delivered at the 19th Party Congress in 2017, emphasized adhering to the holistic land-sea approach in making the PRC a maritime great power. However, Xi’s speeches and guiding

299 See footnote 104.
documents issued under his leadership were also more combative against PLAGF influence. The PRC’s Defense White Paper released in 2015 urges that “the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned,” closely referencing Li Yihu’s 2007 rationale for the holistic land-sea approach. PLA analysts were keenly aware of Xi’s interest in cutting down the size of the PLAGF: in a two-part PLA study on Xi Jinping’s thoughts on the military, several papers included repeated reference to language calling for the end of a “big ground force” mentality.

Xi’s statements and official documents published under his leadership similarly continued Hu’s partiality for PLAN investment over PLAGF interests. The 2015 Defense White Paper signaled Xi’s strong support for the PLAN’s modernization into a blue water navy and explicitly stated that the PLAN will “gradually shift” its focus from “near seas” defense to simultaneous near and far seas protection; since the 2006 Defense White Paper called for extending PLAN strategic depth, all Defense White Papers (issued in 2008, 2010, and 2013) had used the same boilerplate language stipulating that the PLAN has a near seas defense strategy and remains in the course of building capabilities for far seas protection. Even more explicitly, Xi’s remarks at the 12th PLAN Party Congress clarified that building a powerful navy is necessary for a world-class military.

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provides strategic support for transforming the PRC into a maritime great power [是建设海洋强国的战略支撑], and is an important component of realizing Chinese national rejuvenation [是实现中华民族伟大复兴中国梦的重要组成部分].

Xi-era statements and official policy documents demonstrate that the sea power school has prevailed over the land power school at the highest levels of the CCP’s consensus-building process. By linking the national objective of becoming a maritime great power to the CCP’s grand strategic objective of national rejuvenation, Xi completed the maritime transformation of CCP strategic planning. However, operationalizing the newly accepted maritime vision will require a laborious maritime transformation at the bureaucratic level, including standing down the entrenched interests of the PLAGF. To that end, PRC maritime transformation is not yet complete.

**CCP Military Strategy: Toward a World-Class Navy**

Xi Jinping’s 2017 work report provides the latest iteration of the CCP’s “three-step” PLA modernization timeline; according to this timeline, the PLA should “basically realize mechanization” while laying the groundwork for informationization by 2020, “basically realize the modernization of national defense and the military” by 2035, and be a fully-built “world-class military” by midcentury, likely 2049. Although the “world-class” designation proliferates CCP and PLA planning documents as well as state media articles, no clear definition exists for what exactly the CCP would consider a world-class military. PLAN leaders have undertaken this

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charge as one to develop the PLAN into a “world-class navy” [世界一流海军] that is “commensurate with China’s nationhood in the world.” As noted earlier, Xi has specified that a world-class navy is necessary for making the PRC a maritime great power and achieving national rejuvenation. These ambitions remain distant: the CCP describes the PLA as lagging “far behind the world’s leading militaries” and repeatedly notes an outstanding need to develop a modern maritime military force able to fulfil its mission set, including deterring U.S. operations and being able to “win” conflicts. CCP efforts to build PLAN capabilities largely fall into 3 categories: 1) technological and theoretical development, 2) PLAN modernization, and 3) training. This section will overview CCP objectives of PLAN force development “world-class” status before turning to force employment in the service of increasing CCP strategic influence, directly through military diplomacy and indirectly by securing other influence-building policy initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The first area the CCP is has targeted PLAN capabilities for improvement regards technological and theoretical development. The CCP believes the PLA faces risks of “technology surprise” and a “growing technological generation gap” which foster CCP fears that the U.S. will develop innovations which constitute “absolute military superiority.”


these challenges, the CCP has directed the PLA to improve its technological innovation capabilities.\textsuperscript{311} In pursuit of greater military technological innovation, the CCP in the Xi era is taking a two-pronged approach, including its 2016 National Innovation-Driven Development Strategy [国家创新驱动发展战略], which directs political capital toward prioritizing potentially dual-use technological innovation in the course of economic development, and a military-civil fusion [军民融合] initiative to guide corporate and local government investment in China toward dual-use sectors.\textsuperscript{312} Xi has personally endorsed these efforts in his speeches, urging the PLA to develop and leverage emerging technologies as a component of broader PLA modernization.\textsuperscript{313} These efforts are not new; the PRC has put forward centrally-planned strategies to advance technological innovation with a focus on dual-use technologies since the release of the Medium and Long-Term Defense Science and Technology Development Plan in 2006.\textsuperscript{314} The parallel plans’ significance is the introduction of the obvious military objectives driving the CCP’s interest in technological innovation. The 2016 National Innovation-Driven Development Strategy sets milestones paralleling the PLA’s three-step modernization timeline, aiming for the PRC to be an “innovation nation” by 2020, an international leader of innovation by 2030, and a “world great power of scientific and technological innovation” [建成世界科技创新强国] by 2050.\textsuperscript{315}


The second category of CCP efforts regards PLAN modernization. Ongoing PLA reforms demonstrate CCP expectations that a modernized PLAN must be capable of: blue-water power projection as well as achieving joint operational synergies with other PLA services, including the CCG and People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM).

PLA strategists understand blue-water projection as pushing the PLA “strategic front-line” further from China’s shores and securing strategic depth. This process involves improving PLAN warship quantity and quality. By sheer hull count, PLAN shipbuilding has proceeded at an impressive rate, with Chinese shipyards launching 10 destroyers in 2019, illuminating scale to the shipbuilding effort which also includes launching eight of the flagship Type 055 destroyers in just over three years (August 2017 to August 2020). PLAN destroyers also feature capabilities approximate to those of their U.S. counterparts: while expert analysts consider the PLAN Type 052D destroyer inferior to the U.S. Navy’s Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, the PLAN’s Type 055 destroyer is widely considered to have capabilities exceeding any Arleigh Burke. The PLAN’s pursuit of improved capabilities has opened a gap with the U.S. Navy in terms of ship-launched anti-ship missiles. PLAN guided missile destroyers,
particularly the Type 052C, Type 052D, and Type 055 are equipped with YJ-18 anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM) boasting operational ranges of 290 nautical miles and HQ-9 anti-air missiles (80 nm).\textsuperscript{320} The U.S. Navy, which equips its warships with the Harpoon ASCM featuring an operational range under 80 nautical miles, has had to invest resources to improving their anti-ship missile capabilities to close this gap.\textsuperscript{321}

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{plan_warships_commissioned_1994-2019.png}
\caption{PLAN Warships Commissioned, 1994-2019}
\end{figure}

Parallel to building a surface combatant force structure capable of blue-water projection, the PLAN has also been modernizing its fleet of supply ships for replenishment-at-sea, which

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
remains a known capability gap in the PLAN. Analysis from Jane’s has found that the Type 903A and Type 901 PLAN supply ships currently have the capacity and speed, and are being produced at a rate such that the PLAN will soon also have the requisite number, to enable expeditionary operations.

Joint operational capability is an acknowledged PLA weakness. CCP efforts to rectify this include rebalancing the service blend among students in military education and increasing PLA participation in international military exercises, but demonstrated technological and operational capabilities for joint operations remain nascent; the PLAN only received its first command and decision-capable vessel in 2019, and the PLA at large appears to still be experimenting with different command information networks at the brigade level, suggesting the military is not yet equipped for joint command across an integrated interservice command information network. While PLAN coordination with other PLA services appears weak, PLAN coordination with the CCG and PAFMM remains a distinct strength; PLAN-CCG-PAFMM coordination has markedly increased following incorporation of the paramilitaries into the PLA command structure and ongoing interaction between the services. The PRC has also taken steps to strengthen legal authorities for the CCG’s use of force in 2020 by passing a revised PAP Law permitting PLA-PAP joint exercises for noncombat operations, offering new legal

authorities for the CCG to take constabulary action pursuant to securing the PRC’s interpretation of its maritime rights, and drafting a Coast Guard Law offering limited discretion for the CCG to fire its weapons on foreign vessels if justified as a police action.327

The final category of CCP efforts to build a world-class navy regards PLAN training. The PLA assesses its officers as lacking combat experience, resulting in the “Five Cannots” [五个不能]: they cannot 1) judge the situation, 2) understand superiors’ intention, 3) make operational decisions, 4) deploy troops, or 5) handle surprises.328 The PLA solution is leadership training, and their sense of progress can be tallied in frequency of term use.329 PLA servicemen broadly lack combat experience as well, which the PLA is attempting to remedy with virtual reality training experiences and increased peacekeeping deployments to the Gulf of Aden.330

A world-class PLA would offer the CCP an effective tool for realizing the CCP’s envisioned new model of interstate relations by acting as a potent tool able to displace the U.S. alliance structure insofar and erode U.S. strategic influence in and beyond the Indo-Pacific

327 As part of a 2018 government reorganization, the PAP assumed command over the CCG. As such, the 2020 PAP law permitting joint PLA-PAP exercises also provides legal authority for joint PLAN-CCG exercises. Although the exercises permitted under the 2020 PAP law do not include wartime combat operations, joint MOOTW exercises build important experience and command structures that will support interoperability in wartime. For the 2020 PAP law, see PRC Ministry of Justice, People’s Armed Police Law of the People’s Republic of China [中华人民共和国人民武装警察法], June 20, 2020, http://www.moj.gov.cn/Department/content/2020-06/22/592_3251131.html. For an analysis on the 2020 PAP law’s granting of authority for the CCG to take constabulary action to secure maritime rights, see Zhu Ziyang [朱紫阳], “China’s Coast Guard has carried out a series of special law enforcement actions to ensure maritime security and stability” [中国海警系列专项执法行动 保障海上安全稳定], People’s Daily, June 22, 2020, http://legal.people.com.cn/n1/2020/0622/c42510-31755823.html. For the draft Coast Guard Law authorizing the CCG to fire on foreign vessels, see the draft Coast Guard Law available at Wei Changhao, “NPCSC Solicits Public Comments on Draft Coast Guard Law,” NPC Observer, November 4, 2020, https://npcobserver.com/2020/11/04/npcsc-solicits-public-comments-on-draft-coast-guard-law/.


In China’s far seas, CCP documents describe reshaping the global superstructure from one of “Cold war mentality and power politics” to one which reapportions greater power to non-Western, developing countries and displaces military alliances with dialogue-driven partnerships. The PLA’s role in building this new model of international relations is primarily military diplomacy, which the CCP hopes will build international support for its preferred rules of behavior. As shown in Figure 3 below, the PLAN is a significant driver of the PRC’s military diplomacy, leading a plurality of international exercises over the past two decades. The PLAN’s importance has continued to grow over time: looking at only 2019 data, the PLAN accounts for a full 50% of the PLA’s international military exercises.

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Although the PLAN’s functional effort in the far seas is largely the same as in the near seas, the strategic environment in which the PLAN is building its partnerships is decidedly different, as PLAN strategy dictates an “active posture” in the near seas and a “reactive posture” in the far seas, which makes the far seas a less complex security environment for PLA military diplomacy. The CCP more readily quantifies far-seas diplomatic engagements and measures progress by number of: countries participating in exchanges; PRC military attaché offices established abroad; foreign attaché offices in China; and defense dialogue mechanisms in place. The CCP shows steady progress as more countries engage the PLA and more engagements become more combat-oriented with deterrence potential.

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While not explicitly discussed in Defense White Papers, the PLAN also appears to advance CCP strategic influence abroad by safeguarding the Belt and Road Initiative and by taking advantage of dual-use investments associated with the BRI to extend PLA reach. Xi Jinping first proposed the initiative as a massive infrastructure investment campaign ostensibly leveraging Chinese capital and labor to improve nodes of connectivity with China’s neighbors and enhance economic exchange and joint development. The BRI is not simply a means for the PRC to unload excess capital: notably, CCP sources describe the BRI as a “strategy.” The BRI has become a framework for Chinese economic leadership abroad, and the CCP advances BRI objectives in the belief that improved infrastructure will foster increased economic integration, which fosters regional cooperation in turn. The BRI is also an opportunity for the PLA to expand global military access and build military-to-military contacts with countries beyond the Indo-Pacific. This military goal is among Xi’s explicitly-stated objectives for the BRI: in a 2019 address to the Central Party School, Xi described protection of the PRC’s overseas interests as an “imperative” to be addressed by building a “security guarantee system for the Belt and Road Initiative.”

BRI investments have included commercial seaport facilities with limited dual-use applications which appear to be what PLA strategic documents consider “strategic strongpoints,” i.e. PRC-controlled ports which in times of crisis can offer limited forward basing

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services such as replenishment. According to the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, the PRC has already successfully leveraged economic cooperation through the BRI to secure PLA access in foreign airfields. Similarly, the port of Gwadar, among the BRI’s largest investments, is designed with specifications that could feasibly support the largest PLAN vessels and does regularly support Pakistan Navy vessels purchased from the PRC.

The PLAN itself has not yet used Gwadar as an overseas base, however, and despite the CCP’s broad efforts to derive military benefit from overseas investments, developing the requisite facilities and infrastructure for a military presence has remained a persistent challenge.

V. Competitor: USG Maritime Interests and Operations

The United States uses military power to secure enduring interests of physical security, economic growth, and free democratic institutions by defending these same interests abroad, creating what observers commonly term the “liberal” or “rules-based” international order. In other words, the United States projects power globally to create environments in which U.S. interests are secured, and challenging that global power projection or reshaping the environment correspondingly threatens U.S. interests. American power shapes a global status quo defined by imperfectly implemented principles such as free trade and democratic values across the globe, and one underpinned by forward military basing in allied countries and


command of the commons, by which the U.S. military can project to any theater to secure its interests.\textsuperscript{350} States enacting foreign policies that appear to challenge the international status quo are thus “revisionist” powers, and the prospect that the PRC is a revisionist state has endured for decades.\textsuperscript{351} USG documents during the Trump Administration began referring to the PRC as a “revisionist” power.\textsuperscript{352} While the Biden Administration has not used the same term, its Interim National Security Guidance similarly characterizes the PRC as undermining “the rules and values at the heart of an open and stable international system.”\textsuperscript{353}

The USG secures American interests by denying efforts at revisionism. The USG has 3 key objectives to deny revisionist activities: to 1) develop competitive advantages, 2) defend the rules-based international order, and 3) preserve American strategic influence. Each objective is available in public strategy documents: The 2017 National Security Strategy stipulates that the USG must increase its competitive advantages vis-à-vis the PRC, particularly in operations “below the threshold of open military conflict.”\textsuperscript{354} The 2019 DOD Indo-Pacific Strategy Report accuses the CCP of undermining the region’s rules-based international order.\textsuperscript{355} Finally, the U.S. Navy’s mission includes preserving U.S. strategic influence by deterring aggression and defeating adversaries should deterrence fail.\textsuperscript{356}

These objectives are the latest iteration of a U.S. grand strategy that has remained largely consistent since its formation during the Cold War: U.S. grand strategy shifted from “containment” of the Soviet Union to “primacy” across economic, military, and diplomatic lines of effort in building and subsequently maintaining a world order in which American power is preponderant.\textsuperscript{357} Despite undulations between administrations favoring far-reaching maximalist foreign policies and those favoring global retrenchment, which one scholar-practitioner observes arises because “almost every new occupant of the Oval Office thought the world had changed in some fundamental way that his predecessor either totally misunderstood or failed to manage effectively,” this cycle of maximalist-retrenchment foreign policies consistently circled debates over how best to manage the accepted fact of U.S. primacy.\textsuperscript{358}

**Sustaining U.S. Primacy**

Michael Green’s comprehensive survey of U.S. policy in Asia demonstrates a “central theme” contiguous over time: “that the United States will not tolerate any other power establishing exclusive hegemonic control over Asia or the Pacific,” and in line with this theme, U.S. policy has made the USG the “preeminent power in the Pacific.”\textsuperscript{359} That is, USG has denied the rise of regional hegemons in the Indo-Pacific with policies in pursuit of U.S. primacy. President Donald Trump’s administration considered maintaining “U.S. strategic primacy in the Indo-Pacific region” its primary national security challenge in the region.\textsuperscript{360} The USG sustains its primacy and meets its key objectives for the maritime balance via 3 operational objectives: 1)


increase the U.S. military’s margin of superiority vis-à-vis its competitors, 2) expand and integrate its network of allies and partners, and 3) demonstrate political resolve.

Regarding the first operational objective, the USG is developing new military capabilities and operational concepts to maintain its margin of military superiority. Following the Cold War, the U.S. has enjoyed military superiority sufficient for hegemonic leadership in every region of the world. This overmatching superiority underpins a denial strategy that constrains the ambitions of would-be regional hegemons, with advanced military capabilities and operational concepts that leverage forward operating bases and technological advantages. DoD considers forces based in-theater integral for achieving U.S. strategic goals insofar as they deter adversaries, enable immediate response to aggression, and prevent tactical losses which would require the USG to transition strategies from denial to punishment or rollback. Similarly, every U.S. National Security Strategy since 2000 prioritizes maintaining U.S. technological leadership.

While progress on new technologies remains classified, USG efforts toward developing new operational concepts have been pronounced. The U.S. national defense policy community has responded to the National Defense Strategy Commission’s urgent call for new operational...
For the Pacific theater, for example, DoD leadership considered operationalizing a maritime pressure strategy involving deployment of survivable, land-based precision-strike networks within the PLA long-range strike threat envelope. The USG has made a priority of developing new strategic and operational concepts for maritime competition with the PRC: the FY2019 National Defense Authorization Act required the President to submit a whole-of-government strategy for competition with the PRC, including the use of military means available to the CCP to affect the United States and its allies. Similarly, U.S. military services are making concerted efforts to reimagine and retool themselves for strategic competition with the PRC: U.S. Navy has planned large-scale exercises in 2021 to test new operational concepts to frustrate Chinese surveillance capabilities, the U.S. Marine Corps has released a radical new force design concept to become a naval expeditionary force extending threat over the CCP's naval and missile assets, and the U.S. Army is investing in long-range maritime strike capabilities.

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The USG’s second operational objective is to expand and integrate the U.S. alliance network. The USG considers its network of allies and partners a “force multiplier” for deterrence and interoperable warfighting capability and is working to thicken its ties with regional allies. The U.S. alliance network in the Indo-Pacific is a series of bilateral security guarantees; as such, factors which reassure allies such as demonstrated military capability or preparedness meaningfully contribute to Pacific alliance cohesion insofar as they assure allies of the U.S. military’s ability to deter or prevail over an adversary. To reassure allies in the face of PLA naval modernization, DoD is preparing for high-end competition through procurement of advanced platforms. DoD is also evolving in-theater U.S. force posture by expanding defense cooperation with Pacific Island nations, for example recently partnering with the Australian government to develop a naval base on Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island. This effort signals an extension of existing U.S. commitments to Pacific Island nations, in particular the Compact of Free Association, which offers U.S. security guarantees in exchange for military access and basing.

The U.S. is also promoting increased U.S. military interoperability with its allies and partners as well as between U.S.-allied militaries; while these efforts thicken the United States’

369 Interoperability is the relative ability of different nations’ militaries and their organizational structures to work together and achieve each nation’s objective.
security ties, those ties have not reliably increased international political cohesion. U.S. experience with Japan and Singapore illustrate this point.

The U.S.-Japan alliance is the cornerstone of American power in the Asia-Pacific, exhibiting both increased military interoperability and political alignment over time. The U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation Guidelines, updated in 2015, created an Alliance Coordination Mechanism expanding military coordination across all levels of conflict, provided for enhanced training, and increased functional domain awareness cooperation.375 The Japanese government has also accepted greater responsibility for regional security by increasing military spending and procuring an island to serve as a training site for U.S. forces.376 The Abe Shinzo and Suga Yoshihide governments maintain an outsized role in networking U.S. regional security partners Australia, India, and, unofficially, Taiwan.377 Of these, Japan-Australia ties are the most developed, with the two states announcing preliminary agreement on a defense arrangement permitting their forces to train in each other’s countries and, separately, agreed in principle for the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force to protect Australian maritime assets; both steps are apparent signals of balancing against Beijing.378 Nonetheless, Tokyo suspended a planned deployment of the U.S. Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense system, citing the program’s costs

despite its strategic importance to the U.S. military posture against the PRC, and Japanese officials have so far declined to host American land-based missiles which could threaten the Chinese mainland.\textsuperscript{379}

The U.S.-Singapore strategic partnership reflects a close military partnership which drives only partial alignment between political agendas. Singapore is the foreign country with the largest military presence on U.S. soil, and the two countries continue to upgrade their security partnership with military facilities agreements and joint exercises.\textsuperscript{380} Even so, U.S.-Singapore strategic cooperation does not translate into total political alignment; Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong argued at the 2019 Shangri-La Dialogue that “the rest of the world has to adjust to a larger role for China,” and the United States, as “the preeminent power, has the most difficult adjustment to make.”\textsuperscript{381} Similarly, when in 2020 the U.S. Secretary of the Navy proposed basing a new Indo-Pacific fleet near where the Indian and Pacific Oceans meet, perhaps in Singapore, the Singaporean Ministry of Defense appeared cool to the idea, noting only that no adjustment is being made or requested from current policy.\textsuperscript{382}


The USG’s third operational objective is to demonstrate political resolve lending credibility to its foreign policy.\(^\text{383}\) The USG makes credible its security guarantees, simultaneously tightening its alliances and deterring potential adversaries, with expressions of political resolve.\(^\text{384}\) Adversity is endogenous to resolve; a nation exhibits political resolve against competitors who attempt to demonstrate the converse and erode its political credibility, so presaging future failures in aggression deterrence.\(^\text{385}\) Various USG policies and documents since 2000 signaled a resolve to militarily dominate the PRC.\(^\text{386}\) During the George W. Bush administration, the Office of Net Assessment’s (ONA) 2001 Defense Strategy Review (DSR) discussed coming military challenges that ONA Director Andrew Marshall described as shifting U.S. long-term focus toward Asia.\(^\text{387}\) The DSR findings informed the 2001 and 2006 Quadrennial Defense Reviews’ areas for enhancing military capability; then–Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Thomas Mahnken described the latter document as being “really—albeit not exclusively—about China.”\(^\text{388}\) The Bush administration began revising U.S. military force posture in Asia, which the Barack Obama administration continued as part of its Pivot to Asia/Asia-Pacific Rebalance. Among other efforts, the Rebalance involved deploying new high-end platforms such as “F-22, Virginia-class submarines, and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)” to the theater.\(^\text{389}\) The Obama administration paired this change in U.S. Indo-Pacific force posture with direct appeals from then President Obama and then Secretary of


State Hillary Clinton to Southeast Asian states, urging them to directly challenge PRC activities while suggesting these challenges would have U.S. support.\(^{390}\) The Donald Trump administration’s military tool of choice to signal maritime resolve in the Indo-Pacific has been the Freedom of Navigation (FON) operation (FONOP), which asserts freedom of navigation regardless of other nations’ excessive claims; DoD will continue these operations and encourage allies to participate in such.\(^{391}\) The Trump administration escalated PRC-targeting FONOPS, conducting 7 in 2018, up from 4 in 2015 and 2016 each.\(^{392}\)

USG resolve-demonstration policy produced mixed results, with particular weaknesses in the Obama administration’s policy. After implying political support for challenges to PRC South China Sea claims in 2011, the USG withheld political support for the Philippines when it issued one such challenge at Scarborough Shoal in 2012, during which “the United States chose to accept the outcome of China’s assertiveness.”\(^{393}\) As U.S. credibility declined, Philippine Secretary of National Defense Delfin Lorenzana declared intentions to strengthen or abandon the Philippines’ mutual defense treaty with the United States, which required an appeal from then Secretary of Defense Mark Esper to maintain.\(^{394}\) USG policy has also made successful assurances, including President Obama’s declaration that the contested Senkaku


islands under Japanese administration are protected under the U.S.-Japan security treaty as well as receiving increased support from Australia, Canada, France, Japan, New Zealand, and the UK for FON in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{395}

Central to the varying results of U.S. policy toward the PRC prior to its recent turn toward USG-CCP competition was its principle of engagement, which sought to shape the CCP into a pliable partner for the United States by fielding a capable military capable of deterring by denial any potential of PLA mischief while simultaneously aligning the CCP’s interests with U.S. interests by establishing Kissingerian linkages between CCP political decisions and its ability to benefit from global markets.\textsuperscript{396} This policy dramatically overestimated the USG’s ability to shape CCP decision making; as senior Obama Administration officials Ely Ratner and Kurt Campbell came to recognize, CCP ambitions and insecurities vis-à-vis the United States exceeded USG analyst assessments, to the extent that the mere presence of U.S. military forces and alliances in Asia were “unacceptable” to the CCP.\textsuperscript{397} Not until the Trump and Biden Administrations did public USG national security documents recognize the CCP for the revisionist power that it is or adopt policies regarding the CCP as a competitor rather than a regime that can be managed to avoid competition altogether.\textsuperscript{398}


Enduring USG Maritime Interest: Freedom of the Seas

U.S. expressions of political resolve in maritime affairs demonstrate the American predisposition toward upholding the freedom of the seas, which in current iteration is predicated on U.S. military access wherever permitted by international law. American maritime policy in the Asia-Pacific demonstrates consistent values and operations but muddled objectives since the late 1970s. U.S. maritime policy, including FONOPs, across administrations emphasized freedom of the seas as an American value not to be constrained by a great power competitor or by international law. Although the U.S. FON Program self-describes as “based on principle,” the logic and expression of U.S. FONOPs prioritize U.S. military access in competition with foreign powers while demonstrating measured indifference to international law. This section offers the strategic logic behind the U.S. FON Program during the Cold War and contiguous elements with current operations targeting excessive PRC maritime claims.

The history of U.S. maritime policy shows an American predisposition toward the freedom of the seas, loosely defined by confidence that law-abiding citizens can cross international waters free from the fear of molestation by foreign vessels, especially precluding seizure of private property. The ideal underpinned the U.S.-Prussia Treaty of 1785, the second of President Woodrow Wilson’s 14 Points in 1918, the controversial League of Nations meeting at the Hague in 1930, and U.S. negotiations on the United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea in 1958. Following the Cold War, the U.S. military’s singular ability to leverage

command of the commons for global power projection further cemented the principle’s importance in American strategic culture.⁴⁰²

While FONOPs are not the sum of U.S. policy reflecting freedom of the seas, they are the product of a policymaking approach which self-interestedly pursued that freedom while disregarding international agreements. U.S. interest in FONOPs arose with the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), an international agreement enumerating the limits of maritime claims and permissible types of activities in them. In 1979, as a third round of UNCLOS negotiations were underway, President Jimmy Carter directed his National Security Council (NSC) to identify options to ensure FON for the United States even if it does not become an UNCLOS signatory. Carter’s NSC recommended a formal FON Program by which the United States “protest claims of other States that are inconsistent with international law and U.S. policy, with particular reference to extended territorial sea claims as well as the regime therein.”⁴⁰³

Carter’s NSC recommended a FON Program that served as the basis for President Ronald Reagan’s 1983 Oceans Policy, which had two key points: 1) the U.S. will recognize the rights of other states pursuant to UNCLOS if that state reciprocates for the U.S. and other states, and 2) the U.S. “will exercise and assert its navigation and overflight rights and freedoms on a worldwide basis in a manner that is consistent with the balance of interests reflected in the convention” but will not “acquiesce in unilateral acts of other states designed to restrict the rights and freedoms of the international community in navigation and overflight and other related high seas uses.”⁴⁰⁴ Reagan’s publicly announced policy implied the USG’s political calculus reflected

an international “balance of interests,” and this message continues to be how the modern U.S. FON Program describes itself.\textsuperscript{405}

Reagan’s messaging was a veneer over self-interested U.S. policy set the year prior. In December 1982, the Reagan White House issued National Security Decision Directive 72, wherein the USG would follow a set schedule of FONOPs to “protect U.S. navigation, overflight, and related security interests in the seas through the vigorous exercise of its rights against excessive maritime claims,” to ensure the U.S. enjoys UNCLOS’ benefits without being subject to its restrictions.\textsuperscript{406} Moreover, Reagan-era FONOPs were primarily assertive tools by which the U.S. shaped its strategic environment with threats of escalation, not tools to champion international freedom of navigation. FONOPs deployed in the Cold War included presence operations threatening provocative Soviet activities. The Soviet Union was geographically disadvantaged for maritime competition and depended heavily on passage through the Black Sea to deploy one of its three major fleet concentrations.\textsuperscript{407} Accordingly, the Reagan administration deployed warships on innocent passage FONOPs through the Black Sea on a regular basis, culminating in Soviet naval vessels ramming two U.S. warships in 1988, to which the Reagan administration responded by launching FONOPs directly following major Soviet naval exercises and sending a nuclear-powered cruiser to transit the Black Sea.\textsuperscript{408} International sea lines of communication were not at risk in these scenarios; Reagan’s FONOPs threatened

\textsuperscript{408} John Lehman, Oceans Ventured: Winning the Cold War at Sea (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 223-225.
to bottle the Soviet navy at geographic chokepoints in the Black Sea and so fulfilled their primary purpose.

President George H. W. Bush modified Reagan’s FON policy by discontinuing the preset FONOP schedule and additionally specifying that the program’s purpose is to “preserve the global mobility of U.S. forces by avoiding acquiescence in excessive maritime claims of other nations,” and President Bill Clinton’s administration left Bush’s policy unchanged.409

After the Cold War, the U.S. FON Program was little publicized until President Barack Obama restarted FONOP patrols in the South China Sea. In 2015, the Obama administration ordered the USS Lassen to conduct a FONOP sailing within twelve nautical miles of Subi Reef, a feature of disputed sovereignty administered by the PRC; while the United States does not recognize Subi Reef as an island conferring a twelve nautical mile territorial zone as is the right of islands under UNCLOS, PRC statements at that time implied a sovereign claim to Subi Reef, among other South China Sea features, as well as twelve nautical miles of territorial sea around those features.410

Though much of the public discourse surrounded interpreting UNCLOS and the legitimacy of the PRC claims,411 the 2015 FONOP’s timing suggests it was a retaliation to a growing military threat rather than sovereignty per se. In 2014 and 2015, the PRC escalated its South China Sea island-building campaign, by which it poured sand atop features not normally above sea level, dredged harbors, and constructed radars, airstrips long enough for military

bomber takeoff and landing, and piers long enough for warships to dock. These islands offer the PLA a forward-leaning posture that threatens U.S. military overmatch in the region and risks the U.S. military’s ability to guarantee seaborne transit in the region.

Correspondingly, the Lassen’s transit in October 2015 was the first in a semi-regular FONOP schedule targeting Chinese claims in the South China Sea and East China Sea through 2016. President Donald Trump’s administration increased the South China Sea FONOP tempo; the USG conducted two South China Sea FONOPs in 2015, three in 2016, six in 2017, five in 2018, and nine in 2019.

The Trump administration followed the Reagan administration’s pattern of executing a self-interested FON Program for great power competition akin to Reagan’s National Security Decision Directive 72 while publicly describing the FON Program as the most visible part of a comprehensive policy defending “freedom of navigation and overflight in the Indo-Pacific” region broadly. DoD describes its FONOPs as protecting the region’s “stable economic order,” and the State Department asserts its FON Program operates with Indo-Pacific partners “so that all nations can access and benefit from the maritime commons.” This description suggests the Trump administration attempted, as Reagan’s administration did, to prosecute a great power

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competition strategy under the veneer of defending public goods for allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific.

Despite public narratives of U.S. values aligning with international law, U.S. maritime interests have consistently prioritized military access. The DoD FON Program exemplifies U.S. priorities with presence operations which reject potential adversaries’ activities or force postures that may restrict U.S. military access.

VI. Trends and Asymmetries

This section discusses key trends in the CCP’s maritime transformation and relevant operational asymmetries with the USG. Trends discussed span the multifunctional nature of sea power as an instrument of strategic competition. Discussed trends include trajectories in CCP or USG national security policymaking, such as their respective visions for naval force structure, and CCP responses to the enduring realities to which the competitors are forced to respond, such as Indo-Pacific geography. Appended to the discussion of each trend and its role in CCP maritime transformation are the operational asymmetries in each sides’ national security establishment that might give the trend outsized impact to one competitor.

China’s Economic Future

PRC economic growth and how it is perceived constitute the competitive baseline from which other enduring trends of the USG-CCP strategic competition are derived. As detailed in Section IV, CCP white papers assert a narrative that the world has entered a “new era” of development defined by the economic rise of developing countries, led by explosive Chinese economic growth, and receding U.S. influence. Xi Jinping explicitly tied PRC economic development to global leadership at the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in 2017, saying

“China’s development is an opportunity for the world,” and the PRC “will open our arms to the people of other countries and welcome them aboard the express train of China’s development.”

The demonstrated success of PRC economic growth has two functions in USG-CCP strategic competition. First, the international perception of continued PRC growth underpins the CCP’s Marxist justification for driving change in the global superstructure: the CCP’s exhibition of a superior economic model is necessary to increase its stature and claim to global leadership. The narrative of a rising PRC and a declining West is the CCP’s fundamental argument in USG-CCP strategic competition. Second, sustained economic growth funds CCP maritime transformation through sustained commercial investments and long-term PLAN modernization.

**Figure 4: The CCP’s Argument: Percentage Share of the World Economy Between Advanced Economies and Emerging Markets**

![Graph showing percentage share of the world economy between advanced economies and emerging markets from 1991 to 2018.](source)


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However, declining returns on fixed asset investment and Beijing’s persistent inclination to rely on investment as a stimulus of economic growth suggests that the once-explosive rate of Chinese economic growth will not be enduring. To the extent that this growth represents a systemic change in the global order, the most significant effects of such have likely already occurred. This subsection considers the PRC’s future economic growth before turning to identify key budgetary asymmetries between the PRC and USG pertinent to the future of the maritime balance.

_Trend: Diminishing Returns on Chinese Fixed-Asset Investment_

The PRC sustained remarkable annual GDP growth for decades, peaking at 14.23 percent in 2007 followed by steady growth rate declines. Much of this growth was driven by an investment-led growth model largely dependent on fixed-asset investments. Declining GDP growth rates over the past decade indicate structural changes in the PRC economy which require a new growth model to arrest the decline. Official PRC publications indicate CCP leaders are aware of the need for a new growth model; still, Chinese leaders continue to pursue investment-led growth to arrest economic downturn.

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Figure 5: Annual PRC GDP Growth Rate and Growth Target, 1999-2019

Sources: various.\textsuperscript{422}

Long-term economic growth potential is determined in the short term by demand side factors and long term by supply side factors. PRC economic growth policy emphasizes demand. Beginning in the mid-2000s, the contribution of fixed asset investment to PRC GDP growth spiked after the global financial crisis of 2007-2009. This reflected broader trends: PRC economic growth since 1990 has been increasingly dependent on high levels of fixed asset investments in terms of volume as well as investment consistency. Just as importantly, CCP leaders have been inclined toward increasing state-funded fixed asset investments to increase PRC economic growth, particularly in times of crisis.

For decades, the PRC successfully grew its fixed asset investment stream; the PRC maintained an average annual growth rate of 20.2 percent in fixed asset investment from 1981 to 2017. PRC gross capital formation, which includes fixed-asset and inventory investment but during this period was overwhelmingly driven by the former, consistently grew as a share of its GDP from the inception of the People’s Republic. This trend continued in the PRC’s recent

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economic history, with gross capital formation comprising 34.11 percent of PRC GDP in 1999 and growing to 43.79 percent in 2018.\textsuperscript{429}

The PRC’s rapid economic growth through the mid-2000s is due in large part to this fixed asset capital investment, which grew to, then maintained a high rate because of a consistently high rate of return, a ready labor supply, and entrepreneurial expectations of rapid economic growth.\textsuperscript{430} Rapidly growing investments required financing, and the PRC’s capital investment, financed by significant domestic savings and foreign investment, drove a virtuous cycle defined by rapid productivity growth.\textsuperscript{431} A landmark study published by the World Bank Group and the PRC State Council’s Development Research Center (DRC) argues that PRC total factor productivity measured about 3.51 percent from 1998-2008, and that these levels helped explain the PRC’s elevated economic growth rates.\textsuperscript{432}

Returns on PRC fixed asset investment have predictably\textsuperscript{433} declined as the productivity of its capital continues to diminish, as shown in Figure 6.\textsuperscript{434} The decline in PRC GDP growth rates directly corresponds to increases in the PRC investment capital output ratio (ICOR), in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item The PRC economic growth model as described herein closely matches the Harrod-Domar growth model, whereby growth rate is effectively a function of the productivity of capital and the rate of investment, and the rate of investment is a product of the domestic savings rate. Under this model, the productivity of capital will be particularly high in earlier stages of development as investment fills longstanding needs, but that productivity will diminish as those needs are filled.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
which a higher ICOR indicates less production efficiency and, as such, less economic growth for capital invested.

**Figure 6: Economic Growth and Declining Returns on Capital Investment in the PRC, 1999-2018**


Parallel to diminishing Chinese productivity and GDP growth is the starker World Bank and DRC assessment of a full collapse in fixed asset investment’s contribution to PRC economic growth across the mining, manufacturing, infrastructure, and service sectors. Even as the PRC’s share of global manufacturing increases by large margins, investment in China’s manufacturing sector has minimal returns.435

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Analysts recognize several factors to be slowing PRC GDP growth, including government interference with resource allocation, an excessively high debt leverage ratio following the 2008 financial crisis, the collapse of demand growth for China’s exports, and the continuously rising savings and investment rate. Continuously high investment likely led to overinvestment in and thus overcapacity in some sectors.  

This explanation is reinforced by the proclivity of PRC provincial government officials, who are politically incentivized to use fixed asset investments as a constant stimulus, leading to a pattern of overinvestment in unnecessary or otherwise unproductive infrastructure projects in order to meet growth targets set by the central government.  

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Diminishing returns on fixed asset investment is a critical enduring trend for PRC economic projections not only because it is a significant driver of the PRC’s domestic economic slowdown in its own right but also because it is the CCP’s favored tool to prop up the image of economic growth. The CCP’s recent policy response to the slowing economic growth typical of the transition to an advanced economy has focused on encouraging local governments to increase their debt burdens in order to post artificially inflated growth numbers. Beijing again turned to capital investment as the solution in 2020 when facing the economic crises brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Beijing attempted to manage the economic decline with sizable state-led investment that benefitted SOEs and increased local government financial dependence on the central government yet did little to support smaller and privately owned companies; the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission assesses that this policy response does little to spur consumption, further compounding Chinese overcapacity and undermining the PRC’s economic recovery. The PRC has not demonstrated an ability to effectively move beyond investment-led growth in or out of crisis; instead, Beijing’s policy responses have suggested CCP leaders’ proclivity toward if not dependence on such.

Asymmetry: Defense Budget Trajectories

PRC defense spending is distinct in two ways from USG defense spending: PRC defense spending is 1) steady as a percentage of GDP and 2) growing as a proportion of the bilateral defense spending balance. Just as the CCP situates its claim to leadership of a “new era” on continuing PRC economic growth at elevated levels, future capital-intensive investments in the PLA, including a modernizing naval force structure, will depend on continued PRC economic growth.


The CCP demonstrates an enduring commitment to maintaining total military expenditures at around 2 percent of GDP, neither increasing during upswings nor decreasing in economic downturns.\textsuperscript{440} When facing a sharp economic contraction in the wake of COVID-19, the PRC National People's Congress increased the PLA's official budget by 6.6 percent while at the same time cutting all nonurgent government spending by 50 percent.\textsuperscript{441} By comparison, the overall U.S. defense budget, which well exceeds that of the PLA in dollars and in percentage of GDP, has varied with transient political shifts. From 2010 on, the U.S. defense budget faced pressures from enduring budget deficits, the residual impact of the Global Financial Crisis, and the Budget Control Act of 2011, which collectively drove a federal disinvestment in defense of nearly one-fourth by 2015.\textsuperscript{442}

Figure 8: U.S. and PRC Military Expenditures as a Percentage of GDP, 1999-2019


Similarly, the CCP’s steady defense investment of 2 percent of its rapidly growing economy, when weighed against the USG’s variable defense investment of a slowly growing economy means PRC defense spending is growing more quickly than USG defense spending. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute estimates find that PRC military expenditures reached one-third of total U.S. military expenditures in 2016, and the Chinese share of military spending has continued to grow since then.
Figure 9: Share of Military Expenditure in Constant (2018) U.S. Dollars, 1999-2019


PRC defense budgeting has for decades exhibited an asymmetric advantage, slowly but surely growing at a faster rate than that of USG defense spending by drawing on political resolve to track a 2 percent GDP defense expenditure as well as once-explosive economic growth. PLA services enjoy a comparatively predictable budget, which reduces uncertainties endogenous to long-term force planning. This pattern is most advantageous in a long-term peacetime competition: should current trends of PRC economic growth and CCP political resolve to maintain defense spending continue unarrested, the PLA is likely to become increasingly well-equipped and develop the potential to adopt a global force posture which rivals that of the United States military. Should the PRC fail to adopt a new growth model to maintain elevated economic growth rates, or should CCP leaders compromise defense spending in favor of other priorities, then this long-term advantage of faster-growing defense spending will be blunted.

Asymmetry: The Costs of PRC Stability Maintenance

Among the PLA’s most powerful competitors for funding in the PRC budget is a domestic stability system that, in terms of political importance and coercive capacity, has no U.S.
equivalent. Reflecting the CCP’s paramount interest in perpetuating its regime and outsized concerns of social unrest, the PRC maintains a costly domestic security apparatus that exceeds the PLA in annual spending. This apparatus, termed “stability maintenance” [维稳], includes CCP control over secret police, courts, and various means by which to manage Chinese public opinion. Declining economic growth rates and constantly high CCP demand for stability maintenance create enduring challenges for funding the PLA.

The CCP’s official stability maintenance budget has historically tracked its national defense spending and publicly exceeded the official defense budget in 2011, when the stability maintenance budget was 624.4 billion RMB and national defense was accorded only 601.1 billion RMB. Adrian Zenz’s research has shown the PRC’s stability maintenance spending likely exceeded its external defense expenditures for the first time in 2010 and has maintained the larger share of the budget ever since. For reasons not made public, CCP leaders have since made efforts to obscure PRC stability maintenance spending. The official stability maintenance budget in 2019 was only 179.78 billion RMB compared to the official 1.19 trillion RMB for national defense. However, Chinese reporters have uncovered that the de facto 2019 stability maintenance budget is at least 1.39 trillion RMB before counting SOE

443 To this point, Andrew Scobell describes the CCP as “ambitious alarmists” who are “preoccupied with maintaining domestic stability and tend to be ultrasensitive to the prospect of chaos.” See Andrew Scobell, written testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Hearing on U.S.-China Relations in 2020: Enduring Problems and Emerging Challenges, September 29, 2020, 7-8, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-09/Scobell_Testimony.pdf.
expenditures toward stability maintenance made at a central or provincial government’s behest.\textsuperscript{448}

Slowing economic growth increases the PRC’s opportunity cost for its stability maintenance spending but may also trigger a need for increased stability maintenance operations, which increases budget pressures for other programs in turn. High rates of economic growth are an important component of modern social cohesion in the PRC. Testifying before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Barry Naughton impressed the importance of continued economic prosperity to young Chinese citizens’ view of the CCP regime, saying, “a young Chinese person today is not only better, much better off than his parents, he’s much better off than he ever thought he could be.”\textsuperscript{449} In separate testimony, Anthony Saich pointed out the CCP’s continued accrual of debt in order to provide the public goods to which Chinese citizens have become accustomed.\textsuperscript{450} Some CCP elites consider 6\% annual GDP growth to be the minimum required needed to “obscure” the PRC’s social problems and maintain social cohesion.\textsuperscript{451}

Even as PRC economic growth slows, PRC stability maintenance expenditures are likely to increase as Xi Jinping imposes more rigid standards of politically acceptable behavior in China and orders them enforced by methods of social control augmented by emerging technologies, for example by proliferating CCTV cameras with facial recognition capabilities and centrally managing the data through a nationwide program called Skynet.\textsuperscript{452} Xi also appears to

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{452} Sheena Greitens, “Domestic Security in China under Xi Jinping,” \textit{China Leadership Monitor}, March 1, 2019,
\end{quote}
have a heightened concern of Chinese popular resistance to the CCP, with Chinese state media referencing the possible end of the CCP with record frequency since he assumed power.\(^{453}\) Xi’s apparent personal proclivities toward finding and suppressing the potential of public unrest against the regime reinforce the likelihood that, while he is in power, the PRC’s stability maintenance burden will increase only more rapidly as China’s economic growth slows.

In addition to budget allocations, PRC stability maintenance also competes with national defense for human capital and command capacity. Funding for the People’s Armed Police (PAP), a paramilitary force tasked with leading the stability maintenance operations which require domestic riot suppression, is officially categorized as part of the PRC’s domestic security budget.\(^{454}\) The PAP was organized under both the Central Military Commission (CMC) and State Council until PLA reforms in 2017 organized the PAP exclusively under the CMC, with PLA resources responsible for directing PAP operations.\(^{455}\) This change in command structure did not change the PAP’s mission from stability maintenance to warfighting. PAP mobile detachments are located in areas the CCP is imposing oppressive social control measures on Chinese minorities, such as Xinjiang and Tibet, and other politically important areas, like Beijing.\(^{456}\)


Xi Jinping has publicly called for the PAP to integrate into the PLA joint operational system, a priority the National People’s Congress reinforced with the 2020 passage of a revised PAP Law providing for PLA-PAP joint noncombat exercises.\(^\text{457}\) This integration, which Joel Wuthnow assesses as still lacking, repurposes time and resources within the CMC command structure from PLA preparations for warfighting toward the breadth of PAP responsibilities, which continues to include riot suppression and disaster relief.\(^\text{458}\) The PAP regularly deploys to conduct these military operations other than war, taxing command resources that could otherwise be dedicated toward efforts to man, train, and equip the PLA, to the detriment of PLA readiness and lethality.\(^\text{459}\) The potential consequences of the PAP-PLA’s unfocused mission set likely extends beyond ground forces. While riot suppression is traditionally a task for the PLAGF rather than the PLAN, the CCG has also recently become involved in stability maintenance operations by capturing Hong Kongers attempting to flee the regime by sea.\(^\text{460}\)

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Indo-Pacific Strategic Geography

The CCP’s maritime transformation takes place within an Indo-Pacific competition theater, and the USG and CCP have unequal claims to the theater’s strategic geography. This thesis does not argue that geography is destiny. Rather, it adopts Roy Kamphausen’s argument that some geographic features are “decisive,” these being “physical features that offer strategic advantages by establishing conditions for either the success or inhibition of military protagonists,” with military advantage “conferred on the power that assembles the more adept and mutually reinforcing set of strategies to control this decisive terrain in a conflict.” Kamphausen argues that Asia’s decisive terrain is its maritime features in “the aggregate of the island chain facing the eastern edge of the Asian landmass and straits that provide access to the Western Pacific and that extend laterally between the marginal seas.” These island chains form chokepoints that a dominant power can use to restrict naval access. CCP strategists

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462 The island chain Kamphausen references is a dominating concept of Asian strategic geography in USG and CCP thought. Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes’ research convincingly demonstrate the origins of this idea in Chinese certainty that the USG has for decades executed a Cold War policy of containment on the CCP by arraying military power along the Pacific islands on China’s maritime periphery, forming three island chains with which to constrain PRC maritime development. While different Chinese sources sometimes offer various definitions of which features constitute which island chains, the broadest reading defines the first island chain as including the Aleutian Islands, Kuril Islands, Japanese Islands, Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, and the Greater Sunda Islands. The second island chain runs through Guam, and the third through Hawaii. See Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, Red Star Over the Pacific: China’s Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy 2nd ed., (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 75-82; Yang Ru [杨茹] and Huang Chao [黄超], “The PLAN’s First Training in the High Seas: 252 Submarines Purge Their Shortcomings and Tear Through the Island Chain” [中国海军第一次远洋训练：252潜艇排除故障撕破岛链], Xinhua, August 13, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-08/13/c_1121476003.htm;


464 A maritime chokepoint is a narrow waterway, such as a canal linking two larger bodies of water or a strait, which limits the capacity of transit and is not easily bypassed. Maritime chokepoints are decisive terrain: militarily, a state can use a maritime chokepoint as a preliminary step toward control over a closed or semi-closed maritime theater, ensuring or denying military and commercial access through a restrictive waterway where the vessels are most vulnerable, i.e., securing or denying another state’s SLOC, in ways and at times opportune to frustrate an adversary’s larger naval operation or prepare one’s own. Control over a maritime chokepoint confers decided strategic advantages pertinent to deterring or escalating strategic competition, and some analysts consider control over multiple chokepoints to be the keys to hegemonic power. See Milan Vego, Maritime Strategy and Sea Control: Theory and Practice, (London: Routledge, 2016), 188-189 & 213 endnote 2; Milan Vego, Maritime Strategy and Sea Denial: Theory and Practice, (London: Routledge, 2019), 301; Jamie McGrath, “There Are No Strategic Chokepoints,” Center for International Maritime Security, June 3, 2020, http://cimsec.org/there-are-no-strategic-chokepoints/43708; Robert J. Hanks, The Unnoticed Challenge: Soviet Maritime Strategy and the Global Choke Points, (Cambridge: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, 1980), 10.
appear to adopt a similar mentality but adopt a broader view including chokepoints west of China, which attend to SLOCs through Southeast Asia into the Indian Ocean.

Peacetime dominance over maritime Asia’s decisive terrain confers wartime advantages. The CCP recognizes that the USG has traditionally held the advantage on China’s eastern periphery and has a dedicated line of effort, dominated by the CCP’s defense establishment, to challenge this advantage. Yet a major thrust of CCP maritime transformation extends in the opposite direction by consolidating commercial investment at maritime chokepoints to China’s west, developing a competitive advantage for the CCP over SLOCs running through the Indian Ocean.

Asymmetry: Two Maps: USG and CCP Views of Asia’s Strategic Geography

Though both USG and CCP planners recognize the same island chains as strategic features in the Western Pacific, CCP interests and commercial responses emphasize SLOCs through island chains toward China’s West, reflecting dependance on maritime energy imports rather than a narrow focus on the eastern island chains themselves. While the USG remained narrowly focused on the security implications of the first and second island chains, the CCP built coercive maritime power that can be mobilized to military purposes against the USG along its western SLOCs.
U.S. and CCP regional force postures reflect distinct political interests toward Asia’s strategic geography. The U.S. maintains relative dominance over its view of the island chains with a forward military presence supported by alliances and military partnerships with other countries east of China. The USG’s demonstrated diplomatic interest is to maintain its alliance commitments and sustain them with a forward deployed military as a deterrent against

provocative military behavior. In Indo-Pacific allies and partners serve as a force multiplier for this effort by aligning their own national policies on maritime access with the USG and by committing their diplomats and militaries to advocate for those standards.

In an eroding deference to U.S. and allied military preponderance over these island chains, the CCP adopted a two-pronged approach toward the island chains to its east: 1) develop land-based long-range strike capabilities able to delay, degrade, and ultimately destroy U.S. and allied bases in the Indo-Pacific as well as U.S. forces flowing into the theater; and 2) escalate the costs of U.S. military operations in and around the first island chain with gray zone activities such as provocative maneuvering of PLAN vessels or harassing U.S. warships with paramilitary CCG or PAFMM vessels.

In addition to securing access through Asia’s eastern island chains, the CCP also has an outsized interest in securing its SLOCs to China’s west, by which China receives most of its energy imports. PRC economic growth increased oil consumption: the PRC has been a net oil importer since 1993, and by the 2000s, over 80% of PRC oil imports passed through the Strait of Malacca, at the southern tip of the First Island Chain. CCP leaders recognize the risks inherent in depending on energy imports through one key strait and have taken mitigating

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468 This deference, likely arising from sober PLA assessments of the balance of power, restrains the potential range of PLAN operations. For example, the PLA AMS *Science of Military Strategy* published in 2013 describes the PLAN operational area as constrained within the first island chain. "第三，海军的作战海区，在今后一个较长时期内，主要是第一岛链和沿该岛链的沿海区，以及岛链以内的黄海，东海和南海海区。" Shou Xiaosong [寿晓松], ed., *The Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), 208.


First, CCP has attempted to reduce its reliance on energy shipments through the Malacca Strait by increasing overland pipeline capacity to import crude oil and natural gas; these successes have only been partially successful, as evidenced by the PRC’s continued reliance on Middle Eastern and African countries for oil imports. Second, the CCP has increased its commercial leverage along key waterways along its western SLOC.

Map 2: Map of CCP’s Focus: China’s Energy Import Transit Routes (2016 Data)


**Trend: Consolidating PRC Commercial Power at Western Maritime Chokepoints**

Chinese investment through the BRI’s maritime component, called the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI), is concentrating PRC power through economic means at key maritime chokepoints to China’s west, such as the Strait of Malacca. Beyond securing China’s energy imports, Chinese commercial dominance and logistics software in key ports can give the CCP a significant surveillance capability over maritime supply chains with competitive. This trend poses a dangerous but unannounced whole-of-society challenge to USG dominance over Asia’s decisive terrain.

Chinese investments at maritime chokepoints are unsurprising and not inherently competitive. Maritime chokepoints are geographic realities for shipping companies and business opportunities for port operators and maritime support services, such as ship repair and maintenance, ship brokering and chartering, and bunkering; because of the rich business opportunity, maritime support services are likely to be more concentrated at chokepoint ports. These services help mitigate potential risks involved in traversing maritime chokepoints, which in the case of oil tankers could result in delays rippling across the global energy market. In accordance with this commercial reality, Chinese financial investments through the MSRI are arrayed along maritime chokepoints which happen to be critical for energy shipping along the Eurasian landmass. The Maritime Silk Road follows a SLOC beginning in the Mediterranean Sea, running through the Suez Canal and Strait of Hormuz, out through the Gulf of Aden, across the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal, down through the Strait of Malacca, and up past the Gulf of Tonkin, where it meets the major ports on China’s coastline.

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capital-intensive infrastructure projects that raise barriers of entry for companies or countries competing for market share at the same port facilities.  

The MSRI’s scope and scale indicate it is not a parochial or transient interest for the CCP: while weak disclosure requirements obfuscate the precise amount of Chinese investment in foreign ports, a Financial Times and King’s College London joint investigation estimates that companies from the PRC and Hong Kong have announced or completed agreements for 40 overseas port projects worth approximately $45.6 billion between 2010 and 2017, with funding details for another dozen projects unannounced. Nor are strategically-positioned MSRI investments strictly an artefact of market demand for Chinese capital: an assessment from an official Marxist research center in the PRC describes strengthening PRC control over existing SLOCs and building new ones as an MSRI objective.

Current MSRI investments appear to presage Chinese dominance over global maritime shipping infrastructure. In early 2020, Isaac Kardon reported that PRC firms partially owned or operated 94 ports globally and had contracted projects developing the infrastructure of hundreds more.\(^{480}\) The ports partially owned or operated by Chinese firms are geographically dispersed, with an approximate distribution across the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans; among these, the greatest concentration in the greater IOR, to include the Mediterranean Sea.\(^{481}\) Cutting across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, Chinese port investments in Africa circle the continent and reach nearly every African country with a coastline.\(^{482}\)


The commercial aspect of Chinese maritime influence is not satisfied with financial stakes across the world’s seaports; they must also be centrally linked. PRC policy since 1996 has emphasized the integration of China’s domestic seaports into a cohesive system, defined not by “fragmented competition” [分散竞争] between the ports but rather “orderly cooperation” [有序协同], as a way to transform the PRC maritime shipping industry from "large" to "strong."483

Following a similar logic, PRC officials have championed a port cooperation system along the MSRI, for example by increasing Chinese contractors’ abilities to bid and work on foreign port projects; offering Chinese expertise for capacity building in port management; and advocating logistics information sharing through memoranda of understanding or the PRC Ministry of Transport’s LOGINK logistics information platform.484

LOGINK joined the International Port Community Systems Association (IPCSA) in 2019, offering the Chinese government a membership in the global port systems community involved in setting international standards for shipping logistics, such as supply chain visibility.485 Media coverage of a report jointly produced by LOGINK, IPCSA, and the Chinese corporation Alibaba entitled “Enabling Logistics Visibility by Interconnecting Logistics Information Service Systems in a Standardised Way” recommends increasing data flows between port systems globally by standardizing the way they are connected—a service LOGINK provides by connecting ports in Southeast Asia across state borders.486

Should LOGINK’s services become standard in the commercial maritime shipping industry, the PRC Ministry of Transportation will have successfully formed a network structure by which it can asymmetrically derive and exert coercive economic power, imposing costs on other countries. Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman’s research into this sort of weaponized interdependence arising from economic globalization has found that networks such as LOGINK proposes have a “panopticon effect” whereby “states’ direct surveillance abilities may be radically outstripped by their capacity to tap into the information-gathering and information-generating activities of networks of private actors,” in this case the ostensibly private port facilities transmitting data through a Chinese government network.487 Farrell and Newman find that “panopticon” capabilities confer decisive informational advantages, as exhibited by the USG’s own erstwhile panopticon in northern Virginia, which centralized much of the physical fiber optic cables supporting global internet transmissions and gave the USG unparalleled surveillance capabilities in the early stages of the Global War on Terror.488 LOGINK’s proliferation among Indo-Pacific ports and the PRC’s advocacy for its use to become a global standard would introduce a PRC panopticon capability to illicitly surveil and potentially coerce an adversary’s commercial maritime actors.


Systems such as LOGINK and the PRC’s commercial investment in civilian ports become even more strategically consequential given that the CCP’s military strategy considers civilian assets to have latent military purpose. The PLA has a critical operational asymmetry with the United States military insofar as PLA strategic documents explicitly call for mobilizing civilian systems to military purposes, matching a growing literature in which Chinese military analysts

describe civilian and military information systems as simply two facets within a single network domain. In times of crisis, the PLA may move beyond the commercial logic of maritime shipping and LOGINK’s potential panopticon surveillance capabilities, instead using such ostensibly civilian assets for overt military purposes. These are most prominent in the PLA’s effort to develop informatized warfare capabilities and to secure strategic strongpoints in place of overseas bases.

**Informatized Warfare.** All PLA military strategic guidance released since 2004 define the character of future war to be “informatized” [信息化], in which information collection and distribution “shapes all aspects of society, including the economy and governance, as well as warfare.” PLA NDU Vice President and editor of the NDU version of the *Science of Military Strategy* Lt. General Xiao Tianliang [肖天亮] described the “essential character” [本质特征] of informatized war to be “systems confrontation” between systems of digitally interlinked platforms. PLA strategists assert that military conflict under the framework of informatized war inextricably entangles civilian networks into systems confrontation.

The 2013 AMS *Science of Military Strategy*, for example, calls for building a modern military system by “residing the military within the civilian” [寓军于民], referring to concealing military purpose and capabilities under the veneer of civilian labels. Similarly, PLA literature

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490 PLA literature refers to systems confrontation as well as systems destruction [体系破击]; the former is a recognition that the PLA’s future adversaries will also likely have digitally interlinked military systems rather than discrete forces, and the latter is an approach to exploit an adversary’s interlinkages by destroying key nodes in the adversary’s information systems to paralyze their command operations. See M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy since 1949*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 220; Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and Systems Destruction Warfare: How the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2018), x-xi, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1700/RR1708/RAND_RR1708.pdf.


describes civilian and military information systems as existing within a single “network domain” whereby “military and civilian spheres are not distinct; in fact, they constantly intersect.”493

As such, the PLA’s discussion of systems confrontation includes an information warfare component which targets an adversary’s civilian networks, such as civil infrastructure or commercial entities, potentially with Chinese civilian networks.494 An adversary’s seaports integrated with a PRC Ministry of Transportation information system such as LOGINK provides the PLA precisely this opportunity to marshal ostensibly civilian government resources to damage the adversary covertly or overtly. Without specifying LOGINK in particular, the USG appears attuned to the threat the CCP poses to U.S. maritime infrastructure, describing the PRC as “a persistent cyber espionage threat to the United States military, economy, and critical infrastructure” in its 2020 National Maritime Cybersecurity Plan on cybersecurity risks in critical ship and port systems.495

LOGINK is the most high-profile case of a civilian asset along the MSRI which may be harnessed to coercive or military effect, but it is not the only one. A Chinese SOE has also building what it calls the “Blue Ocean Information Network” composed of permanent maritime sensors collecting and relaying hydrographic, meteorological, and marine traffic data to the SOE. PLA researchers have noted the potential value of this system, which effectively provides near-permanent real-time maritime domain awareness,496 for naval

496 Maritime domain awareness is “the ability to detect, identify, and track vessels at sea.” It is a largely underdeveloped capability in Southeast Asia that has historically been conferred through platforms that are expensive to operate and maintain such as the P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft. Gregory B. Poling, “From Orbit to Ocean—Fixing Southeast Asia’s Remote-Sensing Blind Spots,” Naval War College Review 74, no. 1 (Winter 2021), 57-76, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol74/iss1/8.
operations. Corporate officials of the SOE running the Blue Ocean Information Network aspire to proliferate these sensors along the MSRI by 2035 and globally by 2050. 497

The CCP also makes use of space-based assets for maritime domain awareness. The PRC operates a robust constellation of reconnaissance satellites, many of which are dedicated to the task of monitoring maritime spaces. Most important are the Haiyang ocean observation satellites and the Yaogan reconnaissance satellites. 498 Although Chinese state media describe these satellites as having scientific research functions, they also comprise a critical link in the PLA’s situational awareness; triangulating ship location and tracking their movements are capabilities that are as useful for missile targeting as they are for scientific research. 499 The bureaucracy of space policy in the PRC supports the assessment that military resides within the civilian with regard to space policy as well. The PLA Strategic Support Force, which is responsible for the PLA’s capabilities regarding space, cyber, electronic warfare, and psychological warfare, and other military bodies have important oversight roles in most of the PRC’s space activities; Alex Bowe assesses that the PRC’s “space policy in effect allows


**Strategic Strongpoints.** PRC investments along the MSRI also confer physical power projection benefits to the PLA. PLA strategists describe building “strategic strongpoints” \footnote{"二要构建依托本土、辐射周边、走向两洋的海外战略支点,为海外军事行动提供支撑,或作为部署海外军事力量的前进基地,在相关地区发挥政治军事影响力,与本土战略布局形成内外兼顾、近远衔接、互为支撑的态势。" Shou Xiaosong [寿晓松], ed., *The Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2013), 254.} overseas that rely upon the Mainland, radiate to China’s periphery, and goes toward the Two Oceans region to provide support for overseas military operations or to act as a forward base for deploying military forces.\footnote{Analysts at the U.S. Naval War College note that all ports Chinese officials term strategic strongpoints are 1) strategically located along important SLOCs and maritime chokepoints; 2) have high-level coordination between Chinese state, Party, and commercial entities; 3) have extensive Chinese commercial investment; and 4) have dual-use functions with potential or actual military use. Isaac B. Kardon, Conor M. Kennedy, and Peter A. Dutton, “China Maritime Report No. 7: Gwadar: China’s Potential Strategic Strongpoint in Pakistan,” *U.S. Naval War College*, August 1, 2020, 1, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/7.} While no official definition for “strategic strongpoint” exists, Chinese officials have used the term to describe foreign ports with strategic value,\footnote{Peter A. Dutton, Isaac B. Kardon, and Conor M. Kennedy, “China Maritime Report No. 6: Djibouti: China’s First Overseas Strategic Strongpoint,” *U.S. Naval War College*, April 1, 2020, 1, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/6; Conor Kennedy, “Strategic Strong Points and Chinese Naval Strategy,” *China Brief*, March 22, 2019, https://jamestown.org/program/strategic-strong-points-and-chinese-naval-strategy/.} including civilian ports along the MSRI.\footnote{This is not to say that the MSRI has secretly built a chain of PLA naval bases. The PRC’s strategic strongpoints along the MSRI, even positioned at maritime chokepoints and interlinked with foreign ports through LOGINK, are not equipped to function as naval bases sufficient to sustain a protracted high-intensity naval conflict; in fact, the PRC’s interest in their commercial function and in foreign MSRI ports as nodes for PRC diplomatic outreach are more likely to make these ports a net liability in the event of a naval conflict. See Isaac Kardon, written testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Hearing on China’s Military Power Projection and U.S. National Interests, February 20, 2020, 7-8, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Kardon_Revised%20Written%20Testimony_Feb2020.pdf; Joshua T. White, “China’s Indian Ocean Ambitions: Investment, Influence, and Military Advantage,” *Brookings*, June 2020, 11, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP_20200615_chinas_indian_ocean_ambitions_white-1.pdf.} Seaports along the MSRI with significant Chinese investment or which are owned or operated by Chinese firms are thus able to covertly provide peacetime logistics and intelligence capabilities even without formal military access agreements with the host country,\footnote{a 2010 National Defense Mobilization Law and 2016 National Defense Transportation Law require key construction projects, including seaports along the MSRI, to be}
built to military standards and further financially incentivize the private firms undertaking these projects to make additional contributions to national defense mobilization.505

By situating the military within the civilian, the PRC’s consolidation of commercial power along the MSRI conceals latent military capabilities whereby the PLA is able to make use of ostensibly commercial investments to military benefit at critical maritime chokepoints along the island chains which make up Asia’s decisive terrain. CCP and PLA officials appear to treat overt commercial maritime and latent naval power as an original Chinese approach to sea power distinct from the Mahanian tradition; reflecting this position, some analysts, such as NDU Professor and PLAN Colonel Liang Feng [梁芳], have assessed the USG as being overly reliant on military tools to secure SLOCs to destabilizing effect.506 To that end, strategic PRC investments along the MSRI does not appear to pose a traditional sea power threat of a rising expeditionary navy challenging a dominant maritime hegemon.507

The emergent commercial and latent military influence that the CCP accrues through strategic investments along the MSRI pose a threat to U.S. and global flow security. Global flows refer to: 1) the functional flows of international trade and travel making possible supply chains, technology transfer, and political exchange across state borders; and 2) the global ecosystems such as oceanic currents or atmospheric circulation making these flows possible.508

The functional global flows most pertinent for security considerations are overwhelmingly


507 The classical example of this is the Anglo-German naval arms race between 1898 and 1914. See, Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, Red Star Over the Pacific: China’s Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy 2nd ed., (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 144-149.

maritime, with global air traffic tightly entwined with maritime traffic through global SLOCs. Global flows and the interstate interdependencies which arise thereby are made possible by the heavily-accessed but unowned global commons, which are for the same reasons highly vulnerable to exogenous shocks, such as overexploitation by free riders.

The PRC's MSRI investments are more deeply integrating the CCP into the system of global maritime flows, with greatest emphasis on investments near strategic Eurasian chokepoints, increasing the system's vulnerability to CCP policy. In this case, some projects along the MSRI make global maritime flows susceptible to PRC interference should the CCP elect to dominate maritime chokepoints with the commercial or latent military power it is building and disrupt the maritime flow of goods and resources to the United States. The PRC is approaching a position of power over the United States that the U.S. already holds over the PRC: Chinese vulnerability to the U.S. in the case of the Malacca Dilemma is precisely an issue of PRC maritime flow security.

USG and CCP patterns of behavior with regard to the maritime commons suggest the CCP may be more willing to directly disrupt U.S. maritime flow security than the USG would to the PRC. Both states appear willing to ignore international law in pursuit of domestic interests. For example, both the U.S. and PRC have hedged against fully endorsing UNCLOS, which in governing maritime commons offers a framework for sustaining global maritime flows: the United States has not ratified UNCLOS at all for reasons described in Section V, and the PRC lacks a provision to incorporate international agreements into domestic law, seemingly flouting UNCLOS despite having ratified it by adopting controversial and widely-criticized legal positions.

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to assert that UNCLOS has no bearing on some of its maritime disputes. Still, the USG’s demonstrated interest is to maintain dominance along Asia’s decisive terrain by maintaining a robust array of regional allies and partners in part through the provision of public goods, such as by protecting free maritime transit in the region. By contrast, the PRC’s interpretation of international law are distinctly at odds with that of nearly all UNCLOS ratifiers and of the United States; Carla Freeman’s research shows that Beijing adopts a “situational” approach to high seas governance, whereby PRC policy toward an international agreement “depend upon Beijing’s assessment of how a given regime relates to its national goals and ambitions.” The CCP has demonstrated clear resolve in its opportunistic approach to maritime behavior, and strategic MSRI investments building Chinese commercial and latent military power along maritime chokepoints and key SLOCs increase the achievable range of the CCP’s opportunism.

**Naval Power**

The most obvious indicator of CCP maritime transformation is the development of the PLA Navy. A regime’s navy is its most direct tool for exerting sea power, and Mahan observed

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that “the history of sea power...is largely a military history.” This is not to equate sea power or naval power strictly to warfighting. As Ken Booth’s framework details, navies have military, diplomatic, and constabulary functions across wartime and peacetime. Under this framework, a navy uses the “currency” of “actual or latent violence” by threatening or using force to military ends, such as by changing the balance of power in a theater with its presence, to lend a hard edge to the regime’s broader policy. This currency of emergent or latent naval violence assists in achieving the regime’s diplomatic objectives by reassuring allies and partners while threatening adversaries, with the navy’s margin of military superiority positively correlated to its regime’s credibility with states it would assure against other threats. As the U.S. margin of military superiority diminishes, so too does U.S. strategic influence as doubts about the United States’ ability to deter and defeat shared adversaries proliferate allied capitals. The erosion of the U.S. Navy’s overmatching capacity and capability is deleterious to U.S. strategic influence and maritime peace. Sara Mitchell’s research uses the Issue Correlates of War dataset to find that “states with greater naval capabilities make more claims to offshore maritime areas and employ more coercive strategies unless they face countries with similar naval strength.” Mitchell’s research showed that U.S. naval power, measured in terms of U.S.

517 During peacetime, the leading way a navy uses this currency is by conducting presence operations. Naval presence can carry the flags and weaponry of a sovereign state far from its borders to signal a threatening or reassuring commitment in an overseas theater. See Henry J. Hendrix, To Provide and Maintain: Why Naval Primacy is America’s First Best Strategy, (Annapolis, Foscle: 2020), xvii-xix.
518 Ken Booth, Navies and Foreign Policy, (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 16. Booth’s framework is particularly applicable to U.S. “gunboat diplomacy” during the Cold War, wherein the visible deployment of a navy threatened but did not by itself constitute the use of force, thus shaping an adversary’s strategic decision making without initiating armed conflict. Beatrice Heuser, The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 282-284.
519 Ken Booth, Navies and Foreign Policy, (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 18. On military superiority and credibility to allies and partners, see Glenn Snyder’s discussion of reputational values, wherein a state’s security guarantee turns also on its capability to deliver on this guarantee. Glenn H. Snyder, Alliance Politics, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 23-30.
naval tonnage as a proportion of world naval tonnage, is inversely correlated with the number of maritime claims\textsuperscript{522} worldwide.\textsuperscript{523} The implication is clear: while it lasted, global U.S. naval overmatch was an important contribution to global maritime stability.

\textbf{Figure 10: U.S. Proportion of Global Naval Tonnage and Number of Ongoing Maritime Claims}

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\caption{U.S. Proportion of Global Naval Tonnage and Number of Ongoing Maritime Claims}
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In this way, developing PLAN capabilities challenge U.S. strategic influence. The CCP’s pursuit of a world-class military has peacetime implications which threaten U.S. interests regardless of any actual outbreak of armed conflict. This section overviews trends and

\begin{itemize}
\item Mitchell defines a maritime claim as “a diplomatic conflict that involves explicit contention between two or more states over the ownership, access to, or usage of a maritime area.” Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, “Clashes at Sea: Explaining the Onset, Militarization, and Resolution of Diplomatic Maritime Claims,” \textit{Security Studies} 29, no. 4, 637-670, 644-645, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1811458.
\item Mitchell specified that power is not fungible across domains. Traditional measures of capabilities such as economic and demographic power have “no effect” in maritime claims despite being generally successful in resolving territorial disputes. By contrast, naval preponderance is significant in naval disputes but not territorial disputes. Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, “Clashes at Sea,” (presentation, Webinar: Sino-American Maritime Competition, The Hague Center for Strategic Studies, November 16, 2020), https://youtu.be/XlXbz5oW26U?t=1713.
\end{itemize}
asymmetries in the observable hardware—the tons, guns, and naval aviation—pertinent to the USG-CCP naval balance.

**Trend: PLAN Modernization: More Hulls, Better Missiles**

Ongoing PLA modernization is eroding U.S. naval primacy in the Indo-Pacific by shrinking the gap in capabilities, where the U.S. continues to lead, and growing the gap in force size, where the PLAN has overtaken the U.S. Navy. PLAN modernization involves a buildup which is overtaking the U.S. Navy by hulls and displacement. As of December 2020, DOD estimates the PLAN to operate a naval battle force of approximately 360 ships compared to the U.S. Navy’s battle force of 297. The Office of Naval Intelligence anticipates that the PLAN battle force will grow to 425 vessels by 2030, adding approximately 55 surface combatants and 10 submarines over the next ten years. The PLAN’s warship preponderance is sharpened by disparity in U.S. Navy and PLAN operational theaters; although the PLAN endeavors for extra-regional, possibly global power projection, its core operations remain within the First Island Chain, while the Indo-Pacific is only a priority theater within a global area of responsibility for the U.S. Navy. While nearly all of the PLAN aside from forces based in Djibouti can be expected to be stationed in the Indo-Pacific, only a rough 60 percent of the U.S. Navy will be in the theater.

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524 The U.S. Navy defines battle force ships as “commissioned United States Ship (USS) warships capable of contributing to combat operations, or a United States Naval Ship that contributes directly to Navy warfighting or support missions.” U.S. Office of the Secretary of the Navy, “GENERAL GUIDANCE FOR THE CLASSIFICATION OF NAVAL VESSELS AND BATTLE FORCE SHIP COUNTING PROCEDURES.” SECNAV INSTRUCTION 5030.8C, June 14, 2016, https://www.nvr.navy.mil/5030.8C.pdf.
Nor can PLAN warships be discounted as low-quality platforms which would fare poorly in a high-intensity engagement with U.S. forces. As shown in Figure 12, Chinese naval shipbuilding by hulls and by full load displacement has consistently outpaced that of the U.S. Navy since 2011. Moreover, As shown in Figure 13, taking displacement as a crude metric for warship capabilities—and assuming that the density of combat power is approximate on modern warships—PLAN warships are comparable to those of the U.S. Navy.

These figures also show the PLAN’s superior firepower dispersal; the tonnage of ships the U.S. Navy commissioned since 1999 is largely concentrated among its destroyers, and the service commissioned only a handful of corvette-styled littoral combat ships (LCS) over the past...
two decades. By contrast, half of the surface combatants the PLAN commissioned each year since 2013 have been corvettes, dispersing PLAN surface firepower across a greater number of smaller ships. A surface fleet dispersing its firepower across greater numbers of vessels diminishes the damage that each of an adversary’s attacks can do to the fleet’s aggregate striking power, a clear benefit if an adversary has limited munitions and cannot simply target all ships indiscriminately. The U.S. battlefleet is heavily comprised of destroyers and cruisers equipped with the Aegis combat system and are densely equipped with weaponry to fulfill multimission roles; the loss of a single ship would be, by design, a significant loss to the U.S. fleet’s aggregate firepower. The U.S. Navy has over the past decade discussed and begun adopting a Distributed Maritime Operations (DMO) concept to reverse this pattern, but reshaping the U.S. naval force structure will be a decades-long process; the U.S. Navy only awarded its first contract to build the first of a new class of guided missile frigates in 2020 as an experimental step toward distributing U.S. naval firepower and capability across a larger fleet of smaller ships.

529 This pattern of procurement likely derives from U.S naval inclinations developed as long ago as the Second World War, in which the U.S. Navy fought and won decisive naval battles using aircraft carriers as capital ships. Criticizing this perspective, U.S. Secretary of War Henry Stimson described “the peculiar psychology of the Navy Department, which frequently seemed to retire from the realm of logic into a dim religious world in which Neptune was god, Mahan his prophet, and the U.S. Navy the only true church.” Thomas B. Buell, “Of Ships and the Men Who Sail Them,” Washington Post, August 3, 1986, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1986/08/03/of-ships-and-the-men-who-sail-them/3090b6c8-5d75-42f2-b617-ff6c1f29a0a5/; Beatrice Heuser, The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 266-267.


531 Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, Red Star Over the Pacific: China’s Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy 2nd ed. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 236-237. U.S. fleet design as described here reflects Mahan’s championing the concentration of offensive power as a fundamental principle of strategy, extending it to maritime strategy by casting the concentrated combat power of a battle fleet as the core of sea power. “In any frontier line, or any strategic front of operations, or any line of battle, offensive effort may, and therefore should, be concentrated in one part, not distributed along the whole.” Alfred Thayer Mahan, Mahan on Naval Warfare, ed. Allan Westcott, (Mineola: Dover, 1999), 64. Also see David C. Gompert, Sea Power and American Interests in the Western Pacific, (Santa Clara: RAND Corporation, 2013), xi-xii.

Figure 12: U.S. Navy and PLAN Surface Combatants and Aircraft Carriers Commissioned, 1999-2020


Figure 13: Full Load Displacement of U.S. Navy and PLAN Surface Combatants Commissioned, 1999-2020


A rough comparison of naval missile capacity and range also demonstrates PLAN warship competitiveness against U.S. Navy warships. The U.S. Navy’s DDG-51 *Arleigh Burke*-class and DDG-1000 *Zumwalt*-class destroyers are equipped with 96-cell and 80-cell vertical launch systems (VLS) respectively. The PLAN’s Type 052D and Type 055 guided missile destroyers have 64 and 112 cells, respectively. With these four warship classes, the U.S. Navy retains a preponderant advantage: the U.S. Navy’s budget for Fiscal Year 2020 projects a total force of 68 DDG-51s and two DDG-1000s. As of the end of 2019, the PLAN has launched 23 Type 052Ds and 5 Type 055s. As the USG continues building DDG-51 *Arleigh Burkes* and the PLAN continues its run of Type 055s—to a total of at least 8 but rumored to grow to 24 within the next few years—the balance of total VLS capacity will shift toward the PLAN.

The PLAN is likely to maintain if not expand its larger force size through its advantages in shipbuilding. DOD finds that the PRC “is the top ship-producing nation in the world by tonnage and is increasing its shipbuilding capacity and capability for all naval classes.”

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538 While VLS cells may not always carry surface strike missiles—they may hold SAMs, land attack cruise missiles (LACMs), or even be empty—greater VLS capacity does correspond to a diminished tradeoff in missile capacity and versatility when fulfilling a navy’s missions. On the planned run of 8 Type 055 destroyers, see Daniel Caldwell, Joseph Freda, and Lyle J. Goldstein, “China Maritime Report No. 5: China’s Dreadnought? The PLA Navy’s Type 055 Cruiser and Its Implications for the Future Maritime Security Environment,” *China Maritime Studies Institute*, February 2020, 2, https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/5. On rumors of the PLA potentially procuring an additional 16 Type 055 destroyers within the next five years, see Rick Joe, “Hints of Chinese Naval Procurement Plans in the 2020s,” *The Diplomat*, December 25, 2020, https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/hints-of-chinese-naval-ambitions-in-the-2020s/.
PRC backs its shipbuilders with direct financing and subsidies, expanding the industry fourfold between 2010 and 2019.\(^{540}\) State-owned enterprises, led by the dominant China Shipbuilding Group, conduct the majority of Chinese commercial and military shipbuilding,\(^{541}\) and SOE dominance in both sectors supports the transfer of dual-use technologies through commercial channels to benefit PLA assets.\(^{542}\)

The Chinese defense industrial base’s shipbuilding capacity is a significant concern for U.S. military planners. First, the PLA defense industrial base’s shipbuilding capacity indicates that PLAN force structure is all but certain to maintain if not grow its advantage in surface fleet size. As shown in Figure 14, USG analysis projects an ascendant PLAN force structure while the U.S. Navy directs its efforts toward changing its composition from large surface combatants to small surface combatants. A second concern for U.S. military planners is the PLAN’s greater capacity for ship replacement in the event of a protracted conflict. Marine Commandant Gen. David Berger wrote that the difference between U.S. and PRC industrial bases, particularly in

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\(^{541}\) While some analysts have argued that colocating military and civilian ship construction depresses productivity and efficiency in both and makes commercial clients “captive” to the needs of naval production, Chinese shipbuilders appear aware of the problem and to have taken steps to address them. The U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence finds that Chinese shipbuilders use a “semi-modular construction technique” that shortens vessel assembly times in order to preserve capacity at assembly ways and docks, which are needed for assembling both civilian and military vessels. This approach instead extends the time ships spend at outfitting piers and disproportionately impacts warships, which are outfitted with significantly more complex weapons and communications systems than commercial vessels, thus mitigating risks that military shipbuilding might disrupt delivery times for colocated civilian shipbuilding. On the potential dangers of colocating military and civilian shipbuilding, see Sue Hall and Audrye Wong, “Key Factors in Chinese Shipyards’ Development and Performance: Commercial-Military Synergy and Divergence,” in Chinese Naval Shipbuilding: An Ambitious and Uncertain Course, ed. Andrew S. Erickson, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2016), 103. On the ONI assessment of Chinese shipbuilders’ semi-modular construction technique, see Office of Naval Intelligence, “UPDATED China: Naval Construction Trends vis-à-vis U.S. Navy Shipbuilding Plans, 2020-2030,” February 2, 2020, 4, https://fas.org/irp/agency/oni/plan-trends.pdf. For details on outfitting times for civilian and military vessels, see John Birkler et al., Differences Between Military and Commercial Shipbuilding: Implications for the United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defence, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2005), 30, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG236.pdf.

shipbuilding capacity, will leave the United States “on the losing end of a production race—reversing the advantage we had in World War II when we last fought a peer competitor.”

Figure 14: Projected U.S. Navy and PLAN Surface Fleets, 2020-2050

Despite the PRC’s shipbuilding capacity, the PLA’s ability to maintain these vessels has not yet been tested at scale; the PLA’s defense industrial base had not needed to maintain a fleet at its current size and sophistication heretofore. Chinese state media indicates that environmental logistics such as managing corrosion on equipment at sea remains a challenge to be researched for the PLAN. For example, even following a 2018 research forum dedicated

to controlling corrosion on naval equipment and a comprehensive 2019 redesign of PLAN corrosion control policies, the PLA Naval Academy’s research director Cao Jingyi [曹京宜] reported in 2020 that the PLAN strategy to combat corrosion remains a superficial and piecemeal effort which begins protecting equipment too late to be effective.\footnote{546 Li Yun, “PLA naval deputy to NPC talks about technological innovation in equipment protection,” \textit{PLA Daily}, May 21, 2020, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2020-05/21/content_9818555.htm; Li Yun [黎云], “Cao Jingyi: Push for an Equipment ‘Grand Strategy’ and Develop Technological Innovation” [曹京宜:推动装备防护“大战略” 做好技术创新“细文章”], \textit{PLA Daily}, May 21, 2020, http://www.chinamil.com.cn/jmywyl/2020-05/19/content_9816809.htm; \textit{PLA Daily}, “The First Naval Equipment Corrosion Control and New Material Development Forum Is Held” [第一届海军装备腐蚀控制及新材料发展论坛举行], December 5, 2018, http://www.81.cn/hj/2018-12/05/content_9368248.htm.} Similarly, PLA engineers and analysts have found the storage and management of damage control equipment aboard warships to be “irrational”: inadequate storage space leads to damage control equipment being strewn about the vessels, leak-plugging equipment are not updated or renewed to match vessel facility upgrades, and damage control procedures are not centrally coordinated.\footnote{547 Deng Kaiyong [邓开勇], Yin Hui [尹辉], and Shu Xiong [舒雄], “Problems with Managing the Use of Warship Damage Control Equipment and Suggestions for Optimization” [舰艇损管器材使用管理存在问题及优化建议], \textit{China Ship Repair} [中国修船] 2, (April 2017), 23-25.} These shortcomings do not indicate a clear U.S. Navy advantage; the Navy’s Board of Inspection and Survey’s 2020 Annual Report evaluated U.S. Navy surface ships as “DEGRADED” in 11 of 21 functional areas, including key warfighting functions such as anti-submarine warfare, weapons systems, Aegis weapons systems, and aviation.\footnote{548 U.S. Navy Board of Inspection and Survey, INSURV Annual Report, March 1, 2021, 5, https://media.defense.gov/2021/Mar/03/2002592279/-1/-1/0/2020-INSURV-ANNUAL-REPORT.PDF/2020-INSURV-ANNUAL-REPORT.PDF.}

More important for determining naval lethality is the PLAN’s decisive missile advantage. Any kinetic conflict in the near seas will involve an asymmetry of forces, weighing the capabilities of the part of the U.S. Navy deployed to the Indo-Pacific against the PLAN, the CCP’s paranaval forces, and the PLA’s shore-based firepower.\footnote{Toshi Yoshihara and James R. Holmes, \textit{Red Star Over the Pacific: China’s Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy} 2nd ed. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018), 152.} PLA naval modernization has included a decades-long effort to improve the precision, range, and versatility of the PLA’s ship- and shore-launched missiles. Type 052D and 055 destroyers are equipped with HQ-9 surface-
to-air missiles (SAM) with an operational range equivalent to the U.S. Navy’s currently deployed SM-2 SAM; protected from aerial assault behind the HQ-9’s threat envelope, PLAN 052D and 055 destroyers can use the YJ-18 anti-ship cruise missile (ASCM), which boasts an operational range of 290 nautical miles, dramatically beyond the U.S. equivalent Harpoon’s 70nm range.\textsuperscript{550}

The navies’ ASCM gap will persist for years: the Office of Naval Intelligence first confirmed in 2015 that the YJ-18 ASCM entered service with the PLAN, while as of 2020, U.S. long-range options have a shorter reach or remain in testing stages.\textsuperscript{551} The much-trumpeted naval strike missile is only estimated to range above 100nm.\textsuperscript{552} The still-developing SM-6 missile, which is marketed as capable across antiair, anti-surface, and ballistic-missile missions, has a projected upper operation range of 200nm, still leaving a 90nm ASCM missile gap against a YJ-18.\textsuperscript{553} The Lockheed Martin long-range anti-ship missile (LRASM) similarly has a 200nm range; worse, the U.S. armed forces have only ordered 121 LRASMs across three procurements, accumulating only enough missiles to use against high-priority targets.\textsuperscript{554}

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Raytheon’s Block V Tomahawk promises the ability to strike surface ships at a range between 675nm and 1350nm.\textsuperscript{555} If successful, the Block V will reverse the ASCM gap until the PLA reveals a YJ-18 successor. The U.S. Navy first tested the Block V Tomahawk on November 30, 2020, and additional tests are likely before Raytheon is able to deliver the missiles to the Navy, scheduled for some time in 2021.\textsuperscript{556} Details remain unclear as to whether the initial run of Block V Tomahawks will have the 675nm to 1350nm operational range or whether that will be deferred until a future delivery of Block Va and Vb Tomahawks; the former includes an upgraded target seeker, while the latter features improved warhead penetration, but testing and delivery timelines for either remain unspecified.\textsuperscript{557}

\textit{Asymmetry: Land-Based Sea Denial and the PLAN Fortress Fleet}

As long as the conflict theater remains the Indo-Pacific, the PLA maintains a significant advantage in sustaining its missile gap against the U.S. armed forces in the form of land-based firepower. This includes both shore-based systems, such as the 270nm ranging YJ-62 and YJ-12B ASCMs, and ballistic missile systems that, with longer ranges, can be placed deeper inland behind PLA antiair defenses.\textsuperscript{558} PLA land-based firepower is a means of sea denial\textsuperscript{559} to contest

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U.S. sea control in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. armed forces have historically enjoyed hegemonic control over global strategic geography, which allowed it to rapidly project military power across the global commons—notably oceans and the airspace above them—and wage war against adversaries anywhere in the world on short notice even without a local military presence. In a distant maritime theater such as the Indo-Pacific, the U.S. faces a disadvantage in the land it has available for basing fleets and placing firepower, while the PLA asymmetrically benefits from a greater ability to integrate land power and sea power.

U.S. naval theory prioritizes naval mobility in combat and cautions against compromising an erstwhile advantage by tethering themselves to fortifications on land or by engaging without decisive force any land-based opponents, which are typically capable of generating a rate of fire per unit, in a fixed geographic point. Mahan himself derided the Russian Navy of 1905 as a “fortress fleet” adopting a “radically erroneous” approach to naval warfare for geographically circumscribing its mobility to the limits of its shore-based fire support. The late Wayne Hughes, who taught naval warfare for more than thirty years at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, similarly observed that naval commanders “historically have sought to avoid having to fight in front of fortifications,” and modern naval officers should attempt to win a conflict “without having to confront the forts” or defeating them only “by finding an Achilles’ heel.” By contrast, PLA strategists describe “using the land to control the sea” [以陆制海] precisely to exploit the strategic benefits of augmenting a local navy with shore-based fire. As previously noted, this

Routledge, 2019), 104.
564 English language analysis of this approach typically terms it anti-access/area denial (A2/AD). While the A2/AD approach is functionally identical to what is herein described, A2/AD is not a phrase originating from or commonly
land-centric framing of PLA strategy is endorsed by the PLA Academy of Military Sciences, whose 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* describes continental China as the “support and backstop” [本土为依托] from which power radiates to the “focal point” of the Indo-Pacific [两样地区为重点].

Given technological advances, notably increased range and precision allowing ballistic missiles to strike targets thousands of nautical miles out at sea, Mahan’s criticism—and by extension, U.S. naval theory—appears outdated. The PLA’s DF-class ballistic missiles and the strategic depth they confer preserve PLAN mobility by extending a broad threat envelope thousands of nautical miles beyond China’s shores. Chinese media has been explicit about the

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566 Modern sea power theorist Toshi Yoshihara sympathetically cites Chinese scholars who echo Mahan’s criticism of integrated approaches such as the Chinese composite of land and sea power on the basis that force should be concentrated, and by choosing to dedicate resources toward multiple orientations, “composite land-sea powers cannot be very strong in the maritime and continental directions simultaneously over the long term.” This criticism is perhaps overreaching and not altogether germane to the CCP’s strategic environment, defined by secure land borders, or approach to land-sea integrated planning. It remains to be seen whether and how CCP maritime strategy will change over the long term but, given enduring CCP assessments that the U.S. is not facing imminent collapse, the CCP is well-situated for the short and medium term by pursuing a sea denial strategy from a position of weakness or near-parity against the U.S. Navy rather than attempting to achieve maritime hegemony in the region by asserting Mahanian sea control, for which force concentration is a requirement. Further, the criticism that a composite land-sea approach necessitates multiple strategic orientations facing viable threats from each supposes an approach that uses continental forces to protect continental interests from continental threats rather than the PLA approach of “using land to control the sea,” which uses continental forces to protect maritime interests from maritime threats. See Toshi Yoshihara and Jack Bianchi, “Seizing on Weakness: Allied Strategy for Competing with China’s Globalizing Military,” *Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, January 4, 2021, 37*, https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/CSBA8239_(Seizing_on_Weakness_Report)_Web.pdf; Toshi Yoshihara, “China as a Composite Land-Sea Power: A Geostrategic Concept Revisited,” *Center for International Maritime Security, January 6, 2021*, http://cimsec.org/china-as-a-composite-land-sea-power-a-geostrategic-concept-revisited/47156.

567 DF-class ballistic missiles include short range ballistic missiles (SRBM), medium range ballistic missiles (MRBM), intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBM), and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). SRBMs travel less than 1,000km or 540nm; MRBMs travel between 1,000km and 3,000km, or between 540nm and 1620nm; IRBMs travel between 3,000km and 5,500km, or between 1620nm and 2700nm; ICBMs have operational ranges beyond IRBMs. See Arms Control Association, "Worldwide Ballistic Missile Inventories," updated December 2017, accessed December 26, 2020, [https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/missiles#-text=There%20are%20four%20general%20classifications,approximately%20620%20D1%2C860%20miles]%3B.
threat its land-based ballistic missiles pose to the United States; it referred to the DF-21D medium-range anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) as a “carrier killer” upon reveal in 2017 and similarly referred to its DF-26 intermediate-range ASBM variably as a “carrier killer” or a “Guam killer” missile, suggesting the missiles have the range and precision necessary to target U.S. military facilities on Guam or U.S. carrier strike groups. PLA analysts publish what Yoshihara and Holmes describe as a “real and intensifying interest in striking Aegis combatants at sea as a part of a broader anticarrier strategy,” for example in published research articles considering precisely how many and what sort of missile attacks would disable or sink an Arleigh Burke destroyer.

The CCP appears keenly aware of the threat its shore-based ASBMs pose to the U.S. Navy: the PLARF fired DF-21D and DF-26 missiles into the South China Sea on August 26, 2020, which state-run media described as a gesture to deter U.S. military provocations along China’s periphery. Another report noted that the PLARF is expanding its DF-26 brigades and will likely position them where their extended reach can deter U.S. activities east of Guam while remaining far enough inland that the U.S. would be forced to resort to nuclear strikes to destroy the DF-26 launchers. PLA and U.S. officers appear convinced of the PLARF’s ability to strike


vessels at extended ranges: retired senior colonel Wang Xiangsui [王湘穗] reportedly said that the August 2020 ASBM tests successfully hit a moving ship.\(^{572}\) In November 2020, Commander of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command ADM Phil Davidson suggests that the PLA’s so-called “carrier killer” missiles are misleadingly nicknamed because, rather than targeting a specific type of vessel, “they’re targeting everything.”\(^{573}\) The PLARF has not rested easy on its existing anti-ship capabilities and is likely pairing ongoing expansions in PLARF capacity with more advanced missiles able to strike ships still further out from Guam.\(^{574}\)

In addition to range and precision, the PLARF has the ballistic missile capacity to protect its fortress fleet. In 2020, DOD reported that the PLARF fields 150 MRBM launchers and 200 IRBM launchers;\(^{575}\) the standard IRBM launcher is expected to have 0-1 reloads, while a standard MRBM launcher may have 0-2 reloads, indicating the PLARF has the capacity to...

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discharge between 350 and 850 ASBMs in short order. The PLARF’s sheer ASBM capacity, able to allocate 1-3 ASBMs per ship in the U.S. Navy battle force at a low-end range of 540nm, diminishes the need to identify and prioritize targets in the event of a kinetic maritime conflict with negative implications for the U.S. Navy’s DMO concept.

The PLA’s pursuit and cultivation of a missile gap, driven by ship-launched ASCMs and shore-based ASBMs, constitutes an effective sea denial capability that contests the U.S. Navy’s ability to exercise sea control in the Indo-Pacific. The erosion of U.S. primacy in the Indo-Pacific is certain to undermine U.S. security guarantees and otherwise affect U.S. strategic influence: navies accrue and exert influence by exhibiting warfighting capability and agreeable intentions, and the U.S. Navy must for the foreseeable future maintain U.S. influence in the Indo-Pacific under the shadow of PLARF conventional precision strikes. While influence cannot be precisely measured, a downward trajectory for U.S. influence corresponding to its military balance in the region is likely.

The USG is keenly aware of how the PLA’s missile superiority has shifted the Indo-Pacific military balance. The DOD 2020 Tri-Service Maritime Strategy, guiding the United States’ Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard in global maritime competition, clearly articulates that the CCP is actively working to diminish the U.S. margin of military superiority at sea—successfully so:

China has implemented a strategy and revisionist approach that aims at the heart of the United States’ maritime power. It seeks to corrode international maritime governance, deny access to traditional logistical hubs, inhibit freedom of the seas, control use of key

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chokepoints, deter our engagement in regional disputes, and displace the United States as the preferred partner in countries around the world…

China’s and Russia’s aggressive naval growth and modernization are eroding U.S. military advantages. Unchecked, these trends will leave the Naval Service unprepared to ensure our advantage at sea and protect national interests within the next decade.579

A key pillar of DOD’s response has been to seek new operational concepts to arrest this apparent decline.560 U.S. Naval strategy since the Cold War has attempted to use and sustain its dominant position of being able to assert local sea control anywhere in the world; sea control remained a U.S. Navy imperative as of the two maritime strategies preceding the 2020 Tri-Service Maritime Strategy.581 The 2020 strategy settled on operational concepts combining “distributed fleet operations and mobile, expeditionary formations with sea control and sea denial capabilities” by making use of both “sea-based and land-based fires” to mass combat power despite an adversary’s missile threat envelope.582 Said differently, the U.S. is shifting from operational concepts informed by traditional Mahanian sea power to instead “using the land to control the sea.”583

583Confirming this assessment, U.S. doctrine is increasingly embracing the PLA model of land-based sea denial: the U.S. Marine Corps’ latest force design document responds to the “impacts of proliferated precision long-range fires” by suggesting that Marines be equipped with the sensors and weapons “that can provide a landward complement to Navy capabilities,” in which landward refers to the part of a littoral inland from the shore which can be supported and defended directly from the sea. DOD envisions the Marine Corps as a highly mobile force able to use long-range precision fire to exercise sea denial functions while maneuvering contested environments, following the model set forth by the PLA fortress fleet. See U.S. Marine Corps, Force Design 2030, March 2020, 4-5, https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/142/Docs/CMC38%20Force%20Design%202030%20Report%20Phase%20%20and%20%20.pdf?ver=2020-03-26-121328-460; U.S. Marine Corps, Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment, 2017, 4, https://www.hqmc.marines.mil/Portals/160/LOCE%20full%20size%20edition.pdf?ver=2018-06-20-095003-
By adopting a fortress fleet approach to sea denial and integrating its sea power with land-based assets, the PLA has successfully forced the U.S. sea forces to either adopt a land-sea integrated sea denial approach of its own along China’s periphery or pull back from the theater altogether. Given that sea control is typically exercised by a dominant power against a weaker one, parity between the U.S. Navy and PLAN within the conflict theater will likely make sea denial rather than sea control the salient naval operation. Correspondingly, the PLAN’s ability to seize and exert sea control in wartime within and beyond the Second Island Chain remains uncertain. The PLA’s missile gap imposes significant costs on regional adversaries but does little to cultivate influence if for no other reason than diplomacy is more easily conducted with regular port visits, mil-mil contacts, and joint exercises than at the end of a missile.

**Trend: Outgrowth of PLAN Aviation Toward Sea Control**

The PLAN appears to be building the aviation capabilities needed to establish sea control along China’s periphery. Even without a near-peer challenge, the PLAN surface fleet would not likely be able to achieve regional sea control without command of maritime airspace.\(^{584}\) PLAN aviation currently plays a limited role in the existing Indo-Pacific naval balance, with most of the naval air fleet being land-based. Ongoing PLAN operationalization of its first aircraft carriers, with plans for additional construction, is converting PLA naval aviation from a land-based force to an increasingly sea-based one, adding a new domain to the naval challenge facing U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific.\(^{585}\)

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\(^{584}\) Milan Vego, *Maritime Strategy and Sea Control: Theory and Practice*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 41. Airpower at sea first became a decisive part of sea control during the Second World War, as U.S. and UK navies were unable to reliably secure allied merchant convoys against German submarines when sailing through an “air gap” in the mid-Atlantic, where the convoy was without the limits of air cover from North America, Iceland, or the UK. These convoys were secured largely in part by aircraft carrier escorts able to patrol larger swaths of ocean while equipped with dedicated antisubmarine weapons. See Paul Kennedy, *Engineers of Victory: The Problem Solvers Who Turned the Tide in the Second World War*, (New York: Random House, 2013), 35 & 50-52.

The PLAN carrier production schedule dictates when and how other PLAN aviation capabilities develop. As of 2020, the PLAN operates two ski jump carriers able to field a fighter force equivalent to an airborne brigade when operating in conjunction;\(^{586}\) DOD notes that the PLA expects a third carrier to enter service by 2023 and be operational by 2024.\(^{587}\) Though no official carrier production plans are publicly available, Chinese media has long published rumors that the PLAN aims to grow its fleet up to six carriers.\(^{588}\) The third carrier, currently in production, and all produced thereafter are reported to feature jet-launching catapults, and while the third carrier will likely be conventionally powered, some future carriers are likely to be nuclear-powered.\(^{589}\)

The PLAN is modernizing its naval air fleet in anticipation of its coming carrier fleet. The current PLAN aviation force remains small, reflecting the extended production timelines of aircraft carriers: only 24 J-15 fixed-wing carrier aircraft are confirmed, and “approximately” that figure has been produced; the number of naval aviators present at a recent carrier commissioning ceremony appear to confirm the limited force size.\(^{590}\) A second reason the PLAN has maintained a comparatively small J-15 fleet is its planned carrier aircraft modernization. A modified variant of the multirole FC-31 stealth fighter, sometimes called the J-31, is likely to replace the J-15 as the PLAN’s primary carrier-deployed fixed-wing aircraft.\(^{591}\)

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\(^{591}\) *Global Times*, “Is China developing a new type of carrier-based aircraft? Expert: J-31 is expected to replace J-15” [中国正研制新型舰载机？专家：歼 31 有望取代歼 15], July 6, 2018,
indicators point to the FC-31 with significant confidence, some conflicting indicators continue to suggest that the comparatively heavier J-20 stealth fighter will also be deployed for carrier operations. The PLAN does not appear to be preparing to operationalize the J-20 for carrier operations, however, given PLAAF dominance in J-20 production and the PLAN’s preference for one multimission fighter tailored to PLAN missions, for which the J-20—designed for contesting air superiority with minimal ground attack capabilities—is only a partial fit.

Either choice would be a significant improvement over the current carrier-operated J-15, an air superiority fighter modeled off the Russian Su-33. The J-15 is more heavily armed and has operational ranges and altitudes well beyond those of the U.S. F-18E and F-35 but is severely undercut by its incompatibility with catapult launch systems, which necessitate a lower fuel carriage and weapons payload for carrier takeoff. Notably, the J-15 only features stopgap means such as graphene coatings for radar evasion. Unlike the J-15, the FC-31 is


Whether the FC-31 will be a mass-produced dedicated platform for carrier aviation or another incremental step toward the plane PLA planners want remains unclear. Perhaps indicating the latter, Chinese aviation manufacturers are already looking beyond the FC-31. Chief Designer of the Chengdu Aircraft Design Institute Wang Haifeng [王海峰], who led work on the PLA’s fifth-generation J-20, shared in a 2019 interview that the Institute has begun pre-research work on sixth generation aircraft, which should manifest into a weapon capable of securing air dominance and sea control by 2035. See Wang Haifeng [王海峰], “Mystery: the miracle of the J-20’s super short development period solved” [揭开歼20 超短研发周期实现首飞“奇迹”的奥秘], Aviation Online [航空制造网], January 3, 2019, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?_biz=MzU3Njg5ODgwMA==&mid=2247492348&idx=2&sn=ecafaefbb1bc01d16fb7078f3a284a&source=41#wechat_redirect.
designed to be a multi-role fighter capable of air combat, ground assault, and routine air patrols.\textsuperscript{597} Other improvements include an electromagnetic aircraft launch system and improved intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) technology.\textsuperscript{598}

Though current PLAN aviation mission sets remain immature, they appear inclined toward securing regional sea control. Official Chinese strategic guidance defines PLAN aviators’ primary mission as protecting Chinese waters and maritime airspace through “offensive strike, air defense, maritime reconnaissance and patrol, anti-submarine warfare (ASW), and anti-surface warfare (ASuW),” with future mission sets likely to include blue water operations.\textsuperscript{599}

While maritime strike and ISR have been the primary tasks for which PLAN aviation trained, since 2015, training operations have increasingly included surface fleet support and defensive counterair in realistic conflict conditions, developing capabilities needed to match Japanese or U.S. sea forces.\textsuperscript{600} This training has almost entirely originated from airfields, however, and how PLAN aviation training will adapt to carrier operations remains to be seen.

Developments in PLAN carriers and carrier aviation foster increased power projection capabilities, which would for the first time make the PLAN capable of enforcing an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) over large swaths of airspace over the South China Sea, which Chinese officials have repeatedly suggested is a likely, if yet-unenforceable, objective. In 2016, A PRC Ministry of National Defense spokesperson described the Chinese decision to enforce


The PLAN currently lacks adequate infrastructure for enforcing a South China Sea ADIZ. Though the PLAN has access to its three increasingly-militarized artificial island bases in the South China Sea, each ostensibly able to base 24 aircraft, the harsh maritime environment of these bases are highly corrosive to stationed aircraft.\footnote{Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, “Updated: China’s Big Three Near Completion,” June 29, 2017, https://amti.csis.org/chinas-big-three-near-completion/; Michael Pilger, “ADIZ Update: Enforcement in the East China Sea, Prospects for the South China Sea, and Implications for the United States,” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March 2, 2016, 9, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/ADIZ%20Update_0.pdf.} Radomes likely housing radar and communications equipment on the islands imply the PLA has meaningful maritime domain awareness and ISR capabilities over the South China Sea,\footnote{For a detailed assessment of the maritime domain awareness platforms the PLA likely has in the South China Sea, see J. Michael Dahm, “Air and Surface Radar,” Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory South China Sea Military Capabilities Series, July 2020, https://www.jhuapl.edu/Content/documents/AirandSurfaceRadar_v2.pdf.} but sailors stationed at these bases are not well-trained in their operation.\footnote{Alexander Neill, Meia Nouwens, and Laurence Taylor, “China’s radar installations in the Spratly Islands – what do they tell us about its ambitions for the South China Sea?” IISS, February 19, 2018, https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2018/02/china-radar.} Moreover, 45.1 percent of PLAN sailors stationed in the island base report symptoms of poor mental health, diminishing force readiness.\footnote{Zi Yang, “Assessing Mental Health Challenges in the People’s Liberation Army, Part 2: Physical Operational Environments and Their Impacts on PLA Service Members,” China Brief, August 14, 2019, https://jamestown.org/program/assessing-mental-health-challenges-in-the-peoples-liberation-army-part-2-physical-operational-environments-and-their-impacts-on-pla-service-members/.} Current PLAN basing in the South China Sea is inadequate to enforce an ADIZ. These limitations would be largely resolved with carrier deployments. Mobile carriers can conduct patrols well beyond the limits of three island bases. Catapult-launched FC-31 are expected to have combat radiuses of 648nm using only internal fuel, comparable to the F-35C’s 670nm radius.\footnote{Jane’s All the World’s Aircraft: Development & Production, May 11, 2020; John M. Donnelly, “Navy’s Top-Dollar Stealth Fighter May Not Go the Distance,” Roll Call, May 21, 2018, https://www.rollcall.com/2018/05/21/navys-top-dollar-stealth-fighter-may-not-go-the-distance/.} While the FC-31 cannot match the F-35 in stealth or combat capabilities,
PLAN aviation’s strategic imperative in enforcing an ADIZ has as much of a peacetime component as a wartime one: enforcing an ADIZ is effectively enforcing sovereignty over disputed waters and territories, and no South China Sea territorial claimant features a navy or air force capable of engaging the PLAN.

Realizing these capabilities requires first overcoming problems in the PRC’s aeroengine manufacturing program, which longtime intelligence analyst Lonnie Henley describes as an “ongoing disaster.”⁶⁰⁷ PLA aeroengine manufacturers have yet to master several key components and technologies necessary for producing advanced jet fighters; foremost among them is the metallurgy of creating resilient turbine blades able to tolerate the high temperatures and pressure associated with an advanced jet engine.⁶⁰⁸ As a result, the PLA’s jet engines do not produce the anticipated thrust and have been known to explode during tests.⁶⁰⁹

Asymmetry: CCP Paranaval Forces and Gray Zone Activities

In addition to a navy and its burgeoning aviation wing, the CCP employs two sea forces to assert its interests in China’s near seas: the paranaval CCG and PAFMM. The CCG and PAFMM operate similarly to the PLAN but modify Booth’s framework of navies having military, diplomatic, and constabulary functions by extending a military threat only as a proxy of the PLAN and eschewing diplomatic functions altogether. By filling the strategic space of China’s near seas with paranaval forces and directing them to conduct gray zone operations (those that leverage nonmilitary tools to achieve competitive objectives through activities falling below the escalation threshold for open war), the CCP increases its ability to exercise sea control on

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China’s maritime periphery against Southeast Asian countries while mitigating the likelihood of an adversary’s military response. In this way, the CCP’s paranaval forces have effectively introduced a new threat to Southeast Asian countries against which U.S. security guarantees have been largely ineffective.

The CCP deploys its paranaval services in constabulary roles to assert CCP sovereignty in China’s near seas, maintaining administrative presence and taking coercive action against U.S. allies and partners to great effect. The anatomy of threat is simple and involves each service: the PAFMM initiates with aggressive maneuvers but “no force,” followed by CCG vessels “to demonstrate state commitment and add nonlethal coercion if necessary,” backed by the threat of the PLAN looming over the horizon. With these and similar tactics, the CCP has maintained a constant paranaval presence around disputed features in the South China Sea, harassed the vessels and platforms of neighboring countries attempting to extract energy resources, intimidated neighboring countries attempting to construct facilities on features in

the South China Sea; forced Japan’s maritime and air Self-Defense Forces to repeatedly mobilize frequently enough to erode combat readiness; protected the PRC distant water fishing fleets’ illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing activities against enforcement from the maritime law enforcement of other countries, and outright seized Scarborough Shoal from Philippine administration. Likely because all of these activities employ ostensibly constabulary rather than military force, the U.S. has only on rare occasion deployed military force to check CCG or PAFMM activity. Without the tools for proportional response to CCG/PAFMM gray zone coercion, the USG is less able to reassure allies and partners of the value of a U.S. security guarantees.

CCP policies since 2005 have increased paranaval capacity and militarization. The CCG benefitted from a ship construction program between 2010 and 2017 that more than doubled its offshore-capable vessels (displacing 500 tons or more) to 225—more coast guard hulls than those operated by China’s Southeast Asian neighbors combined. The CCG’s offshore-

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capable vessels are supported at over 200 CCG facilities, 40 of which are large bases able to accommodate offshore-capable patrol ships.622

Table 3: China Coast Guard Force Levels By Ship Displacement, 2005-2020623

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FORCE LEVEL (VESSEL TYPE AND DISPLACEMENT IN TONS)</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OCEANGOING PATROL SHIP (2,500-10,000)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REGIONAL PATROL SHIPS (1,000-2,499)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REGIONAL PATROL COMBATANTS (500-999)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COASTAL PATROL CRAFT (100-499)</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INSHORE PATROL BOATS/MINOR CRAFT (&lt;100)</td>
<td>500+</td>
<td>500+</td>
<td>600+</td>
<td>600+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>900+</td>
<td>1,000+</td>
<td>1,275+</td>
<td>1,300+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


While estimates for PAFMM size are not readily available in the open source, satellite technology has revealed as many as 300 fishing boats likely to be PAFMM vessels at PRC-held islands in the South China Sea; similarly, as many as 91 PAFMM vessels have surged near Philippines-administered Thitu Island within a day.624 These figures likely account for only a fraction of PAFMM size. The PRC has subsidized fishing boat construction, militia training for

fishermen, and boat fuel since at least 2013. In 2015, the PRC NPC promulgated the Technical Standards for New Civilian Ships to Implement National Defense Requirements [新造民船贯彻国防要求技术标准] requiring all civilian ships to be built to military standards, which Chinese state media reported will "enable China to convert the considerable potential of its civilian fleet into military strength and will greatly enhance the PLA's strategic projection and maritime support capabilities."

Chinese paranaval preponderance in the near seas may be less of an outright advantage insofar as it indicates the higher force level needs of its gray zone strategies; Peter Dutton assesses that the CCP believes it needs to outnumber its adversaries by 3:1 or 4:1 in order to physically block them from completing their operations. Consistent with the PLA's approach of "residing the military within the civilian" for information warfare, the PLA also takes advantage of PAFMM numbers by reconceptualizing it as a floating ISR network, spanning China’s shoreline and near seas, able to provide “effective maritime intelligence” by feeding targeting and tracking information into PLA theater command intelligence infrastructures. Contemporary PLA analysis discusses expanding PAFMM mobility and ISR capabilities, perhaps by augmenting the PRC’s distant water fishing fleets, to reliably provide the PLA with far seas maritime domain awareness.

629 Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, "China’s Maritime Militia: An Important Force Multiplier," in Michael A. McDevitt, China as a Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 225. One example of PLA analysts discussing this, which Erickson and Kennedy discuss, is
While PLAN-CCG-PAFMM C2 and interoperability remain in development and challenging\(^{630}\) for PLA commanders, the long-term trajectory of the CCP’s three sea forces is decidedly toward bolstering Chinese sea power with ostensibly civilian resources.\(^{631}\) The CCP’s burgeoning paranaval forces, while not likely able to exert outright sea control in a contested military environment, are increasingly capable of imposing prohibitive peacetime costs on Southeast Asian countries attempting to operate in the near seas; the CCP’s paranaval forces simultaneously adds capacity and acts as a force multiplier for the PLAN, which is able to shift its focus and resources toward far seas operations with a robust maritime intelligence network. This approach challenges U.S. security guarantees for Southeast Asian countries by tailoring paramilitary coercion against these countries below the threshold of U.S. military response. CCP paranaval sea forces also contribute a latent military intelligence capability sustained by a broad network of coastal facilities for which the United States has no regional analog, potentially leaving the U.S. military at an ISR disadvantage in a high-end kinetic conflict.

**Navies and their Defense Establishments**

A powerful navy is composed not just of hulls, high-tech sensors, and sophisticated weaponry; a military and navy must also have the “software”—skilled sailors with expertise, seamanship, naval doctrine, and defense establishment support: David Gompert cogently

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observes that “sea power must be institutionalized, not just constructed.” In the same way, the success of CCP maritime transformation will depend on its ability to institutionalize policies supporting its Navy. The most sophisticated ships and weapons will be less effective if suboptimally employed. Examples range throughout history. Imperial Rome initially built an impressive navy but trained no seamen, instead opting to bridge enemy warships with Roman ones using corvus to let Roman heavy infantry cross and conduct naval warfare as if fighting on land; despite early Roman successes, the Carthaginian navy eventually annihilated most of the Roman one in a single battle, leading Rome to eschew corvus and instead train sailors for naval warfare when rebuilding its navy. Imperial Germany’s naval buildup, beginning in the last years of the 19th century until the fleet’s destruction under the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, was a construction project without an accompanying plan for force employment necessary to comprise a sea power strategy, ultimately accruing enormous costs but no allies for Germany nor any hope of achieving the buildup’s chief objective of cowing the United Kingdom. Soviet leaders in pursuit of sea power consistently misunderstood naval technologies and set unbalanced shipbuilding policies focusing on either large surface fleets or ballistic missile

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635 The corvus was a Roman boarding device, in effect a ship-mounted drawbridge which could be lowered onto an adjacent vessel.
submarines without ever striking the appropriate surface-undersea balance advocated by its professional Navy leaders.\textsuperscript{638}

Whether a country's defense establishment equips its navy to succeed is inherently difficult to measure, particularly in peacetime. Yet investigating whether software aspects amplify or dampen its hardware capabilities is a worthwhile endeavor even if precise determinations cannot be known with reasonable certainty. This subsection discusses important aspects of PLAN and broader PLA organizational cultures as well as their impact on PLAN capabilities.

\textit{Asymmetry: The Party Military and Dual-Command Structure}

Unlike the United States Armed Forces, the PLA is a party-army, not a national military; its command authority, the Central Military Commission, is a Party organization, and PLA members swear an oath to follow CCP leadership.\textsuperscript{639} Mao Zedong famously cast this identity for the PLA in a 1938 speech, wherein he reasoned that because “political power grows out the barrel of a gun,” so a CCP principle is that the “Party controls the gun.”\textsuperscript{640} This identity carries forward into the modern era: Jiang Zemin required that all PLA soldiers be “politically qualified,” Hu Jintao made reaffirming loyalty to the CCP the first of the PLA’s four “New Historic Missions,” and Xi Jinping signed a first-of-its-kind regulation on PLA Party-building in part designed to “ensure the absolute leadership of the Party over the PLA” [对确保党对军队绝对领导].\textsuperscript{641}

Being a party-army has advantages not common to professional national militaries. The CCP’s leadership of the PLA, when joined with its leadership of the PRC government apparatus and interpenetration of Chinese civil society, gives the Party an outsized ability to centrally coordinate state and society to support military efforts. One way this ability manifests is as an advantage in large-scale mobilization: Larry Wortzel finds that China has repeatedly mobilized on large scale since World War II and in these instances demonstrated that deployed PLAN and PLAAF units are likely to be supported by Chinese militia, reserves, and particularly effective civil communication and transportation assistance. The PLA’s ability to benefit from mobilization of civil communication resources ensures military consequence to Chinese civil technological developments, for example access to the successful work of Chinese SOEs in developing communication networks secured with quantum technology.

Being a party-army also has notable disadvantages. For example, mechanisms for ensuring CCP control pervade and complicate the PLA’s command structure. The CCP guarantees its control of the PLA through a political work [政治工作] system, which places a unit Party committee within the headquarters of any PLA organization at or above the regiment level. The committee is typically composed of the commanding officer, a political commissar, deputy commanders and commissars, and administrative directors; the commissar typically leads these committees, with the commanding officer as his deputy. The PLAN considers each of its vessels an organization, and all PLAN vessels considered to be at the regiment level.

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or above\textsuperscript{646} have a dual-command structure [双首长制] in which the commanding officer leads the military chain of command and the political commissar represents Party authority\textsuperscript{647} through the Party committee onboard each regiment-level ship.\textsuperscript{648} As such, PLAN captains and commissars have co-equal authority: military commands aboard the vessel are collectively determined under the vessel’s political committee, and the vessel’s commanding officer must accommodate and be held accountable to the directives set by its political committee.\textsuperscript{649}

The dual-command structure onboard PLAN vessels poses multiple potential command and control challenges. First, the time necessary to coordinate between two co-equal leaders and then convene the political committee to hear and approve an agreed-upon decision, if one is in fact reached, is likely to delay command decisions of any significance. In the event of an international crisis during which a theater command joint headquarters may not have the information or capacity to provide a PLAN vessel’s crew with detailed instructions, the personalities composing the vessel’s political committee will have an outsized role in ensuring

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item The modern PLA’s designation of its political commissars as nominally ranked below but in reality more influential than its military commanders is reflected at the highest levels, with CMC Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang [许其亮] and Zhang Youxia [张又侠]. Xu has little personal relationship with Xi Jinping, and his portfolio covers much of the military administration and operations work; Xi likely selected him in large part because Xu was the most senior PLA commander not embroiled in influence cartels loyal to prior commanders. By contrast, Xi personally selected Zhang, his childhood friend, whose personal relationship with Xi and battlefield command experience likely makes him more influential in decision making than Xu; Zhang’s portfolio includes political affairs and discipline enforcement, making him the PLA’s “paramount political commissar.” See You Ji, “How Xi Jinping Dominates Elite Party Politics,” The China Journal 84, (2020), 1-28, 17-20, https://doi.org/10.1086/708647.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
the vessel neither falls into operational paralysis nor exhibits unpredictable behaviors which may foster destabilizing adversary misperceptions.\textsuperscript{650}

The dual-command structure also poses a likely challenge to PLA professionalism, as commanding officers are likely to be overruled, outvoted, or noted to be out of step with Party objectives in the event their professional military assessments do not accord with the Party’s political imperative.\textsuperscript{651} Military professionalism in the PLA has measurably eroded since 2002, when David Shambaugh observed that senior PLA officers “are now promoted on meritocratic and professional criteria, while political consciousness and activism count for very little,” suggesting significant professional autonomy for the officer corps.\textsuperscript{652} Sofia Ledberg’s more recent research indicates this trend may have reversed, with the Political Work Department integrating itself into the military command structure such that, while PLA officers are given what appears to be a significant degree of professional autonomy, only the ideologically approved will be in a position to exercise this autonomy because “every leadership position in the regular military system simultaneously constitutes a checkpoint of Party control.”\textsuperscript{653}

These problems are likely to grow as the role and authority of political commissars continues to accumulate and overlap into those of military commanders. Chinese state media

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\textsuperscript{650} PLA leaders find that PLA officers often fail to accurately judge a situation, make operational decisions, or understand the intentions of higher authorities. As such, PLA vessels and regiments likely face considerable risk of acting erroneously or not acting at all when not given detailed instruction. Some PLA officers have reported an unwillingness to act due to a perception that “the more we do, the greater our chance of making mistakes.” See \textit{PLA Daily}, “With my Organization Backing Me, I Will Do My Duty” [组织给我当靠山 我为事业尽责任], February 18, 2020, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2020-02/18/content_254330.htm; Dennis J. Blasko, written testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Hearing on \textit{Backlash from Abroad: The Limits of Beijing’s Power to Shape its External Environment}, February 7, 2019, 7, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Blasko_USCC%20Testimony_FINAL.pdf.


reports indicate growing agitation within the PLA in response to an aggrandizing Political Work Department. Some PLA divisions are instituting new standards requiring political commissars to be able to organize military training\(^{654}\) and command troops in battle.\(^{655}\) Other units have reported a broad sense that political work has little to no bearing on combat capabilities, requiring commanders to retool political work to match combat requirements and, though left implied, reassert professional military interest against time-consuming political work requirements.\(^{656}\)

CCP leadership clearly favors commissars over commanders in this tension.\(^{657}\) Xi Jinping caustically undercut confidence in the PLA’s professional capabilities by describing the PLA as needing to “train a new type of military personnel who are competent, professional and possess both integrity and ability” in a 2019 speech.\(^{658}\) In the same month Xi impugned PLA commanders’ abilities, the CMC reaffirmed the role of political work in the PLA, issuing guidelines which described a need to “purify” the PLA’s “political ecology” from the corruption of past commanders.\(^{659}\) Tightening the CCP’s grip over the PLA, in 2020 the CMC issued trial, then final regulations on military supervision, which a PRC spokesman described as the “first time a comprehensive and systematic regulation of Party building in the military was specifically made.”\(^{660}\)

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\(^{656}\) Li Yongfei [李永飞], Duan Kaishang [段开尚], and Gao Mingjun [高明俊], “The First Wartime Political Work Exercise, Why the Three Reform Plan?” [一次战时政治工作演练，为何三改方案], *PLA Daily*, August 17, 2020, http://www.81.cn/jfjbmap/content/2020-08/17/content_268723.htm.


\(^{660}\) “首次专门对军队党的建设作出全面系统规范，是构建军队党内法规制度体系的创新举措。” Xinhua, “Leaders of the
Trend: Ground Force Dominance and Resistance to Reform

The PLAN’s operational capabilities are further undermined by PLAGF resistance to adopting the size, shape, and doctrine that top PLA and civilian CCP leaders sought, hampering military-wide reforms. PLAGF defense of its organizational interests, particularly those in conflict with the broader CCP vision for its military, likely contribute to repeated delays and failures of attempted PLA reforms and in so doing undermine overall force readiness and lethality.

From its inception, the PLA has been overwhelmingly dominated by its ground force. Mao Zedong’s own military experience was in fighting protracted ground conflicts which leveraged force mobility and peasant mobilization to defeat the Japanese and Republic of China militaries from a position of weakness. The revolutionary stature of the PLAGF instilled it with institutionalized prominence among PLA services: until 2016, the PLA used a system of military regions, first devised in the 1940s around PLAGF defense of China’s borders, which provided the PLAGF with institutionalized C2 capabilities but relegated peacetime command of PLAN, PLAAF, or Second Artillery (now PLARF) forces stationed in the region to service leaders generally outside the theater. Because of the PLAGF’s advantage in sheer size and influence beyond other services, most commanders and important staff for each military region or for the general department tended to be PLAGF officers.

PLAF commanders also dominated CMC membership to the exclusion of other services for the majority of their existence: PLAGF commanders had been CMC members since

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1956, but the addition of top commanders from the PLAN, PLAAF, and Second Artillery Force to CMC membership were not institutionalized until September 2004, at which point no PLAN or Second Artillery Force commander had previously served on the CMC, though PLAAF top commanders Liu Yalou [刘亚楼] and Zhang Tingfa [张廷发] served on the CMC from 1956-1965 and from 1977-1982, respectively.664 An apparent gap in prestige between services persisted into the recent past. Liu Huaqing, who served as the PLAN's top officer and was known as the “Father of China’s modern navy” and the “Father of China’s aircraft carrier,” spent most of his military career in the ground force and changed his PLAN uniform for a PLAGF uniform when he joined the Central Military Commission under Jiang Zemin.665

PLAF dominance of the PLA has frustrated efforts at reform and modernization when they ran contrary to PLAGF organizational interests. Since adopting the 1993 Military Strategic Guidance, the PLA has been attempting to transition from a force geared to fight mobile, positional, or guerilla ground campaigns to one able to conduct joint operations that combine ground, air, and naval capabilities.666 Progress on this effort has been halting. Ten years after the 1993 MSG was adopted, the PRC released its 2004 Defense White Paper, reinforcing that “priority [is] given to the Navy, Air Force, and Second Artillery Force” to strengthen the PLA’s “comprehensive deterrence and warfighting capabilities.”667 That same year, Hu Jintao...

announced the PLA’s “New Historic Missions,” extending PLA missions well outside of China’s borders. Another ten years later, the lethargic rate of change in PLA reform strongly indicated that PLAGF was obstructing the long-term changes in force structure and prestige that would be necessary to shift from a focus on land warfare to joint expeditionary operations. For example, analysts have observed that the PLAGF did not adopt the largely noncombat and constabulary mission set required of PLAGF under the New Historic Missions. Further, the 2013 Science of Military Strategy specifically urged that the PLAGF needs to “conform to the development trends of informatized war [as first adopted in the 1993 MSG] and those of ground forces around the word by casting off the traditional “Big Army” mentality,” in order to successfully transition toward joint operations. Twenty years after the 1993 MSG called for the PLA to transition its operational model toward joint operations, PLA analysts recognized that bureaucratic opposition from the PLAGF has obstructed reform toward a joint command system or joint warfighting capability while militaries in other countries were able to make similar transitions successfully.

Xi Jinping spearheaded comprehensive, fundamental reforms to the PLA’s organizational structure to overcome PLAGF dominance and build a meaningful joint warfighting capability in the PLA. The CCP Central Committee first adopted a formal decision to undertake sweeping

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668 Daniel M. Hartnett, “The ‘New Historic Missions’: Reflections on Hu Jintao’s Military Legacy,” in Assessing the People’s Liberation Army in the Hu Jintao Era, (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2014), 34...
PLA reforms in 2013, and the details of reform were laid out in a Xi Jinping speech in 2015, CMC guidance given in 2016, and the Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for Military Development also released in 2016. Joel Wuthnow and Phil Saunders summarize the reform's objectives as:

- rebalancing service composition to put more weight on naval, air, and missile forces
- creating the PLA Strategic Support Force and PLA Joint Logistics Support Force, which provided critical operational support to joint commanders
- removing the service chiefs from operational chain of command, while granting theater commanders operational oversight over all conventional forces within their respective regions
- establishing an independent training department under the CMC to formulate and enforce joint training standards
- revising professional military educational curricula to put more emphasis on joint operations
- increasing specialized forces, such as amphibious and helicopter units, that would be essential to a joint campaign.

As of the end of 2020, PLA reforms have not successfully rebalanced influence among the services, and PLAGF officers remain in the majority of leadership positions in the reformed structure. One of the earliest and most important aspects of the reform was transitioning the PLA from its revolutionary-era system of seven military regions, designed for PLAGF defense against invasion, to five theater commands, intended to support joint expeditionary operations, presumably with PLAAF and PLAN leaders. The old system made military region commanders responsible for force building tasks and created ad hoc commands to conduct any wartime operations. To sharpen the theater commands’ focus on developing a joint warfighting

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capability, the reforms shifted non-warfighting responsibilities to PLA organs outside the theater command and institutionalized theater command leadership with permanent C2 mechanisms for joint operations.\textsuperscript{676}

While PLAN and PLAAF commanders made marginal leadership gains because of these reforms, PLAGF generals maintained most of the senior leadership roles in the theater command as well as external organs responsible for noncombat military affairs. Where PLAGF generals led all seven of the PLA’s pre-reform military regions, they lead only three of the post-reform theater commands, ceding leadership in the Southern Theater Command to PLAN Admiral Yuan Yubai [袁誉柏] and in the Central Theater Command to PLAAF General Yi Xiaoguang [乙晓光].\textsuperscript{677} In these theater commands, however, PLAGF influence persists through a preponderance of PLAGF officers staffed at the deputy level.\textsuperscript{678} The PLAGF maintained its hold on leadership of the CMC Joint Staff Department, which is responsible for joint operations: PLAGF General Fang Fenghui [房峰辉] held the inaugural position until PLAGF top officer Li Zuocheng [李作成] took over the position in 2017.\textsuperscript{679}

The theater commands’ permanent joint C2 mechanisms may in fact extend the power of PLAGF commanders leading the Northern, Eastern, and Western Theater Commands as well
as the CMC Joint Staff Department. Previously, the PLAGF commanders leading each military region only had peacetime command authority over the PLAGF forces in each region, with command authority for PLAN, PLAAF, and Second Artillery forces vested in other organs; under the new theater command structure, these PLAGF commanders now exert operational command over units of any service in their commands in wartime and peacetime.\footnote{Phillip C. Saunders and John Chen, “Is the Chinese Army the Real Winner in PLA Reforms?” \textit{Joint Force Quarterly} 83, (2016), 44-48, 46, \url{https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-83/jfq-83_44-48_Saunders-Chen.pdf.}}

Another way the PLAGF maintained its influence during the shift from military regions to theater commands is by maintaining a system of PLAGF headquarters parallel to the joint PLA headquarters in each theater command. While still the PLAGF top commander, Li Zuocheng argued that keeping PLAGF headquarters separate would foster joint capabilities by giving the joint structure space to shed the PLAGF’s influence.\footnote{"不建立陆军领导机构，联合指挥机构就难以摆脱陆军属性，就不是真正意义上的联合作战指挥，也无法做到对各军兵种等同等距指挥和保障." Feng Chunmei [冯春梅] and Ni Guanghui [倪光辉], “Ground Force Commander Li Zuocheng Accepts Media Interview for the First Time” [陆军司令员李作成首次接受媒体采访], \textit{People’s Daily}, January 31, 2016, \url{http://www.81.cn/jwgz/2016-01/31/content_6882034.htm.}} Whether or not that was the driving rationale, the headquarters were kept separate, to the significant organizational benefit of the PLAGF. As a result, the PLAGF headquarters in each theater command, not the joint headquarters, enjoys direct command responsibility for operational PLAGF units in the theater, and the joint headquarters must communicate with PLAGF units in its area of responsibility through the local PLAGF headquarters.\footnote{Dennis J. Blasko, “The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms,” in \textit{Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms}, eds. Phillip C. Saunders et al., (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019), 352.} The top PLAGF commander and political commissar in each theater command also serve as de facto deputy commander and commissar for the full theater command.\footnote{Dennis J. Blasko, “The Biggest Loser in Chinese Military Reforms,” in \textit{Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms}, eds. Phillip C. Saunders et al., (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2019), 352.}

A final service-wide metric of persistent PLAGF influence at the cost of other services is the service mix of top-level PLA officers. As shown in Table 4 below, PLAGF dominance over other
services also persisted in promotions to General/Admiral [上将], the equivalent of a U.S. four-star officer. Even after the 2015 reforms broke the Strategic Support Force (SSF) out from within the PLAGF, the ground force dominated promotions to General rank with only a modest increase in promotions among other services.

Table 4: PLA Promotions to General [上将] By Service and Year, 2012-2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>PLAGF</th>
<th>PLAN</th>
<th>PLAAF</th>
<th>PLARF</th>
<th>SSF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: various.

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PLAGF dominance and continued resistance to reform have negatively affected PLA reform efforts. While the effects of PLAGF resistance on the PLA’s joint warfighting capability, and on the PLAN in particular, is not addressed in the open source, several indicators of the PLAGF resistance’s negative impact on the PLA as a whole are publicly accessible. One measurable indicator is reform timeliness: the PLA has consistently missed self-imposed milestones and deadlines for reform. Joel Wuthnow has testified before the USG that, according to the CCP’s timeline for comprehensive reform, “the PLA has been consistently behind schedule over the last five years.”

He cites as examples a delay of over a year for a 300,000-person downsizing and delays of up to or over four years when reforming the military education system, the People’s Armed Police, and the PLA reserves. The PRC Ministry of National Defense has also confirmed that the PLA’s major policy reforms, initially scheduled for completion in 2020, was now projected to drag on into 2022. Similarly, the PLA appears likely to have missed the 2020 milestone in its three-step modernization timeline to “basically achieve mechanization.” Wuthnow describes the PLA as burdened with equipment and doctrine that are outdated by its own standards, with the PLAGF as the worst offender: as of

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688 See the section on “CCP Military Strategy: Toward a World-Class Navy”.
2017, half of the PLAGF's infantry brigades were still considered “motorized,” the modernization\(^{690}\) stage the PLA designates as prior to being mechanized.\(^{691}\)

Another indicator is public PLA criticism of its ground force commanders. In an unusual step, the Eastern Theater Command produced a 43-episode TV drama entitled *Blue Strike* [《蓝军出击》], about a PLAGF “Blue Force” that reveals the weaknesses of PLA brigades in adversarial trainings in order to highlight the “labor pains” \(^{692}\) of modernization stemming from the PLAGF officers' halfhearted or false compliance with PLA reforms. One report explains that the series shows the extent to which “at the outset of reform, many leaders went through the motions of reform without internalizing it; their uniforms have changed, but their mindsets have not; and their ideas cannot keep up with the needs of a strong military.”\(^{692}\)

PLAGF capabilities lagging reform milestones puts the PLAGF role in joint operations in doubt and potentially imposes harsh trade-offs with other missions, including those that prioritize the PLAN. This tension is perhaps most keenly felt between PLA missions regarding Taiwan and those regarding the far seas. Although the PLAN was initially intended to support a PLA campaign to conquer Taiwan and its offshore islands, by the early 2000s, PLAN leaders and advocates were looking past Taiwan to tie the service's importance instead to protecting foreign

\(^{690}\) Official PLA sources describe modernization as a multi-stage process. The earliest are termed “on foot” \([徒步化]\) and “pack animalization,” \([骡马化]\) defined by the widespread use of foot marches and pack animals to move troops and equipment. With the industrial revolution arriving in China came the next stage of modernization called “motorization,” describing the PLA’s transition toward employing motorized vehicles for equipment transportation and infantry maneuver. Motorization precedes “mechanization,” which is characterized by the use of heavy, sometimes tracked, vehicles such as tanks and self-propelled artillery. Chinese state media declared the PLA fully motorized and partially mechanized by 1985. Full mechanization has required a further decades-long process that remains ongoing. Chen Hui \([陈辉]\) and Chang Ailing \([常爱玲]\), “The Chinese Military’s 80-Year Historic Leap” \([中国军队 80 年的历史性跨越]\), *Xinhua*, July 5, 2008, http://guoqing.china.com.cn/2008-07/05/content_23783481.htm.


investments and sea lanes—missions requiring a far seas naval capability. Rather, the PLAGF has positioned itself to be a likely interservice lead for a joint firepower strike or island invasion of Taiwan. Several factors make the PLAGF exceptionally well-positioned for this role: the ground forces have more and better-equipped amphibious assault forces than the PLAN Marine Corps; PLAGF headquarters exercise command over PLA border and coastal defense units in the Eastern Theater Command; and PLAGF headquarters organizes annual joint PLA exercises (“Firepower”) to develop artillery support capabilities. In addition to having greater amphibious capacity than the PLAN Marine Corps, the PLAGF is developing a multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) precision strike capability that is more affordable than comparable PLARF missiles; the PLAGF’s PCL-191 MLRS is reportedly able to target any installation on Taiwan or off the island’s eastern coast, and at a third of a cost of PLARF missiles at the same range, they will likely also be built in greater number. Amphibious assault is a core PLAN


694 Publicly available PLA literature describes three primary types of joint campaigns it might conduct against Taiwan: island blockade, island offensive, and joint firepower strike. An island blockade is a physical blockade of goods transiting in and out of Taiwan’s air and seaports; an island offensive constitutes an amphibious invasion followed by ground assault; and a joint firepower strike uses precision strike technologies to strike key military and civilian targets on the main Taiwan island. While the PLAN would likely lead a joint island blockade, the PLAGF has the leading role in the joint firepower strike and especially the joint island offensive campaigns. See Li Youshen [李有升], Li Yin [李云]，and Wang Yonghua [王永华], eds., Lectures on the Science of Joint Campaigns [联合战役学教程], (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2012), 201-202; Mark Cozad, written testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Hearing on Hotspots along China’s Maritime Periphery, 9, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Cozad%20Testimony.pdf.


Marine Corps competency, and conventional precision strike is similarly a core PLARF competency. The PLAGF’s development of redundant capabilities and bureaucratic jockeying to lead a joint amphibious invasion or joint firepower strike campaign magnifies the degree to which a joint Taiwan campaign will depend on the PLAGF’s competencies or fail on its weaknesses.

The PLAGF’s organizational resistance against reforms toward a joint warfighting capability and against reforms toward a mechanized force translate the service’s weaknesses into operational vulnerabilities that threaten the prospect of a Taiwan campaign. Unification with Taiwan has since the founding of the People’s Republic been a critical policy objective over which the CCP has repeatedly threatened war. In 2005, the PRC National People’s Congress promulgated the Anti-Secession Law, which declared that “accomplishing the great task of reunifying the motherland is the sacred duty of all Chinese people.” Unification with Taiwan, by force if necessary, is a clear top-level priority the CCP has held for decades. By contrast, Hu Jintao only declared becoming a maritime great power to be a CCP objective in 2012. Given the unyielding and paramount importance of the Taiwan issue to the CCP, PLAGF operational inability to perform its role in a joint Taiwan campaign may force the PLA to reinforce it from the center with additional resources and CMC support at the expense of PLAN far seas operations and other missions unrelated to a joint Taiwan campaign.

long-range-rocket-system.


VII. Case Study: Southeast Asia and the South China Sea

The following section includes a case study considering how the CCP attempts to erode U.S. strategic influence in a critical maritime theater: the South China Sea. This thesis does not argue that the CCP’s maritime transformation and resultant sea power is the only or determinative variable in any changes to U.S. strategic influence in the South China Sea; everywhere they arise, influence and alignment are nebulous entities with many causes. This case study demonstrates that aspects of CCP sea power are mobilized in a broader service of reordering regional and global security architecture, the necessary precondition of achieving national rejuvenation. Moreover, it demonstrates how exertions of sea power which fall below the level of outright military competition upends U.S. strategic influence and so undermines U.S. military primacy.

**South China Sea**

For the same reasons that maritime chokepoints on China’s eastern and western peripheries make up Asia’s decisive terrain, islands and partially submerged reefs in the South China Sea constitute the disputed sea’s decisive terrain: whoever controls these features can station land-based assets on them to monitor and extend threats over the surrounding waters and airspace. The PRC is in effective control over two major groups of South China Sea features—the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands—which it has subsequently militarized. Outposts at Mischief Reef, Subi Reef, Fiery Cross Reef, and Woody Island currently feature hardened airbases, anti-ship missiles, anti-surface missiles, radar and sensor arrays, and jamming platforms which cover much of the PRC’s maritime claims in the South China Sea.701

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PLA militarization of decisive terrain within the Nine Dash Line does not extend to a final important feature: Scarborough Shoal. The group of islets, some 300nm east of the Paracel Islands and nearly 465nm away from Hainan Island, is only 120nm off the shore of Luzon, the main Philippine island. Analysts from the United States and Japan have referred to Scarborough Shoal, in conjunction with the Paracel and Spratly Island groups, as a “strategic triangle” (see Map 5) positioning the PLAN to complicate U.S. and Japanese operations in the South China Sea, potentially by exercising sea control over SLOCs that run through the CCP’s “nine-dash line” maritime claims in the South China Sea. Greg Poling and Zack Cooper observe that PLA assets stationed on Scarborough Shoal, if similar to those on the Paracel or Spratly Islands, would extend PLAN power projection and ISR capabilities over the main Philippine islands, where U.S. military personnel and assets are positioned.

Disputes over Scarborough Shoal, 2012-2018

Events at Scarborough Shoal between 2012 and 2018 demonstrate how the CCP employed its growing naval and paranaval capacity in conjunction with economic tools to undermine U.S. alliance cohesion. By provoking a paranaval conflict with the Philippines and resolving it with economic benefits while the USG remained myopically focused on South China Sea island militarization, the CCP approach to Scarborough Shoal strained the U.S.-Philippines alliance.

With its proximity to Luzon, Scarborough Shoal sits easily within the Philippines’ 200nm exclusive economic zone and continental shelf claims but is claimed as sovereign territory by both the PRC and the Philippines. The legal dispute escalated into a tense standoff on April 704

10, 2012, when Philippine frigate BRP Gregorio del Pilar enforced the Philippines’ claims to the islet group by boarding and preparing to arrest Chinese fishermen operating by Scarborough Shoal; the fishermen issued a distress call and drew two unarmed China Maritime Surveillance vessels with the charge to protect the PRC’s “maritime rights and interests,” a priority codified into law under Jiang Zemin and continually reaffirmed by every subsequent CCP General Secretary, at the islet group. These developments began the standoff of PRC and Philippine government vessels.705

U.S. diplomacy likely played a role in precipitating this standoff. Beginning in 2010, the USG began a concerted diplomatic campaign to embolden Southeast Asian countries against CCP provocations in the South China Sea. In July 2010, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum to urge compliance with UNCLOS in settling South China Sea sovereignty disputes and encouraged all parties to reach a code of conduct, becoming at that time the highest-level U.S. official to publicly express a position on the South China Sea.706 The following year, the United States indicated its increased attention to the region with a presidential tour, in which President Obama became the first U.S. President to attend the East Asia Summit with the leaders of Southeast Asian countries one day after he announced that “the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region” in an address to the Australian Parliament.707 The USG matched its rhetoric with varied capacity-building efforts for Southeast Asian countries,


including the sale of a U.S. Coast Guard cutter to the Philippines, inducted into the latter’s navy as BRP *Gregorio del Pilar*.\(^{708}\) Taylor Fravel observed, “given U.S. diplomacy in previous months, Manila may have concluded that it would be backed by the United States if it challenged China,” or that challenging the PRC may have been a way to “elicit even more direct intervention from the United States.”\(^{709}\)

This USG support almost certainly emboldened Philippine action in the 2012 standoff with PRC vessels at Scarborough Shoal. On April 26, Philippines Secretary of Foreign Affairs Albert del Rosario responded to a PRC threat not to “internationalize” the dispute by telling reporters, “we are going to the United States in order to be able to maximize the benefits derived out of this mutual defense treaty.”\(^{710}\) Researchers from the Center for Strategic and International Studies found that the PRC began building up its presence at the standoff shortly after, deploying an additional ship to Scarborough Shoal on April 28 and steadily increasing to a peak of 14 vessels standing off against the Philippines’ 5 by April 30.\(^{711}\) In private, Philippine officials began “seeking clarity” on which circumstances would trigger U.S. military intervention under the U.S.-Philippine Mutual Defense Treaty signed in 1951.\(^{712}\)

Despite its interest in empowering Southeast Asian countries to check PRC behavior in the South China Sea, the Obama Administration was unwilling to do so directly, including in


defense of a treaty ally. Rather than activating the Mutual Defense Treaty to assist the Philippines, the Obama Administration sought to tie the dispute to the South China Sea’s lack of a collectively-supported Code of Conduct agreement and encouraged ASEAN members to find ways to make progress in the ongoing Code of Conduct negotiations. In the service of these negotiations, President Obama did not publicly clarify the U.S. position on circumstances which trigger U.S. military support under the Mutual Defense Treaty during a June joint press conference with Philippines President Benigno Aquino III. Instead, he returned to the importance of having “a strong set of international norms and rules governing maritime disputes in the region.”

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell reportedly brokered an agreement with Chinese officials for a mutual withdrawal to end the standoff over Scarborough Shoal in June 2012. This narrative has been contested from various sources, not least because, for unconfirmed reasons, the Chinese vessels did not complete their withdrawal after the Philippine vessels left, effectively establishing PRC administrative control over Scarborough Shoal.

While public knowledge of the Obama Administration’s decision-making process around Scarborough Shoal remains incomplete, one factor appeared to be President Obama’s disinterest in competing against the CCP for strategic influence. In a 2014 joint statement with President Aquino, Obama used the language of CCP propagandists to declare, “we welcome

China’s peaceful rise…our goal is not to counter China. Our goal is not to contain China.” Far from seeing PRC activities at Scarborough Shoal as challenging the U.S. security guarantee to the Philippines, President Obama recorded in his memoirs that the PRC’s behavior would only thicken U.S. alliances: “The one thing [the United States] had going for us was that in recent years China had started overplaying its hand…[by] threatening the Philippines and Vietnam over control of a handful of small but strategic islands in the South China Sea. U.S. diplomats reported a growing resentment toward such heavy-handed tactics—and a desire for a more sustained American presence as a counterweight to Chinese power.” President Aquino affirmed this perspective in 2014 by signing the U.S.-Philippines Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, a new vehicle by which the U.S. military could rotate forces through bases in the Philippines on a nonpermanent basis. To the Obama Administration, the CCP’s use of its growing maritime paramilitary appeared to bolster U.S. strategic influence.

To Southeast Asian countries, however, the United States’ threshold for responding to incidents in the region appeared to leave significant space for Chinese coercive economic dominance over the region, giving rise to a “two Asias” dichotomy defined by a “security Asia” in which the United States remains the security partner of choice and an “economic Asia” dominated by the Chinese market. The CCP’s enforcement of its maritime rights and interests around Scarborough Shoal had economic impacts: after seizing the islet group from Philippine

administration, Chinese-erected barriers and CCG patrols denied Philippines fishermen entry to Scarborough Shoal’s inner lagoon, which is rich with fish stocks.\textsuperscript{721} Denial of access to these fish stocks increased economic pressure on Philippines fishermen and became an important issue for Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte, elected in 2016.\textsuperscript{722} Unlike President Aquino, who was a reliable U.S. ally, President Duterte navigated the “two Asias” by triangulating between the PRC and United States and distanced Philippine policy from the United States to secure the comparatively greater marginal benefits of thicker ties with the PRC.\textsuperscript{723}

The change in Philippines policy toward the United States and the PRC is not defined entirely by Duterte’s unconventional personality. Manila’s shift also indicates the inherent limitations in a U.S. security guarantee that does not extend to coercive gray zone actions that undermine economic, in this case fishing, security. By the time of Duterte’s election, Asia-Pacific interdependence through Chinese markets had reached sovereignty-eroding levels.\textsuperscript{724} For example, a 2017 poll in Indonesia found 32 percent of Indonesians believed the benefits of Chinese investment outweigh potential threats to sovereignty following reports that Chinese hackers attempted to manipulate an Indonesian national election.\textsuperscript{725} Philippines public opinion

followed a similar course. In 2015, 43 percent of respondents to a Pew Research poll supported having a strong economic relationship with the PRC while 41 percent instead supported being tough with the PRC on territorial disputes; by 2017, these figures were 67 percent and 28 percent, respectively.  

Figure 15: Shifts in Philippines Public Opinion on the PRC, 2015 and 2017

With Rodrigo Duterte leading the Philippines, the CCP had an opportunity to benefit from a two-track effort on the South China Sea by pushing Manila in “security Asia” and inviting them in “economic Asia.” Whether or not the CCP did so intentionally, in 2016 the CCP managed to drive a wedge further in the U.S.-Philippines relationship by conceding on inflated demands in “security Asia” while proving a tough but engaged negotiating partner for the Philippines on economic issues. Since the CCP’s seizure of Scarborough Shoal in 2012, U.S. analysts had

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201
been exceptionally concerned about the possibility the CCP may militarize the islet group.\textsuperscript{727} In 2015, the Obama administration began to publicize its FON program in response to Chinese militarization on Spratly Islands.\textsuperscript{728} In March 2016, President Obama was reported to have successfully warned General Secretary Xi Jinping away from militarizing Scarborough Shoal as well.\textsuperscript{729} In the Fall of 2016, the CCP appeared to ignore Obama’s reported warnings by positioning ships capable of conducting artificial island building operations near Scarborough Shoal, which in the cases of Paracel and Spratly features preceded militarization.\textsuperscript{730} This provocation was well-timed; Duterte was scheduled to meet Xi for the first time shortly afterward. In that meeting, the two leaders agreed to manage any disputes in the South China Sea bilaterally, a thinly-veiled reference to excluding U.S. engagement in the South China Sea.\textsuperscript{731} Immediately after this visit, Duterte announces a new policy of “separation” from the United States and increased alignment with the PRC.\textsuperscript{732} As an apparently-unannounced part of the two leaders’ agreement, Filipino fishermen were now permitted to access fish stocks at Scarborough Shoal.\textsuperscript{733} Regional expert Ashley Townshend described this development as a “diplomatic masterstroke” in which the CCP built leverage from its 2012 seizure of Scarborough Shoal and subsequent threats to militarize it, then offered a pause in its provocative behavior as


a concession to entice Duterte to reduce Philippine alignment with the United States.\textsuperscript{734} In so doing, the CCP also reinforced to Manila that bilateral diplomacy on Beijing’s terms yields results, while attempting to involve the United States ended with the loss of Scarborough Shoal.\textsuperscript{735}

Beijing’s agreement with Manila granting access for fishermen to the lagoon in Scarborough Shoal traded transient concessions for enduring benefits. Strong U.S.-Philippines military alignment, signaled by the USG’s “pivot to Asia,” the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, and President Obama’s specific warning about militarizing South China Sea islands and Scarborough Shoal indicated the CCP may be exposed to military costs from the allied forces if it built military facilities on Scarborough Shoal. Granting Philippine fishermen access to the lagoon necessarily precluded the island-construction operations needed to build a military outpost on the islet group, likely assuaging U.S. concerns. But regional expert Bill Hayton observes, “China’s policy in the South China Sea is akin to a ratchet. It moves forward, sometimes takes a break but never moves backwards,” further explaining that administrative steps the PRC took in 2020 clearly indicated an enduring CCP intent to occupy Scarborough Shoal.\textsuperscript{736} Beijing’s agreement with Manila in 2016 was not an abandonment of the CCP’s long-held interest in completing its control over the South China Sea’s decisive terrain by occupying and militarizing Scarborough Shoal; rather, the agreement was a bid to delay such occupation in order to weaken U.S.-Philippines alignment in an effort to create future, more permissive conditions.\textsuperscript{737} The CCP used nonmilitary aspects of sea power, in this case flexible


\textsuperscript{737} Jane Perlez, “Prospect of Philippine Thaw Slows China’s Plans in South China Sea,” The New York Times,
interpretations of its maritime rights and interests enforced by a robust paranaval force, while the USG remained strictly focused on the potential naval power of militarized islands. As a result, the CCP weakened U.S. strategic influence over Manila and furthered its objective of reordering the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

CCP success is indicated by shifts in Manila’s behavior toward USG-CCP disagreements on maritime policy. On January 17, 2018, the USS Hopper, an Arleigh Burke-class destroyer in the U.S. Navy, sailed within twelve nautical miles of Scarborough Shoal. The PRC Foreign Ministry called the transit a violation of Beijing’s sovereignty and sparked a monthlong diplomatic pressure campaign ultimately once again weakening the USG alliance with the Philippines.738

Five days after the Hopper’s transit, Chinese state media outlet The People’s Daily ran a column under the “Zhong Sheng” [钟声] byline, which generally indicates a column reflects the official CCP position on international matters.739 Zhong Sheng called the Hopper’s transit a destabilizing action that will escalate tensions in the South China Sea and force the PRC to improve unspecified capabilities in the theater.740 Although the Zhong Sheng article was textually ambiguous, its threat was a clear extension of existing Chinese military policy: in 2016, PLAN Admiral and Deputy Chief of the PLA General Staff Sun Jianguo [孙建国] warned that military transits in the South China Sea “could even play out in a disastrous way,” and that the PLA “can play a decisive role in the last moment to defend our national sovereignty and interests.”741

Speaking on the same day the Zhong Sheng article was published, a Manila palace spokesperson was careful to create distance with the U.S. and minimize distance with the PRC in its response, calling the issue “America’s problem” while maintaining that the PRC continues to operate in “good faith” in the South China Sea. On February 12, 2018, Manila announced a delegation from the PRC Foreign Ministry will meet representatives from the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs to discuss “contentious issues concerning the South China Sea.” The same announcement specified that the dialogue would constitute the second meeting through the bilateral consultation mechanism on the South China Sea, which was formed in January 2017, hosted first bilateral meeting on May 19, 2017, and for which a second meeting was initially planned for late 2017. The two parties released a joint statement on February 13 in line with Zhong Sheng’s criticisms of the United States: Manila and Beijing agree to “exercise self-restraint” over South China Sea activities that “would complicate or escalate disputes and affect peace and stability.” Later that year, Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana questioned the U.S.- Philippine alliance’s utility and whether it constitutes a meaningful security guarantee; if not, Lorenzana suggested Manila may “scrap it.”

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The U.S. naval transit was a strategically unhelpful action that gave the PRC an opportunity to express outrage, which the Philippines mollified by thickening diplomatic ties with the PRC at enduring cost to U.S.-Philippine alliance cohesion.

**Consequences of Diminishing Strategic Influence in Southeast Asia**

Developments in the U.S.-Philippine alliance are mirrored throughout the region. In December 2019, CCG vessels began harassing Malaysian drillship *West Capella* in response to a Malaysian submission to the United Nations that month extending its continental shelf and exclusive economic zone claims. The Chinese deployment began a months-long standoff that did not end until the Royal Malaysian Navy dispatched a destroyer and the CCG vessels withdrew. The CCP reinitiated this standoff in April by dispatching a survey ship, the *Haiyang Dizhi Bahao*, with a CCG and maritime militia escort occupying waters near the drillship and within Malaysia’s new claims under the guise of conducting a survey. The CCP’s persistent coercion won results: when the USG launched a sustained presence operation by the *West Capella* to check the Chinese presence, the Malaysian foreign ministry criticized warship activities in the region generally as raising tensions and undermining regional stability, a tacit rebuke delivered immediately after the introduction of U.S. military presence yet noticeably absent throughout the CCG harassment episode. Chinese vessels did not withdraw until May

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15, in which the standoff was apparently resolved following a call between Chinese defense minister Wei Fenghe and Malaysian defense minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob and after a public statement from the Malaysian defense ministry expressing “gratitude to the medical aid sponsored by China” and “mutual interest” in South China Sea stability, with no indication that the standoff had occurred.\textsuperscript{750}

Such hedging and growing alignment with—or deference to—the PRC\textsuperscript{751} is pervasive in ASEAN member country statements and policy. Following the release of the U.S. Department of Defense’s \textit{Indo-Pacific Strategy Report} in 2019, ASEAN published an “ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific” noting that “geopolitical and geostrategic shifts” have pervaded the Indo-Pacific in recent years, further noting that “the rise of material powers, i.e. economic and military, requires avoiding the deepening of mistrust, miscalculation, and patterns of behavior based on a zero-sum game.”\textsuperscript{752} Describing geopolitical competition as a “zero-sum game” is in line with CCP framing of the USG-CCP competition wherein the USG is attempting to be the sole winner in a game of power politics while the PRC opts for “win-win cooperation.”\textsuperscript{753} ASEAN policy in implementation reflects this effort to hedge between the U.S. and the PRC, for example by simultaneously agreeing to participate in separate joint military exercises.\textsuperscript{754}

The inability of the USG to realize its policy goals in the South China Sea similarly indicates diminishing U.S. strategic influence in Southeast Asia as pertains to the South China


\textsuperscript{751} Chinese influence in Southeast Asia, while growing, is reflective of a regional hedging posture which gives the CCP room to expand rather than an unyielding regional march toward a Sino-centric order. The role of regional hedging on USG-CCP competition is discussed later in this section. For a discussion of Southeast Asian trends toward regionalism rather than Sino-centrism, see Carla Freeman, “The New Asia,” \textit{Focus Asia}, February 2021, 3, https://www.isdp.eu/content/uploads/2021/02/New-Asia-FA-C.-Freeman-22.02.21.pdf.


Sea. Michael McDevitt summarized U.S. policy objectives toward the South China Sea as including the following:

1. No use of force or coercion by any of the claimants to resolve sovereignty disputes or change the status-quo of disputed South China Sea features.
2. Freedom of navigation, which includes unimpeded lawful navigation for commercial, private and military vessels and aircraft. Coastal states must respect the UNCLOS language that all “high seas freedoms,” including peaceful military operations, are applicable in the EEZs of coastal states.
3. All maritime entitlements to any of the waters of the South China Sea must be based on international law and must be derived from land features in the South China Sea. China’s nine-dash line does not meet these criteria. In short, only land (islands and rocks) generates maritime zones, not vice versa.
4. The United States takes no position on the relative merits of competing sovereignty claims. It does not choose sides; nor does it favor one country’s claim over another’s.
5. An effective Code of Conduct that would promote a rules-based framework for managing and regulating the behavior of relevant countries in the South China Sea is essential. A key part of such a document would be mechanisms such as hotlines and emergency procedures for preventing incidents in sensitive areas and managing them when they do occur in ways that prevent disputes from escalating.
6. The United States supports internationally recognized dispute resolution mechanisms, including those provided for in the UNCLOS treaty.
7. Washington will respond positively to small South China Sea littoral countries that are U.S. allies, officially designated “strategic partners,” or “comprehensive partners,” who want to improve their ability to patrol and monitor their own territorial waters and EEZs.
8. The U.S. government wants to improve access for U.S. military in areas proximate to the South China Sea.755

U.S. policy has been largely unsuccessful in realizing these outcomes, in large part due to the USG’s inability to mobilize the collective action of ASEAN countries to deny the CCP’s maritime coercion or secure a behavioral Code of Conduct for the South China Sea. USG inactivity in the 2012 Scarborough Shoal incident sacrificed the first three, sixth, and seventh items McDevitt lists in favor of the fourth and fifth. Arguably, the Philippines’ and Malaysia’s responses to U.S. military operations in 2018 and 2019 suggest negative trends for the eighth item as well. The priorities that the USG did defend throughout the Scarborough episode—

neutrality on claims and endorsement of a Code of Conduct—have been subsequently abandoned or stalled, perhaps indefinitely.\textsuperscript{756}

What progress has been made toward regional balancing has been without apparent USG leadership. Between 2019 and continuing into 2020, South China Sea claimant states began issuing diplomatic notes at the United Nations aligning their national positions with an international tribunal’s 2016 ruling that in part rejected the CCP’s claim to “historic rights” in the South China Sea; the United States publicly aligned its position with the tribunal ruling months after the Philippines, Vietnam, and Indonesia did.\textsuperscript{757} Even Southeast Asian countries’ appeals to U.S. military presence despite PRC pressure serves primarily to hedge against PRC domination over both “economic Asia” and “security Asia” without securing the USG’s position in USG-CCP competition; predictably for peacetime, countries in Southeast Asia generally value the PRC’s economic influence over the USG’s security influence.\textsuperscript{758}

The USG’s inability to gain preponderant influence in Southeast Asian countries sufficient to align them against a PRC security threat has high-end kinetic consequences which bear themselves out in peacetime behaviors. The U.S. military is heavily dependent on forward operating bases in allied countries to conduct operations in East Asia and needs options for expansion in order to maintain a combat-credible military threat in the event a high-end kinetic conflict arises with the PLA within the first island chain. As shown in Table 5 and Map 6, the U.S. military is overwhelmingly dependent on bases in Japan for power projection on China’s


periphery. A 2017 study found the PLARF was at that point able to strike every fixed headquarters and logistical base, strike every U.S. ship in port in Japan, crater every runway and runway-length taxiway on major U.S. airbases in Japan, and destroy more than 200 U.S. aircraft on the ground in a pre-emptive strike on U.S. forces. This study likely dramatically underestimates the PLA’s potential destructive firepower insofar as the USG has since revealed that the PLA has approximately 350 road-mobile MRBM and IRBM launchers, not the estimate of 100-125 MRBM launchers and zero IRBM launchers DOD publicly announced in 2016. In the event of a high-end kinetic conflict in East Asia between the U.S. military and the PLA, the PLARF’s precision strike capabilities will likely force the U.S. military to prosecute the conflict in part from bases which do not yet exist.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>NUMBER OF STATIONED U.S. SERVICEMEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AUSTRALIA</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAPAN</td>
<td>55,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHILIPPINES</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SINGAPORE</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOUTH KOREA</td>
<td>28,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THAILAND</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. (GUAM)</td>
<td>8,150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


To present a more robust basing infrastructure, the U.S. military’s ability to posture combat-credible forces in East Asia depends on the active agreement of allies and partners to accept a greater U.S. troop presence and host combat systems able to threaten the PLA. On the former, current treaty allies Thailand and the Philippines have become increasingly

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759 The U.S. has a sizeable military footprint in South Korea as well, but these are overwhelmingly U.S. Army forces not trained, equipped, or authorized for a maritime confrontation with the PLA.
disinclined to host U.S. forces, with President Duterte motioning to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement authority for stationing U.S. forces in-country.\textsuperscript{762} On the latter, even Japan has been reluctant to host new U.S. platforms, particularly land-based MRBM and IRBMs that can threaten the Chinese mainland.\textsuperscript{763} While the Freely Associated States, a grouping of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau with which the USG has current military agreements through signed Compacts of Free Association, has indicated interest in hosting a larger U.S. military footprint, the closest island remains over a thousand nautical miles from Japan and are more useful for flowing forces to the theater than for hosting forward operations.\textsuperscript{764}


The USG is losing the contest for influence over Southeast Asia in the South China Sea. As the CCP leverages economic and paranaval assets to circumvent international agreements by operating below the threshold the USG determines justifies U.S. military intervention, Southeast Asian countries are increasingly forced to hedge between the U.S. and CCP. To hedge is not to be indecisive; a Southeast Asia that hedges between the United States and the CCP is one resolved against expanding U.S. security cooperation at the expense of PRC.
economic engagement or vice versa. Even U.S. allies and partners decisively triangulate their interests between “economic Asia” and “security Asia.”

By situating the policy implementation trends within an established framework of the CCP’s intentions, the net assessment approach systematically examines the PRC’s actions in the South China Sea in strategic terms. Other leading explanations for why the CCP pursues sea power, including naval nationalism, protecting trade, and survival, are overly focused on whether the PLA develops high-end naval warfighting capabilities able to defend China’s shores or secure its supply lines. As a result, these explanations give insufficient attention to the peacetime implications of the CCP’s sea forces. This case study describes the CCP’s peacetime maritime operations, occurring under the shadow of the PLAN, and the ways it undermines U.S. strategic influence while managing escalation to avoid high-end military competition.

As described in Sections IV and V, the USG and CCP have asymmetric objectives which make ASEAN’s hedging enough for CCP success. The CCP does not have publicly stated objectives to establish primacy in the region, nor should U.S. policy be commended for Southeast Asia’s hedging. The CCP’s stated policy is the rise of a multipolar order with a tacit acknowledgment that, in a multipolar system, the PRC would by default be a regional economic and military hegemon that enjoys the privileges of such. The U.S. foreign policy objective is to maintain regional primacy by denying Chinese military expansion in the South China Sea, in part by mobilizing and aligning regional allies and partners around that objective.

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successfully rallies its partners to this cause, it succeeds; if it does not, and regional opinion is equivocal, then it fails. While it is the USG’s objective to succeed, the CCP need only not fail.\textsuperscript{768}

VIII. Alternative Futures

How CCP efforts at maritime transformation develop and the threat it will pose to the United States from 2021 to 2049 leaves significant room for uncertainty. As an effort to bound that uncertainty, this section presents four alternative future scenarios of the likely “pace and intensity of long-term competition” against a given adversary.\textsuperscript{769} This section modifies a framework developed by experts at the RAND Corporation to account for the identified trends in the CCP’s maritime transformation. Rather than make decisive predictions on whether trends in CCP maritime transformation as described in Section VI are enduring or not, this section offers four representative scenarios covering a range of potential permutations should the identified trends be accelerated, maintained, slowed, or reversed altogether.

The bulk of this thesis has accumulated the pieces available to conduct a threat assessment of CCP maritime transformation. Section IV argued that the CCP is undergoing a maritime transformation amid a broader competition against the United States with an objective to reorder the global superstructure and aggrandize itself while removing obstacles such as the U.S.-led security architecture. Section V argued that the USG objective is to maintain its military primacy in part by drawing on the current security architecture to preserve its freedom of maritime access, or freedom of the seas. Section VI identified five key trends that shape the potency of CCP maritime transformation and sharpen the threat it poses to USG interests: 1) diminishing returns on Chinese fixed-asset investment, 2) consolidating PRC commercial power


at western maritime chokepoints, 3) ongoing PLAN surface fleet modernization, 4) an outgrowth of PLAN aviation, and 5) continued PLAGF service dominance and resistance to CCP-directed reforms. Section VII offered a case study in how some of the CCP’s maritime developments have already been used to weaken U.S. strategic influence over its allies and partners.

This section considers how potential trajectories in the trends identified in Section VI affect the CCP’s ability to achieve its objectives described in Section IV at the cost of USG objectives as described in Section V. To do so, it makes use of a RAND framework led by Andrew Scobell to summarize four scenarios as ideal types of what the CCP and its instruments of power will look like in 2049. The four scenarios RAND considers are as follows:

1. A triumphant China, in which Beijing is remarkably successful in realizing its grand strategy;
2. An ascendant China, in which Beijing is successful in achieving many but not all of the goals of its grand strategy;
3. A stagnant China, in which Beijing has failed to achieve its long-term goals; and
4. An imploding China, in which Beijing is besieged by a multitude of problems that threaten the very existence of the CCP-PLA-PRC.

As Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping have posited, the success of CCP maritime transformation is an important component of realizing CCP grand strategy. A successful maritime transformation is to continue or accelerate the commercial maritime and naval trends building CCP sea power (e.g., trends 2-4) while arresting or reversing the trends which restrict maritime transformation (e.g., trends 1 and 5). Table 6 summarizes how degrees of success in CCP maritime transformation map to degrees of its success in realizing its grand strategy, aligning with the four scenarios RAND developed. The table also characterizes the probability and magnitude of

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770 The purpose of alternative futures analyses is not to make overspecified predictions for policy to rigidly follow. Rather, it is to set initial future conditions different enough from present forecasts in order to capture a range of feasible futures for which the USG can flexibly plan. A larger number of alternative scenarios capturing detailed nuances, while potentially interesting, is not useful for defense planning. See Jeffrey S. McKitrick, “Analytical Tools and Techniques” in Net Assessment and Military Strategy: Retrospective and Prospective Essays, ed. Thomas G. Mahnken (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2020), 208-209.

771 Andrew Scobell et al., China’s Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2020), 103.
likely conflict between the CCP’s maritime transformation and USG interests\textsuperscript{772} before offering an assessment of CCP maritime power\textsuperscript{773} and the projected outcome of CCP maritime transformation under each scenario.

\textsuperscript{772} A gray zone scenario in which U.S. interests are threatened by the high probability of low-magnitude conflict, for example, has a different character altogether from a scenario with a high probability of medium-magnitude conflict, such as the onset of limited war, or a scenario with a low probability of high-magnitude conflict, such as a pre-emptive nuclear strike on the United States, its allies, or USG personnel and assets deployed abroad.

\textsuperscript{773} Maritime power in these circumstances is weighed in whether the CCP is able to establish sea control and/or sea denial, and in which areas. In the given scenarios, the CCP is able to establish sea control or sea denial globally, regionally through the Indo-Pacific, or locally in China’s near seas.
Table 6: Alternative Scenarios for CCP Maritime Transformation in 2049

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Triumphant CCP</th>
<th>Ascendant CCP</th>
<th>Stagnant CCP</th>
<th>Imploding CCP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Likelihood</strong></td>
<td>Less likely</td>
<td>More likely</td>
<td>More likely</td>
<td>Less likely</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conditions (RAND summary)</strong>&lt;sup&gt;774&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>PRC becomes world's largest economy and an innovation leader. PLA is modern, capable, and has global reach.</td>
<td>PRC becomes strongest Asian power with sustained economic and innovative growth but is not dominant. PLA has robust regional reach.</td>
<td>Economic downturn, significant social discontent in PRC. PLA has slowly growing capabilities.</td>
<td>CCP domestic control eroded. PLA preoccupied with internal functions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conflict with USG (probability/magnitude)</strong></td>
<td>High/High</td>
<td>High/Medium</td>
<td>Medium/Medium</td>
<td>Low/High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CCP maritime power</strong></td>
<td>Global contest for sea control</td>
<td>Regional sea denial, local sea control</td>
<td>Regional sea denial</td>
<td>Local sea denial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome of CCP maritime transformation</strong></td>
<td>CCP successfully transitions to a new economic growth model, overcomes PLA/ PLAGF interests to implement reforms, and develops sufficient joint expeditionary capacity to seize sea control in theaters far from China’s shores. MSRI investments in strategic strongpoints gives rise to a network of overseas naval bases. <strong>Very High threat.</strong></td>
<td>PRC finds partial success in new econ. growth models but does not entirely root out entrenched PLA/ PLAGF interests. Development of joint capabilities continues but does not reach objectives as envisioned; PLA formidable but not a “world-class military.” Improved PLA can secure sea control near China and position sea denial capabilities globally. More countries give CCP strategic strongpoints through MSRI, but most do not permit them to be converted to full military bases. <strong>High threat.</strong></td>
<td>Substantial shift toward PAP/ PLAGF, away from overseas interests. In econ. downturn, CCP still tries to rely on investment-based growth to little avail due to overcapacity. PLAN is maintained but carrier program is halted due to massive costs of building and maintaining nuclear powered vessels. Inadequate investment in PLAN aviation undermines even regional sea control capabilities. Cheaper shore-based PLARF and PLAN/paranaval forces maintain sea denial capabilities. <strong>Moderate threat.</strong></td>
<td>CCP faces a sequence of black swan catastrophes making it unable to compete internationally. The PLA, including the PLARF’s stockpile of ballistic missiles and launchers, are not well-maintained, posing challenges to current regional sea denial capabilities. Primary threat to the United States is low-likelihood high-magnitude risk of a nuclear event. <strong>Variable threat.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Trends</strong></td>
<td>Diminishing economic growth</td>
<td>Reversed</td>
<td>Slowed</td>
<td>Maintained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial power at maritime chokepoints</td>
<td>Accelerated</td>
<td>Maintained</td>
<td>Slowed</td>
<td>Reversed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLAN modernization</td>
<td>Accelerated</td>
<td>Slowed</td>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>Reversed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outgrowth of PLAN aviation</td>
<td>Accelerated</td>
<td>Slowed</td>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>Reversed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLAGF dominance, resistance to reform</td>
<td>Reversed</td>
<td>Maintained</td>
<td>Accelerated/ Maintained</td>
<td>Accelerated/ Maintained</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<sup>774</sup> Andrew Scobell et al., *China’s Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2020), 104.
**Scenario 1: Triumphant CCP**

The most optimistic scenario for the CCP is, along with the most pessimistic scenario, the least likely. In this scenario, the CCP succeeds in all major lines of effort deriving from its grand, maritime, and military strategies, succeeded in finding new drivers of economic growth, and is able to effectively convert power across all dimensions into strategic influence at the expense of the United States. The CCP’s success validates its competitive approach against the USG and positions it extremely well to hold USG interests at risk in waters near and far from China’s shores. The probability of conflict with the USG and likely magnitude of this conflict are both high, posing a very high threat to U.S. interests. The CCP’s successful maritime transformation poses a high threat to the USG-led global security architecture.

As a political baseline, this scenario requires stability for CCP rule for the next thirty years. Prerequisites for such include transfers of power between CCP paramount leaders without significant, publicly visible power struggles and the successful and sustained pacification, by whatever means, of frontier provinces with non-Han ethnic majorities: Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia. To realize the grand strategy of national rejuvenation, the CCP will also need to have successfully annexed Taiwan, by conquest if necessary. Costs of domestic security maintenance have grown at a sustainable rate or have declined as currently emerging technologies by which the CCP will pervade Chinese civil society becomes more affordable and are deployed at scale.

CCP economic successes in this scenario drive strategic success. In this scenario, the CCP successfully transitions away from investment-led economic growth to identify a new growth model and implements a disciplined approach to managing the PRC economy during crises. These developments successfully reverse the current trend of diminishing economic

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growth for the PRC and end the proclivity of CCP officials to inflate growth figures with overinvestment.

Increasing economic growth rates have three second-order effects for maritime transformation. First, they bolster the range and depth of MSRI investment, giving the CCP significant breadth of international port surveillance and potential cyberattacking capability. Second, a steadily growing Chinese economy indicates a steadily growing PLA budget, accelerating ongoing naval shipbuilding programs, including the development of nuclear aircraft carriers fielding advanced carrier aviation. Finally, the demonstrated reality of the CCP’s accelerating economic growth underpins the CCP’s Marxist claim to a greater role in international leadership.

Taken together, these three products of rising economic growth rates are likely to expand the range of PLAN power. As the PLAN conducts more mil-mil engagements with MSRI countries receiving significant port investments, the CCP is likely to expand its network of commercial “strategic strongpoints,” with several strongpoints becoming overseas PLA bases outright. CCP successes extends the maritime competition to theaters beyond the Indo-Pacific. Europe, Africa, and South Asia become integrated into the CCP’s overseas security architecture, and traditional U.S. allies in the regions, facing local pressures, will have more incentive to hedge between the USG and CCP. The PLA’s ability to station ASBMs and parts of its growing navy at overseas bases will extend the PLA’s model of sea denial to distant theaters, potentially culminating in a global sea denial capability. Expeditionary fleets stationed at forward PLAN bases will be positioned to exert sea control where U.S. military presence, particularly sea denial capability, is limited.

In addition to reversing the trend of diminishing economic growth rates, a triumphant CCP would successfully transition from a ground-centric force to an expeditionary joint force by fully implementing the PLA reforms Xi Jinping announced in 2015 and uprooting entrenched PLAGF bureaucratic actors. The PLAGF becomes a leaner, modernized army able to effectively act as
the ground component of a joint military, and the CCP is sufficiently confident in PLAGF-led joint operations, such as those in a forced Taiwan unification scenario, with no deficiencies that would distract from the PLAN’s expeditionary mission set. By clearing PLAGF obstructions to the trajectory of military development, the PLA abandons its land-sea integrated approach to military activities and actively seeks a global presence with forces that need not radiate from the Chinese mainland. The PLAN thus enjoys elite CCP backing to become a world-class, blue-water navy with a largely expeditionary mission set.

While the U.S. Navy continues to focus its attention on the First and Second Island Chains, its eroding margin of military superiority weakens U.S. treaty alliances with the Philippines, Thailand, and South Korea. Given rising pressure from the PLA and the strategic application of Chinese investment, these alliances may end altogether. In deference to the changing regional balance, Singapore begins drawing down some of its mil-mil interactions with the United States, and ASEAN breaks its balance between the United States and PRC when scheduling joint military exercises. While the U.S. may be able to increase its military footprint further from the theater in Guam and along the FAS islands, the CCP’s restrictions on maritime access and continued efforts to foster a less permissive maritime environment will impose mounting costs on, and eventually effectively suspend, the U.S. military’s ability to operate with impunity in peacetime within the First Island Chain.

**Scenario 2: Ascendant CCP**

The second scenario, more likely than the first or fourth, is one in which the CCP continues to accrue power but does not resolve its structural limitations or enduring proclivities. In this scenario, the CCP’s accrual of resources and capabilities makes it the dominant power in continental Asia and China’s near seas, but its power recedes along a gradient stretching out to the reaches of the Indo-Pacific. While the CCP remains focused on its longstanding objectives of national rejuvenation and neutralizing obstacles such as U.S. global influence, slowing
economic growth and persistent resistance to PLA reform restrain the CCP’s competitive capabilities. Conflict with the USG is just as likely as under the Triumphant CCP scenario, but the CCP’s recognized economic and military reform limitations will lead to a lower standard to which the PLA will calibrate its prosecution of conflict. With a high likelihood of moderate-intensity conflict, the CCP’s maritime transformation will pose a high threat to U.S. interests.

Like under the Triumphant CCP scenario, the Ascendant CCP scenario requires that the CCP’s hold on power remain secure, including the succession of paramount leaders after Xi Jinping without significant, publicly visible power struggles. Unlike the Triumphant CCP scenario, perceived domestic unrest in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia—and cross-Strait tensions with Taiwan—need not be definitively resolved so long as the costs of stability maintenance and the PLA’s cross-Strait military posture do not grow to consume budgets or manpower that CCP leaders intend for other programs.

While the CCP in this scenario does not find and fully realign itself to a new economic growth model that continues Chinese economic growth in the past decades, the PRC economy still benefits from enough new financial and technological innovations to slow its decline. Central CCP authorities restrain the proclivity of provincial officials to continue feeding overinvestment, though the proclivity persists and becomes less well-managed during economic crises. Notably, the slowing of PRC GDP growth, by some estimates to between 2.7% and 4.2% in 2049, still indicates decades of robust, if not mold-breaking, growth.776

With moderately increasing stability maintenance expenditures and slowing economic growth, the CCP’s expenditures on its commercial and military maritime transformation efforts is likely to slow and transition from investment to operations. The PLA budget, likely to track the

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PRC’s GDP, will have falling growth rates unable to sustain the explosive growth of PLAN shipbuilding demonstrated from 2000 through 2020. The resources for current naval shipbuilding programs will be slowly diverted to the PLAN’s burgeoning costs for ship maintenance and recapitalization. The CCP will similarly commit to fewer new MSRI investments as the costs of maintaining current MSRI projects grow. While the CCP may make the investments necessary to convert some flagship strategic strongpoints, such as the Gwadar Port, into overseas PLA bases, the financial incentives available to do so or to create new strategic strongpoints along the MSRI will need to be selectively deployed.

While neither the PLAN nor its network of commercial strategic strongpoints will be adequately resourced to grow into globally dominant forces, their continued growth offers significant sea denial capabilities through much of the Indo-Pacific and a limited sea control capability in China’s near seas. The PLAN will still be the largest navy in the world, and it will still have access to a network of strategic strongpoints and limited options for forward operating bases in Southeast Asia, the Indian Ocean Region, and East African countries. While the PLA is unlikely to have adequate basing to seize sea control in these waters, it will have the capability to intimidate Indo-Pacific countries weighing security cooperation agreements with the United States and to execute dangerous maneuvers that threaten U.S. Navy ships operating in the Indian Ocean. These capabilities harden in China’s near seas, where the PLAN will face more robust pressure from the U.S. military positioned along the First and Second Island Chains, but the ever-expanding reach of the PLA’s anti-ship missiles and expansive naval/paranaval presence disincentivize Southeast Asian countries from aligning further with the United States.

An Ascendant CCP will have completed its reforms to the PLA, building new joint warfighting capabilities and making progress toward balanced service interests, without successfully uprooting entrenched PLAGF leaders or the service’s willingness to hold military-wide reform hostage to service interests. The PLAN will be a robust force hindered in budget battles and progress toward an expeditionary mission set by continentalist interests who
demand the PLA remain focused closer to China’s borders. The PLAN’s mission set and force structure will be tied to strategies emphasizing land-sea integration, in which the Chinese mainland serves as the necessary source of power and backstop for PLA operations.

As with a Triumphant CCP, the USG-CCP maritime competition in Southeast Asia is likely to tip in the CCP’s favor, following the local balance of forces. With the U.S. military’s margin of military superiority diminished or closed altogether, U.S. allies, particularly those interested in keeping USG-CCP maritime competition contained within the Indo-Pacific, may send military forces to conduct presence operations and insist on freedom of access. The United Kingdom, France, and Canada may conduct regular or semi-regular freedom of navigation operations near the First Island Chain. These will likely be performative gestures that do not indicate allied militaries will balance against the PLA in the South China Sea or Taiwan Strait, however, and the CCP’s sea forces will be able to punish or deny access to waters within large parts of the First Island Chain to the U.S. military and its allies. Recognizing the shifting military balance, Southeast Asian countries will continue to hedge between the USG and CCP, with U.S. allies Thailand and the Philippines decreasing the volume of joint exercises and partners such as Singapore expanding defense cooperation with the CCP to match their engagements with the USG.

**Scenario 3: Stagnant CCP**

The third scenario, more likely than the first or the fourth, is one in which the CCP does not make needed adjustments to its economic and military policies. This scenario is primarily characterized by lethargic economic growth and the harsh limits of budgetary constraints on ongoing CCP lines of effort. Anemic growth and domestic instability force the CCP to turn its focus inward, suspending its focus on contesting global influence against the United States. Due to harsh budget limitations on PLAN and MSRI investments, neither the probability of maritime conflict with the USG nor its likely magnitude meaningfully increase between 2020 and 2049,
with both remaining at moderate levels. With a moderate likelihood of moderate-intensity conflict with the USG, CCP maritime transformation will pose moderate threats to U.S. interests.

The defining attribute of this scenario is the CCP’s inability to find new models of economic growth and continued reliance on an investment-led growth model. Continued overinvestment will maintain the current trend of diminishing growth rates and poorly position the PRC to recover or respond to a major economic downturn, as experienced during the 2008 Global Financial Crisis or the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. In the event of another similar exogenous shock in the 2030s, the overinvested CCP will not be able to recover as rapidly as in the previous two. The PRC will suffer serious budget shortfalls, growing financial pressure for social welfare as jobs are lost, and diminished spending leading to anemic economic growth.

The absence of visible economic growth poses an existential threat to the CCP. The elite CCP narrative that robust economic growth is necessary to distract or appease the Chinese citizenry and ward off dissent will foster paranoid behaviors from political leaders hypersensitive to perceived popular unrest, even if the Chinese public does not demonstrate against the CCP. This hypersensitivity will exacerbate political fissures between the CCP elite that become publicly visible during important policy debates and leadership successions. If popular unrest does materialize in response to poor economic conditions, they will likely be compounded by general unrest in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia as well as worsening cross-Strait relations. The demands and costs of stability maintenance will significantly increase and begin consuming a greater share of budget, manpower, and CCP leader attentions. The PLAGF may be deployed to supplement PAP capacity in armed stability maintenance activities, again giving the PLAGF the most politically important mission sets of the services.

777 Andrew Scobell et al., China’s Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2020), 104.
With rapidly falling economic growth rates, PLAN shipbuilding will need to be significantly curtailed, and spending on costly prestige platforms like on the aircraft carrier program will likely be suspended. Ship maintenance will likely suffer, and a small number of already-constructed warships may be scuttled to relieve maintenance and sustainment costs. Similarly, growth of Chinese investment along the MSRI will slow or actively recede, uprooting the commercial instruments of CCP influence in the Indian Ocean Region and Mediterranean. Where MSRI investments are maintained, the project’s potential value as a strategic strongpoint will be in harsh competition with its value as a commercial port in which a Chinese company has ownership; with lax economic growth, the CCP may not readily risk the economic value of overseas investments by leveraging latent dual-use capabilities that may draw international ire. The CCP will operate an aging, potentially shrinking navy with limited naval aviation capacity along fewer potential seaports from which it can conduct military operations. Collectively, these factors will preclude the PLA from establishing a distant sea control capability.

A Stagnant CCP will be increasingly reliant on the PLAGF to maintain domestic stability and as such will be poorly positioned to uproot enduring PLAGF bureaucratic interests that contract the move toward joint warfighting capabilities. In fact, the CCP’s interest in domestic stability will make it beholden to the PLAGF, restoring part of the service’s influence lost from the reforms. With stagnant or shrinking defense budgets, the PLAGF’s return to influence will come at the cost of other services, including the PLAN in terms of budget, manpower, and political investment in mission sets. In conjunction with the paranaval PAFMM, the PLAGF and PLARF will be able to maintain robust sea denial capabilities in China’s near seas using anti-ship missile platforms that are comparatively cheaper than aircraft carriers or other prestige vessels.

Unlike the Triumphant or Ascendant CCP scenarios, a Stagnant CCP will find itself on the losing end of USG-CCP maritime competition in Southeast Asia. With the U.S. military’s margin of superiority growing once again, CCP influence in the region that came at the cost of USG influence will begin transitioning back, with Southeast Asian countries becoming more receptive
to security cooperation activities with the United States and returning to a hedged posture. A Stagnant CCP is likely to face regional military competition against countries like Vietnam and the Philippines instead of fighting against the United States to win their alignment. The CCP will remain the largest economic and military power in the Asia-Pacific, but it will be more dependent on its neighbors to create a stable peaceful environment fostering peace and prosperity for the region.

**Scenario 4: Imploding CCP**

The fourth scenario is highly unlikely. Sustained social turmoil and an Imploding CCP forced to lurch from crisis to crisis is altogether unable to dedicate resources to international competition, with the United States or China’s Southeast Asian neighbors. Maritime transformation, as well as the CCP’s grand strategy involving competition and a national rejuvenation, will be abandoned.

An Imploding CCP faces a parade of black swan catastrophes: the PLA initiates and loses a war with a bordering country, the PRC faces a sudden collapse of its financial system, Sino-Soviet ties break down, persistent infighting and power struggles among CCP elites factionalizes the PLA, and persistent popular protests give way to anomie across the country. Demonstrations against the Party-government, especially in oppressed areas like Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, could quickly become violent protests, then outright armed revolt.

The probability that the CCP orders military conflict against the USG, which would draw in a competitor when the CCP’s hold on power is weak, is extremely low. However, a CCP with weakened or contested legitimacy may also not be in firm control of PLA activities. In this scenario, the USG would not be able to deter or compel the end of a military action through established diplomatic channels in Beijing. At the high end of the risk spectrum, this could lead to the mobilization of part of the PLA for major war led by a charismatic general or an
unauthorized nuclear strike. The CCP’s primary threat to the United States in this scenario is this low-likelihood, high-magnitude risk of an unauthorized attack made possible by weak Party-state institutions.

**IX. Implications for Policymakers and Conclusion**

This thesis used a net assessment approach to align CCP capabilities with its intent over a span of decades to arrive at a characterization of the threat CCP maritime transformation poses to U.S. interests. While prior efforts to explain the CCP’s bid for sea power tended to extrapolate CCP intentions from observed capabilities, an overemphasis on capabilities—particularly current capabilities—provides too narrow of an assessment to be useful for defense planning. In the most urgent cases, defense establishments require years if not decades to reshape a military in response to a new threat; after identifying a threat requiring change in military force structure, a defense establishment must procure new platforms, develop doctrine and train their servicemen for their use, and foster service cultures around the reshaped force. Transient developments, such as the rise of popular nationalism, are inadequate for assessing the threat posed by a state engaged in long-running competition. The net assessment framework takes a broad analytical approach that considers the dynamics a competition unfolding over time and considers capabilities as trends that advance or hinder a defense establishment’s progress toward its enduring objectives. This section summarizes the thesis’ net assessment of CCP maritime transformation and concludes with discrete findings from the assessment.

**Review of the CCP’s Maritime Transformation**

The CCP’s enduring grand strategic objective is realizing its national rejuvenation in opposition to a superpower rival state, in this case transforming the global order in opposition to the United States and its security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. Becoming a “maritime
The "great power" is a secondary objective that CCP leaders believe is necessary but insufficient to realize national rejuvenation. The CCP’s maritime transformation was initiated and propelled forward by the activist foreign policy preferences of first Hu Jintao, then Xi Jinping as part of broader grand strategic shifts toward a greater international role for the PRC. For its part, the United States’ enduring objective has been military primacy, by which it denies potential competitors and secures the international status quo. Military primacy and deep engagement in the global status quo secure longstanding American interests, including freedom of the seas for U.S. civilian and military vessels.

Through maritime transformation, the CCP is developing sea power that is increasingly able to contest the United States’ erstwhile primacy and simultaneously threaten its Indo-Pacific security architecture. The Indo-Pacific’s largely maritime theater makes sea power a potent force in the USG-CCP strategic balance. Trends in the CCP’s maritime transformation collectively demonstrate an emerging maritime posture that undermines U.S. military primacy by extending sea denial capabilities throughout the Indo-Pacific and consolidating sea control capabilities in China’s near seas. Assessments of sea control and sea denial capabilities remain untested in peacetime, and the naval balance will likely shift over a long-running competition. Several operational asymmetries between the USG and CCP defense establishments serve as potential inflection points in the emergent trends of that competition.

The CCP has exerted sea power to stress the United States’ ties to its Indo-Pacific allies and partners. Because reordering China’s regional security environment in opposition to the U.S.-led security architecture is an important step toward national rejuvenation, the CCP’s maritime campaign against U.S. strategic influence is likely to intensify as it develops new capabilities. How this conflict will progress remains uncertain; although the CCP’s sea power is growing, CCP maritime transformation is also hindered by two negative trends reflecting structural weaknesses for which CCP leaders have not demonstrated an ability to arrest: a declining economic growth rate and robust continentalist interests in the PLA.
While I initially hypothesized that the CCP is building Mahanian sea power but struggled to do so because of ossified continentalist interests in the Party-state, my findings from this research did not strictly support this hypothesis. CCP maritime transformation is not on a course to sea power as Mahan understood it, in terms of overseas market access and naval battlefield command. Two important differences between the CCP’s emerging sea power and Mahanian sea power emerge from this analysis. First, while Mahan emphasized decisive battles between concentrated battlefleets, the CCP’s military and civilian assets both confer threat: CCP military doctrine emphasizes “residing the military within the civilian” to situate military capability and purpose within civilian resources, ensuring a maritime conflict will involve ostensibly private seaports and their civilian software as well as the PLAN’s battlefleet.\(^778\) The use of civilian assets such as a maritime militia ostensibly composed of Chinese fishermen dramatically expands the geographic scope of modern maritime competition while lowering its intensity. Chinese sea power is a weapon for peacetime as well as wartime. Second, while Mahan—and subsequent U.S. naval tacticians—derided the “fortress fleet” which makes use of shore-based fire, modern technology has made it possible for the PLA to radiate significant striking power from the Chinese mainland into maritime theaters in the Indo-Pacific, reportedly with dangerous precision.\(^779\) This is not to say Mahan’s theories of sea power are now obsolete; the CCP’s interdomain approach to sea power continues to support the Mahanian concepts of national expansion through overseas markets. Rather, modern technology has rendered obsolete Mahan’s approach to naval warfare despite the U.S. Navy’s inherited “tendency to focus


attention too readily on the big battle” without adequate engagement with land campaigns and control of the littoral seas.\textsuperscript{780}

The net assessment approach’s focus on interaction between competing defense establishments clarifies the nature of these differences. Recognizing the civilian and interdomain characteristics of CCP sea power, USG national security and defense documents have acknowledged a need to develop new operational concepts in order to maintain a competitive advantage over the CCP; further, the USG has begun to seek options to emulate the PLA by establishing American land-based maritime strike capabilities in the theater.\textsuperscript{781} The USG defense establishment’s response suggests that the CCP’s land-sea integrated approach to sea power confers an advantage vis-à-vis the USG despite the approach originating from a political compromise with ossified continentalist interests in the CCP.

\textit{Key Findings}

Seven findings emerge from this net assessment.

1. \textbf{There is no future in which CCP maritime transformation poses a low threat to U.S. interests.}

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Whether the CCP is triumphant, ascendant, stagnant, or imploding between 2020 and 2049, the CCP’s maritime transformation will only increase the threat that regime poses to the USG and its interests. The threat a competitor poses is a factor of its capabilities and its intentions.\textsuperscript{782}

The CCP’s intention to use its growing power to the detriment of U.S. interests has been remarkably consistent. The CCP has maintained a grand strategy of national rejuvenation, varyingly defined, since the formation of the People’s Republic in 1949. Since 1993, the CCP has considered the United States its primary adversary on the road to rejuvenation, and successive CCP leaders have maintained this assessment through the present day. While the CCP may modulate the tempo and intensity of their competitive activities in response to geopolitical or economic flux over time, in only one future scenario does the CCP turn from its march through U.S. interests toward national rejuvenation. An Imploding CCP faced with significant challenges to regime survival is most likely to forego policies of national rejuvenation and instead focus narrowly on survival. In this instance, CCP competitive intention poses little threat to the United States, but it is quickly displaced as a threat by the potential for failures of governance giving rise to activities undertaken by rogue military and paramilitary agents who may be armed with part of the CCP’s nuclear arsenal. These or other threatening developments may just as likely not happen, but uncertainty over whether they will happen leaves threat conferred essentially unknowable in this scenario. The Imploding CCP scenario leaves plausible a wide range of potential outcomes and cannot be confidently designated as posing a low threat to the United States and its interests.

In Triumphant, Ascendant, and Stagnant CCP scenarios, the CCP’s intention remains focused on national rejuvenation achieved by defeating the United States in a competition over the U.S.-led security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. The distinguishing factor in these three scenarios for the USG’s threat calculus is their range of likely capabilities. In the Triumphant and

\textsuperscript{782} Thomas C. Schelling, \textit{Arms and Influence}, (1966 reprint, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 35.
Ascendant CCP scenarios, the CCP’s maritime capabilities grow significantly, as surging economic growth rates fund continuations and expansions of programs to build sea power such as targeted MSRI investments and PLAN modernization. These programs will extend the PLA’s sea denial capabilities and introduce a sea control capability, particularly in waters near China’s shores. Growing CCP influence through MSRI investments in Europe, Africa, and South Asia threaten to open a second front of maritime competition for which the USG is apparently unprepared. A Stagnant CCP in 2049 will have as a baseline the ships, jets, and missiles still to be provided under current acquisition programs, though they may be degraded by poor maintenance and sustainment. Under those circumstances, the CCP would still possess the world’s largest navy, coast guard, and maritime militia concentrated in a region covered by a robust threat envelope from ship- and shore-launched anti-ship missiles boasting the longest operational ranges in the world. The USG cannot be assured of military primacy in the Indo-Pacific even when facing a Stagnant CCP, and the still-shifting military balance will have deleterious effects on the credibility of U.S. security guarantees, stressing and potentially weakening U.S. ties in the Indo-Pacific security architecture.

CCP maritime transformation has already passed the point at which the PLA’s capabilities seriously challenge U.S. primacy and so undermine U.S. credibility in the Indo-Pacific. That it reached such a point at all indicates the enduring competitive intentions of the CCP to accrue sea power and exert it in a maritime competition with the United States.

2. PRC economic growth determines the intensity of maritime transformation, but it is not the object of such.

The CCP’s vital objectives are not fundamentally economic. While the CCP in years prior clearly stated that its focus was on economic development and that it considered national security a secondary factor, authoritative Party statements at the Fifth Plenum and the revised PRC National Security Law, both issued in 2020, have shown that the CCP has revised its
priorities and now coordinates development and security interest as equals. The elevation of the CCP’s security interests in its decision-making calculus, particularly when presented and institutionalized in high-profile documents resulting from the CCP’s consensus-building process, suggests that USG and allied countries are now less able to shape CCP security-driven decisions by imposing costs on the Chinese economy alone.

Maritime transformation is a political decision with security and economic components, and it is a decision the CCP made to advance toward national rejuvenation. Xi Jinping’s description of it and its objective of transforming the PRC into a maritime great power have two implications. First, it is a pillar of the CCP’s grand strategy reflecting a complex of interests beyond having the means to secure economic interests. Maritime transformation is about more than having a constabulary navy able to patrol SLOCs to secure seaborne trade. Second, the CCP will not reverse its commitment to maritime transformation merely because it is expensive or unprofitable. Cost imposition on the PRC economy will serve to limit the resources available to fund maritime transformation programs, potentially restricting their frequency and scale, but it will not force the CCP to cease or reverse its accrual of sea power.

3. **Sea control in the Indo-Pacific is on track to become prohibitively costly.**

The United States faces an enduring challenge to its sea control capabilities with no apparent answer. The PLA’s ballistic and cruise missiles, which DoD considers to be more advanced than those fielded by the U.S. military, constitute a robust ability to contest or deny any foreign military attempts to gain and maintain sea control within its threat envelope. The PLA has been able to fire anti-ship missiles able to reach targets as far from China’s shores as Guam since at least 2019 and is likely increasing its capacity of missiles and launchers while

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simultaneously testing still more advanced anti-ship missiles that range beyond Guam. The PLA’s land-based sea denial will likely soon extend its coverage beyond the Asia-Pacific to cover larger swaths of the Indo-Pacific.\textsuperscript{784} In response, the USG will need to make significant investments in theater missile defense just to maintain the credible functionality of its forward operating bases in the event of war; recognizing this reality, former USINDOPACOM commander ADM Phil Davidson advocated for a $4.68 billion missile defense system on Guam.\textsuperscript{785} The USG appears to have limited options beyond Guam for theater missile defense, as even Japan has declined to continue developing the Aegis Ashore missile defense system and has thus far declined to commit to the alternative Aegis Afloat.\textsuperscript{786}

Without credible theater missile defense, U.S. sailors in the Indo-Pacific are forced to operate under threat of PLARF strikes. This does not preclude outright U.S. military forces or operations near China. However, U.S. military efforts to seize air and maritime superiority—prerequisites for permitting the conduct of maritime or air operations—will face highly sophisticated sea denial operations conducted by a PLA with sufficient accuracy, munitions, and electromagnetic support to contest or in some cases outright deny U.S. efforts.\textsuperscript{787} Sea control for operationally useful durations at acceptable cost within the First and Second Island Chains may soon be outside of the U.S. military’s capability if it is not already. The U.S. military’s response has been to explore land-based sea denial capabilities within the theater and standoff maritime strike capabilities outside the current threat envelope in apparent recognition of this

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Future peacetime operations, such as presence operations designed to assure regional allies and partners of the combat-ready credibility of a U.S. security guarantee, will be reduced by the likely outcomes of escalation. Future wartime operations will likely need to include at least in part beyond the weapon engagement zone. While at least one flag officer has suggested for reasons not revealed that the PLA’s anti-ship threat does not target U.S. assets that would be instrumental for victory in “the next war,” this suggestion is countervailed by ADM Davidson’s assessed need for a Guam Defense System and by the thin history of militaries that are deterred by secret plans.

Even if the United States loses command of the seas in the Indo-Pacific, the PLA is unlikely to gain it. Despite its robust surface fleet modernization, the PLA still lacks a mature naval aviation capability critical for improving situational awareness at sea and for conducting antisubmarine warfare operations. Both are necessary to establish sea control against a peer adversary. What assets the PLA has successfully built are also likely to operate in the face of U.S. forces postured with precision strike capabilities that lend themselves to sea denial and may include strikes on PLA assets at sea or on the Chinese mainland. Most of all, the Indo-Pacific countries most familiar with Chinese military power are also the most disturbed by it. As such, the likely effect of the CCP’s sea denial capabilities is sharply restricting prospects for any military to gain sea control for operationally useful durations in the Indo-Pacific, particularly within the First and Second Island Chains. The future Indo-Pacific security architecture and the
United States’ individual security guarantees are likely to suffer severe losses if they are made credible by operations requiring sea control at acceptable costs.

4. The CCP’s vision of sea power is one that is deeply integrated across domains and elements of national power, military and civilian.

The CCP’s land-sea integrated approach to maritime transformation and the PLA’s principle of “residing the military within the civilian” foster sea power that is integrated across land and maritime domains at the same time that it is integrated across informational, military, and economic elements of national power. The PLA’s embrace of its fortress fleet and dedicated augmentation of its naval forces with shore-based fire gives the PLA a significant operational advantage over forward-deployed U.S. forces in the Indo-Pacific. However, while the bulk of the PLA’s traditional military hardware has been oriented to China’s east, civilian components of maritime transformation efforts run along informational and economic lines toward China’s west. The 2013 Science of Military Strategy describes continental China as the “support and backstop” from which power radiates to the “focal point” of the Indo-Pacific, with space and cyber forming the “crux.” This description entails more than the strategic depth conferred by surface fleets and ballistic missiles. Financial power radiates from China along the MSRI and contributes to a complex information network stretching into waterways both east and west of China. Civilian assets are critical nodes in this network and make clear contributions to CCP maritime domain awareness and targeting capabilities.

In China’s near seas, the PLA’s operational picture is supported by surveillance equipment aboard civilian maritime militia vessels and the permanent maritime sensors constructed in the early stages of the Blue Ocean Information Network. In the waters beyond, ports that are

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owned, operated, or have received significant funding from Chinese companies through the MSRI are positioned to become nodes in an information network feeding into the PLA’s ISR networks; in times of crisis, these information nodes may extend further to include ports that are not owned or operated by Chinese companies but use the PRC Ministry of Transportation-sponsored LOGINK logistics management software. By 2035, the Blue Ocean Information Networks’ sensors are also projected to have spread along the MSRI. The PRC’s ocean reconnaissance and surveillance satellites, under the PLA’s oversight, reinforce the CCP’s maritime domain awareness in both the near seas and the far seas.

A broader common operating picture than that enjoyed by one’s adversaries is an important advantage with applications in wartime and peacetime. Shared situational awareness can enable or hobble an organization as its component parts attempt to operate in concert, whether those operations be battlefield maneuver, surveillance of international waters, or enforcement of international maritime law. The USG’s maritime challenge is not posed by the PLA alone; it is posed by the CCP and the state, military, and civilian society apparatuses it can manipulate.

5. The USG’s focus on high-end threats takes a narrow view of the maritime competition’s decisive terrain and does not adequately account for the peacetime implications of the CCP’s military and paramilitary power.

The USG began competing against the CCP long after the CCP first began the competition. The USG first joined the contest by placing a disproportionate focus on high-end military threats. While CCP leaders designated the United States as their primary strategic adversary in 1993 and actively accelerated preparations for strategic competition in 1999, the USG was distracted by other engagements until years later. The Office of Net Assessment’s 2001 Defense Strategy Review and 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review considered the need for enhancing military capability against the PLA, but U.S. foreign policy did not publicly recognize the CCP’s revisionist ambitions or prescribe that the USG compete in response on a smaller scale until the
renewed publicization of the Freedom of Navigation program in 2015, and the USG did not do so on a larger scale until the 2017 National Security Strategy.

The USG’s policy toward the PRC in 2015 and thereafter appear motivated by concerns about the Indo-Pacific military balance and positioning for the high-end fight; the timing of the 2015 FONOP appeared to indicate that the Obama Administration was concerned about Chinese militarization, not international law, in the South China Sea. While the Trump Administration’s policy toward the PRC led with economic competition, the administration also adopted a more aggressive FONOP schedule and conducted several high-profile naval exercises in the South China Sea.791 In the last days of the Trump Administration, Congress also established a $2.2 billion Pacific Deterrence Initiative to strengthen deterrence against the CCP by modernizing U.S. forces in the theater, improving logistics and sustainment requirements, and building the partner defense capability and capacity.792 These measures, centered on military capabilities, do not respond to threats to U.S. strategic influence posed by civilian assets or in the gray zone.

In the South China Sea, the USG’s focus on the prospect of kinetic conflict between high-end systems has at times been out of step with what is needed to assure regional allies and partners. When the Obama Administration was faced with Chinese provocations at Scarborough Shoal in 2012, it declined to clarify its interpretation of the U.S.-Philippines alliance in support of its treaty ally and only appeared to take public action on the islet group by warning the CCP against building military facilities on Scarborough Shoal.793 When the Trump

Administration observed a Malaysian drillship experiencing a harassment campaign from Chinese vessels, it conducted a sustained, high-end joint presence operation in support of an ungrateful partner that had accustomed to Chinese harassment and mercurial U.S. support.\textsuperscript{794} In both cases, the USG led its engagement with its Southeast Asian ally or partner with a focus on whether high-end military assets might be at risk or the solution, with consistently poor results. As Bill Hayton advised, “engagement means more than just showing up with a gunboat, or even an aircraft carrier, every few weeks or months and expecting everyone to love you.”\textsuperscript{795} Preparing for a high-end fight against the PLA may position the U.S. military to make its security guarantees more credible, but it alone is not enough to reassure allies and partners facing maritime coercion from the CCP.

The focus on high-end capabilities is also visible in the asymmetries between the USG and CCP on what constitutes the Indo-Pacific regions’ strategic geography. The decisive terrain from U.S. defense planning perspectives continues to be the First and Second Island Chains, where the PLA is able to hold U.S. forces at considerable risk. But the decisive terrain from a CCP maritime power perspective is the aggregate of maritime chokepoints both east and west of continental China, through which energy resources and hollowed-out Chinese capital flow. The USG’s response to the CCP’s maritime transformation has been piecemeal, with U.S. forward deployments and the Pacific Deterrence Initiative along the chokepoints to China’s east and a patchwork of economic initiatives, including the Clean Network and the Blue Dot Network, responding to the Belt and Road Initiative. By targeting the BRI writ large, these initiatives only address the investments along maritime chokepoints to China’s west by default.\textsuperscript{796} In the same


way that the USG may not have been actively competing against the CCP for before 2017, it is not clear that the USG is directly competing against the CCP’s instruments for accruing and exerting sea power in the Indian Ocean Region or Mediterranean Sea today.

6. Converting power into strategic influence remains a weakness for the CCP.

Just as eroding U.S. sea control capabilities in the Indo-Pacific are not giving way to new PLA sea control capabilities, the CCP’s use of sea power to erode U.S. strategic influence in Southeast Asia has not given rise to CCP strategic influence over Southeast Asian countries. Exactly what effect CCP sea power has on the PRC’s foreign relationships is difficult to separate from other potential variables, such as blame for the COVID-19 pandemic or ongoing genocide in Xinjiang. What can be known is that efforts DoD describes the PRC as having likely made to establish military bases in Namibia, Vanuatu, and the Solomon Islands have thus far been unsuccessful. Nor has the PRC announced any new maritime access agreements to support expeditionary operations for its blue-water navy, with the potential exception of the naval base at Ream, Cambodia.

Some investments along the MSRI have met resistance or limited host country support. In Malaysia, officials across several governments were eager to cooperate with the CCP to fund an expansion of the Kuantan Port, which sits on Malaysia’s east coast and is the Malaysian port closest to China. Despite support from local officials, Malaysian officials at the federal level did not support a similar investment into the Melaka Deepwater Port, which sits in the Malacca


Strait and received significant public scrutiny for the strategic implications of positioning a Chinese port in the region’s energy lifeline.\textsuperscript{799}

Other public indicators describe the CCP as facing significant challenges in accruing or exerting strategic influence. The 2021 ISEAS poll reports over 75% of respondents named the PRC as the most economically influential power, and nearly 50% of respondents named the PRC as the most strategic-politically influential power in Southeast Asia; in both cases, the vast supermajority of respondents also reported this influence as worrying rather than welcome.\textsuperscript{800}

The Lowy Institute’s Asia Power Index assesses that the PRC exerts only modest power in the Indo-Pacific through military diplomacy, and its metrics suggest that the PRC’s ability to advance its diplomatic interests appears to underperform its significant investments in diplomatic networking and regional summits.\textsuperscript{801} The CCP is not without strategic influence, but it consistently fails to fully convert its economic, diplomatic, and military power into strategic influence. This weakness may be preventing the CCP from establishing foreign military bases, investing in strategic strongpoints, or building soft power. There is no reason to believe the CCP’s efforts to convert sea power into strategic influence will be different.

7. The PLAGF’s continentalism remains an enduring vulnerability for CCP sea power.

Continentalist interests, including the PLAGF, contributed to a successful CCP effort to pursue land-sea integrated sea power rather than outright Mahanian sea power. Although this fostered distinct inter-domain operational advantages for the PLA’s prospective operations


against a forward-based adversary, the PLAGF’s obstinate pursuit of its interests, backed by its sizeable bureaucratic heft, constitutes an enduring vulnerability for CCP maritime transformation and for the future of CCP sea power. The PLAGF competes against the PLAN for resources and leadership roles in joint command structures. This is typical of professional militaries. Less typical is the PLAGF’s determined, decades-long resistance against the orders of successive CCP General Secretaries to modernize into a smaller, better-trained ground component of a joint force.

The ground force’s failures of reform and modernization hold at risk PLAN modernization in two ways. First, the PLAN will not be able to complete its own reforms into the naval arm of a joint force if it cannot rely on the PLAGF to be responsive to its reform obligations. Second, halting PLAGF modernization weakens the PLA’s defense posture in the theaters nearest to its own borders, increasing the tension between a PLAN aspiring to blue-water operations and a PLAGF that may not be able to secure CCP interests. In critical cases such as Taiwan, the PLAN may be required to supplement PLAGF deficiencies at cost to its budget, manpower, and mission set.

This is a vulnerability, not simply a weakness. Borrowing Toshi Yoshihara and Jack Bianchi’s definition, a weakness is an impediment to an entity’s ability to reach its goals, while a vulnerability is a weakness that can be subjected to an adversary’s strategy.802 The CCP’s weakness in converting power into strategic influence is in part driven by its sweeping demands, hostile behavior, and resistance to compromise. The USG is unable to reliably increase that effect. However, the USG can increase tension within continentalist and sea power factions within the CCP, for example by, unilaterally or with allies, adopting a force posture that tests the CCP’s interest in militarily dominating Taiwan or a force posture that confers greater threats

near China’s disputed land borders. In such cases, the guiding principle for taking advantage of the PLAGF as a vulnerability for CCP sea power is to lure it into making the mistakes that, because of its robust bureaucratic interests, it cannot help but make.

**Conclusion**

CCP grand strategy has undergone a sweeping reorientation toward the sea. Driven by an apparent faith that sea power will lead to or evidence national rejuvenation, CCP leaders have cultivated and exerted sea power, in part to erode U.S. strategic influence in the Indo-Pacific’s maritime theater. The strategic logic of CCP maritime transformation has also become clear over time and various iterations; the CCP’s sea power can directly stress U.S. security guarantees by cutting into its margin of military superiority, test the USG’s ability to assure its allies and partners through gray zone coercions, and shape the regional security environment with civilian investments hollowed out to conceal military purposes. Maritime transformation has not made the CCP a dominant power commanding the alliance of most Indo-Pacific countries, but it has posed significant challenges to the United States’ ability to sustain such a position.

Because it is the leading power, strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific remains the United States’ to lose. The rise of PLA sea denial in China’s near seas has compromised the U.S. military’s ability to establish sea control, and potentially command of the commons altogether, within the First and Second Island Chains. While U.S. defense planners remain focused on the eastern half of the Indo-Pacific, commercial investments along the MSRI and the PLA’s doctrine making military use of civilian assets extend gradients of PLA power through the Indian Ocean Region and Mediterranean Sea under cover of economic interests and win-win cooperation.

The United States faces a daunting challenge in the CCP as a sea power. CCP leaders are committed to supplanting U.S. influence and have prepared for decades to do so, in part by producing the world’s largest navy, coast guard, and maritime militia under the protective
umbrella of the world’s first anti-ship ballistic missiles. CCP leaders have also publicly indicated that their security interests are no longer secondary to their economic interests, blunting the USG’s potential for constraining the CCP’s military expansion by holding its economy at risk. Countries in the Indo-Pacific have repeatedly declined to bandwagon into an anti-CCP coalition, instead choosing to hedge between great powers in competition. As these countries continue to hedge, the United States bleeds strategic influence over its allies and partners.

How the PRC’s economy develops will have significant impact on the future of CCP sea power, but barring total Party-state implosion, the capabilities that the CCP has already built will impede the USG’s pursuit of its foreign policy objectives in the Indo-Pacific for decades to come. The USG faces moderate to extreme threats from the CCP and its sea power in every future. Trends favor the CCP, and USG platitudes to work more closely with allies and partners will not arrest them.
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