

China's Indo-Pacific Strategy: The Problems of Success

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Structured Abstract

Article Type: Research Paper

Purpose—The article delineates, explains and evaluates China's Indo-Pacific strategy.

Design—Balance of threat theory and security dilemma theory are explained in the Introduction and re-invoked in the Conclusion. A geo-economics section considers energy security and the Maritime Silk Road initiative. The geopolitics section considers China's presence in the South China Sea, Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean. A maritime strategy section moves from China's seapower drive into consideration of blue water navy, island chains, and two-ocean strategy.

Findings—There is a paradox. On the one hand, the article finds that China has been quite successful in seeking to establish control of much the South China Sea and of the East China Sea, and from there penetration into the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans. However, on the other hand, the article also finds that this very success is creating grounds for failure as a range of states across the region increasingly cooperate to constrain China.

Originality/Value—Firstly, new application of balance of threat theory and security dilemma theory, in this case onto China's Indo-Pacific strategy. Secondly, in most studies of China in the Indo-Pacific there is little treatment of the "paradox of success" found in this study.

Keywords: China, geo-economics, geopolitics,
Indo-Pacific, Maritime Silk Road, seapower

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I. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific—the maritime area stretching from the Pacific and Indian Oceans, with the South China Sea as intervening waters—is increasingly important in China’s “strategic calculus.”¹ Within these waters, China is seeking to establish control of the South China Sea and of the East China Sea, and from there penetration into the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans—in effect a drive for a two-seas control followed by a strong two-oceans presence and consequent influence.

The article finds that China has been generally successful in achieving its aims in these seas and oceans, but that precisely because of this very success China is now paradoxically facing mounting problems. Helpful in explaining this paradox of success creating potential failure is *balance of threat* theory and *security dilemma* theory. The “balance of threat” theory was advanced by Stephen Walt, whereby states identify threats from other states by looking at their “aggregate [economic] power,” “offensive [military] capabilities,” “[perceived] offensive intentions” and “geographic proximity.”² From that comes balancing responses of cooperation between similarly concerned countries. This balancing process feeds into “security dilemma” dynamics, in which actions taken by a state to increase its own security cause reactions from other states, which in turn lead to a decrease rather than an increase in the original state’s security.³ The problem for China is that the military actions which it takes are (1) indeed explained by Beijing as legitimate defensive security measures, but (2) potentially can also be interpreted as offensive in character, and (3) attract widespread characterization as offensive in nature and intention based on regional perceptions reflecting a “trust deficit” in operation, which thereby triggers “balance of threat” response dynamics.⁴ In contrast, U.S. military actions in the region are not generally seen as threatening to most other countries, precisely because of the *balance of threat* grounds of “geographic proximity” and “(perceived) offensive intentions,” which apply in the case of China do not apply in the case of the U.S.

Because this is a study on Chinese strategy and policy for the Indo-Pacific, the sources used in this analysis are those not only in but also around the Chinese government, with the Chinese media cited precisely because it is firmly under the control of the state, and with quantitative material similarly China-centered. The article delineates, explains and evaluates through three empirical sections that consider the geo-economics, geopolitics and maritime strategy being pursued by China in the Indo-Pacific. Theory is returned to in the conclusion.

II. Geo-Economics

China’s geo-economic involvement in the Indo-Pacific revolves around energy security and the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative.

2.1 Energy Security

China faces an ever growing “energy security” (*nengyuan anquan*) issue. Before 1995 China was an oil exporter, but since 1995 a modernizing industrializing China has become an increasingly large energy importer of oil and gas. The biggest external source of energy for China is the Middle East, from where energy imports flow across the Indian Ocean through the Strait of Malacca to the South China Sea and up to China. This generates important maritime imperative for China’s energy security resolution. These energy imperatives lay behind the Pentagon-sponsored study in 2004 on *Energy Futures in Asia*, where the authors argued that “China is building strategic relationships along the sea lanes from the Middle East to the South China Sea in ways that suggest defensive and offensive positioning to protect China’s energy interests but also serve its broader security objectives.”⁵

China is faced with various energy challenges across the Indo-Pacific. This was typified in Dai Xu’s warnings:

Looking at the example of the Middle East, which supplies over half of China’s oil imports, Chinese oil transport vessels travelling from that region must pass through the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Malacca, and the South China Sea. Danger is everywhere in the Persian Gulf, pirates run amok on the Indian Ocean, and the navies of India and the United States eye our vessels jealously.⁶

Piracy threats have prompted ongoing anti-piracy deployments by China into the Gulf of Aden since 2009, and a clear sign of the Chinese navy’s “broadened horizon” and “enhanced ability.”⁷ The reference to Indian and U.S. naval interruption of energy supplies primarily refers to the “Malacca dilemma” (*Maliujia kunju*), a term coined by the previous Chinese leader Hu Jintao with regard to China’s energy supplies being blocked by U.S. or Indian naval interdiction of energy imports coming through the Strait of Malacca. Chinese analysts are well aware that within the Indo-Pacific maritime continuum, “energy security requires free passage from China’s coastline to the Indian Ocean, with the Strait of Malacca playing a particularly central role.”⁸

China’s desire to avoid the maritime “Malacca Dilemma” constriction has also led it to develop two significant diversions away from the Strait of Malacca. One is the China-Myanmar Energy Corridor (CMEC), organized around the gas line and oil pipelines running up from the deepwater port of Kyaukpyu to Kunming in southwestern China. This was opened in April 2017, complete with a 70 percent stake in Kyaukpyu by the state-run conglomerate China International Trust Investment Corporation (CITIC) agreed in November 2017. Second, is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) running from Gwadar on the Pakistan Coast up the Indus valley to Xinjiang, which links the Maritime Silk Road to the overland Eurasian Belt within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It remains to be seen whether significant quantities of energy flow through these pipelines and infrastructure routes, as well as how secure they will be.

Within the Indo-Pacific, China’s claims in the East China Sea and South China

Sea are partly to do with their energy potential. China's claims over energy fields in the East China Sea brings it up against Japan, while those in the South China Seas brings it up against not other rival littoral claimants, but also Indian attempts to operate in energy fields like Block-128 controlled by Vietnam, but also claimed by China. Finally, energy security is one driver in China's Maritime Silk Road initiative, since the extended Indian Ocean and South China Sea lanes are precisely those used for transporting energy back to China.

2.2 *Maritime Silk Road*

China's "Maritime Silk Road" (*haishang sichou zhi lu*) has become a frequently mooted theme in China's foreign policy, with the state media explaining the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) as a "geo-economics 'Indo-Pacific' plan" on the part of Beijing.⁹ The Maritime Silk Road is the maritime Indo-Pacific part of the Belt and Road initiative, the "Belt" being the overland Eurasia route, with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) running from Gwadar up to Xinjiang forming a link route between the MSR and Eurasia routes.

The rhetoric is soaring, with Chinese scholars calling the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative "the fulfilment of 'the era of Indo-Pacific,'" and the MSR packaged benignly as "a maritime silk road to peaceful seas."¹⁰ PRC scholars may argue that the "'Maritime Silk Road Initiative' indicates China's intention to create a peaceful and harmonious environment, for cooperating with other States," as does its attendant naval diplomacy.¹¹ However, it is precisely Chinese "intentions" and its naval presence which generate widespread apprehension outside China. Its assertiveness over pushing its wide-ranging claims over most of the South China Sea, and the dependency issues in its wider MSR infrastructure projects have not helped China's image across the region.

China's *Maritime Silk Road* concept was first unveiled in October 2013 by Xi Jinping at the Indonesia Parliament, where his call was to "vigorously develop maritime partnership in a joint effort to build the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century."¹² In Southeast Asia, the MSR initiative serves to potentially soothe worries over assertive Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea. The initiative was extended from Southeast Asia to take in the Indian Ocean, while a further spur has been extended into the Southern Pacific—fostering an image of economic cooperation, rather than unsettling naval expansionism. As the Chinese Ambassador to Singapore Chen Xiaodong explained, the MRS "will help mitigate the negative impact caused by the South China Sea dispute."¹³ In short, the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) concept is an attempt to counterbalance the negative imagery caused in the Indo-Pacific over Chinese policies and actions, "deepening trust [*jiashen xinren*] and enhancing connectivity" is China's official mantra.¹⁴

Some clarification of what the MSR involves was given by *Xinhua* in April 2014 in its report, "China Accelerates Planning to Re-connect Maritime Silk Road." This announced that the MSR initiative would involve "infrastructure construction of countries along the route, including ports of Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh,"

in which China would “coordinate customs, quality supervision, e-commerce and other agencies to facilitate the scheme, which is also likely to contain attempts to build free trade zones.”¹⁵ In December 2014, China set up the *Silk Road Fund*, with US\$40 billion in funds to be provided by the State Administration of Foreign Exchange (65 percent), China Investment Corporation (15 percent), the Export-Import Bank of China (15 percent) and the China Development Bank (5 percent).¹⁶ In June 2017, China unveiled a White Paper entitled *Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative*. It emphasized win-win “pragmatic cooperation” involving “shelving differences and building consensus” and a “call for efforts to uphold the existing international ocean order.”¹⁷

China’s Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative has generally been well received across much of the Indo-Pacific. This was demonstrated at the Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in May 2017, where the leaders of Kenya, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Fiji joined other ministers from various other Indo-Pacific countries. At the last minute, Japan and the U.S. sent representatives, though at a junior level. At the 2017 Forum, Xi Jinping announced that an additional RMB100 billion (around US\$15.9 billion) would be put into the Silk Road Fund.

China has faced rival Indo-Pacific infrastructure schemes. The Obama administration mooted the Indo-Pacific Economic Corridor (IPEC). Since 2014, India has sought to build up its own Indian Ocean schemes with *Mausam* and the *Cotton Route* on the cultural front, and the *Security and Growth for All in the Region* (SAGAR) on the economic front. With good reason, China saw the U.S. infrastructure initiative announced by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in July 2018 as being counter to the BRI initiative.¹⁸ The Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility for the Pacific (AIFFP) mechanism announced by Australia in November 2018 represented another counter to China’s infrastructure penetration. India and Japan floated the *Africa-Asia Growth Corridor* (AAGC) initiative in 2016, which was immediately criticized in the Chinese state media.¹⁹ In turn the *Trilateral Partnership for Infrastructure Investment in the Indo-Pacific* (TPIIP) initiative from Australia, Japan and the U.S. was set up in November 2018. Such alternatives lessen the advantages China holds from its MSR initiative.

A second Belt and Road Forum was held in April 2019, with leaders and ministers from a swathe of countries in South-East Asia, the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean—though the U.S. and Sri Lanka boycotted this, unlike in 2017. It remained significant that India boycotted China’s Belt and Road Forum both in 2017 and 2019. India’s absence was officially on the grounds that the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) linking the overland Eurasian “Belt” route and the Indian Ocean “Maritime Silk Road” route crossed Kashmir, in dispute between India and Pakistan. In reality, India is averse to the MSR, because it views China’s power projection in the Indian Ocean as counter to its own interests, and with widespread Indian perceptions of the MSR as being in effect a “string of pearls” geopolitical encirclement.

III. Geopolitics

China's Indo-Pacific geopolitics revolve around three maritime zones, namely the South China Sea, and the wider Indian and Pacific Oceans. China is an Indo-Pacific littoral state, with presence and interest throughout the wider Indo-Pacific waters, yet is geopolitically constrained and hampered by the arc of neighboring Indo-Pacific states and their particular Indo-Pacific strategies.

3.1 South China Sea

China's territorial claim to most of the South China Sea is increasingly treated as a "core interest" (*hexin liyi*) issue of China's territorial integrity. China claims sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly scatterings of (so-called) islands, rocks, atolls and reefs, associated exclusive economic zones, and indeed most of the South China Sea under the (questionable) "nine dash/U-shaped line."²⁰ This brings China into maritime and territorial disputes with Brunei, Malaysia, Indonesia and most of all, the Philippines and Vietnam.

At the top of the South China Sea, Hainan Island gives China immediate geopolitical anchorage and power projection advantages. The submarine base at Yulin enables immediate Chinese deployment into the South China Sea, and then into the West Pacific or into the Indian Ocean. This is part of the growing significance of the South China Fleet for power projection further afield.²¹ A related venture was the decision by the Hainan Commerce Department in March 2018 to set up new port facilities at Sanya for deep sea research vessels to operate in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, to be completed by 2019. Hainan is set to become a free trade zone by 2025, and forms the first starting point in the Maritime Silk Road network.²²

With regard to the Paracels, Chinese forces evicted South Vietnamese forces in 1974. Woody Island (*Yongxing*) has been built up at the administrative level, redesigned as the Sansha city prefecture-level body in 2012, complete with jurisdiction over China's Paracel and Spratly holdings, and reflect bureaucratic "lawfare" being deployed by China in establishing maritime claims.²³ Woody Island has continued to be built up as a center for naval and air force power projection by China further down in the South China Sea, with H-6K advanced bombers landing on it in May 2018. With regard to the Spratly holdings, the 1980s saw conflicts with Vietnam, for example the Johnson South Reef skirmishes of 1988, while more clashes with the Philippines resulted in China moving onto the Mischief Reef in 1995 and Scarborough Shoal in 2012. Chinese strategy during 2015–2017 focused on the creation (dubbed the *Great Sandwall of China*) of artificial islands through massive concrete operations to provide China with a range of harbors and airfields deep in the south of the South China Sea, and now militarized with anti-ship missiles, electronic jammers and surface to air missiles (SAMs) which have been dubbed the *Great Wall of SAMs*.

Chinese strategy in the South China Sea has been to establish clear physical

military control of these waters, and avoid sovereignty talks at the regional, multi-lateral or international level. Beijing remains keen to localize the issue and avoid the involvement (what China calls “interference”) of outside nations, which of course would enable it to operate from a position of strength against the smaller littoral nations.²⁴

This rejection of outside legal involvement was most clearly seen in the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) case of *The Republic of the Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China* brought by the Aquino administration in January 2013 with regard to the Spratly area. The PCA arbitral tribunal in applying the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) found that: (1) China’s claims to “historic rights” in the area enclosed by the nine-dash line gave it no EEZ rights; (2) none of the existing Spratly land outcrops were “islands” under UNCLOS 121.3 criteria of being able to “sustain human habitation or economic life of their own” leaving them as “rocks” with 12 mile territorial waters but no EEZ; and (3) artificial constructions onto partially submerged reefs and atolls did not generate territorial waters or EEZs (UNCLOS 60.5), but merely had a 500-meter “safety zone” around them (UNCLOS 60.8).²⁵ Not surprisingly, having rejected the PCA competency in the first place, China vehemently rejected the subsequent PCA findings, and set out to nullify any further outcome from them. In effect China brazened it out, with China’s geopolitical power seeming to outweigh its weakness in international law.²⁶

Despite the PCA ruling, the new Duterte administration in the Philippines pursued economic cooperation with China, as did ASEAN. Desultory discussions running since 2013 to agree to a “legally, binding” Code of Conduct (COC) on the South Sea between China and ASEAN remain to be concluded, though in August 2018 a 19-page Single Draft Negotiating Text (SDNT) surfaced in the COC discussions. Significantly, the SDNT had no provisions for the COC being “legally binding,” and of course did not deal with matters of sovereignty or maritime disputes.²⁷

Although the Philippines and ASEAN chose to drop the PCA ruling; other powers in the Indo-Pacific like the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India and France called on China to accept it, and with China in mind, such powers continue to issue varied joint statements on the need for the “rule of law” to be upheld in the South China Sea. It is significant that the U.S. has carried out increasing numbers of Freedom of Navigation (FON) deployments around these PRC holdings in 2018 as part of its Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy, and has been joined by similar FON deployments by Australia, France and even the UK. Beijing continues to see such FON deployments as “a serious political and military provocation.”²⁸ It is also noticeable that, to China’s discomfort, the U.S. has reasserted their own ongoing military presence in the South China Sea, with growing U.S. military links with Vietnam a further concern to China.²⁹

3.2 Pacific Ocean

China has also made its presence felt in the Pacific basin.³⁰ In part, this reflects China’s maritime strategy of pushing past the first and second “island chains,” on

which more is discussed in the later section on China's maritime strategy. In part, this reflects the push by the PRC to achieve recognition as the legitimate government of China, at the expense of rival claims by Taiwan, in part this is for China's access to the resources of those deep-sea waters and sea beds which hold fisheries and mineral resources, and in part it reflects of China's increasing geopolitical rivalry with the United States.

China has also so created its own multilateral platform to engage with the region in the 2006 with the China-Pacific Island Countries Economic Development and Cooperation Forum (CPICEDCF). This brings China together with the eight Pacific island states (Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Niue, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu) that recognize Beijing. China has also reached out to the main regional mechanism, the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), being a dialogue partner since 1989. A formal China-PIF Cooperation Fund was set up by China in 2000. Beijing has also developed close relationships with the sub-regional Melanesia Spearhead Group (MSG). Australia and the U.S. have looked on with increasing concern as China has established close links with Fiji, and involved itself in various infrastructure projects in Papua New Guinea signaled in June 2018 with a Memorandum of Understanding under the Belt and Road Initiative. The very success of China's economic appearance in Papua New Guinea generated immediate counteractions though in November 2018, with the U.S. and Australia announcing joint plans to develop naval base facilities at Lombrum to forestall possible Chinese moves there.

In terms of traditional maritime security, China has been a member of the Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) since its inauguration in 1988. More recently, in 2014 and 2016 China participated in the by-invitation only bi-annual Pacific Rim (RIMPAC) naval multilateral exercises hosted by the U.S. at Hawaii, though the invitation for July 2018 was withdrawn due to U.S. disapproval of Chinese actions in the South China Sea. Even as one Indo-Pacific maritime interaction was being curtailed, another was being opened up as August 2018 saw the Chinese navy invited and arrive to attend the *Kakadu* exercises in the waters off Darwin for the first time, alongside other participants from across the Indo-Pacific.

3.3 Indian Ocean

Although China is an external power in the Indian Ocean, it has sought closer involvement with Indian Ocean Regional Association (IORA), of which it is an observer. However, India has maintained a veto on China joining or having observer status with the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).

China's economic presence in the Indian Ocean is being channeled through its Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative. Its military presence in the Indian Ocean is in part through "new pathways" of ongoing facilities or quasi-bases being established in the Indian Ocean.³¹ Hence comments by PRC scholars that "China should also enhance its military and economic presence in the Indian Ocean," since "the Indian Ocean is a 'must enter' region for the Belt and Road initiative as well as the national strategy of building China into a maritime power."³²

The question of Chinese presence was first propagated in the “string of pearls” hypothesis advanced in 2004 with the Pentagon-sponsored study on *Energy Futures in Asia*. Its accuracy has become engrained in Indian perceptions of China in the Indian Ocean, in which encirclement fears are palpable. China has always denied that it is operating a specific “string of pearls policy” of military bases and has denied any aims of India-encirclement.³³ Certainly some of these “string of pearl” facilities have proven still-born. The Kra canal project has not yet come to fruition, and fears of Chinese listening facilities on Great Coco Island seem to have been rumor rather than fact. China’s hopes of building and operating a deepwater port at Sonadia were blocked when the Bangladeshi government canceled the project in 2016. Rumors of a Chinese submarine base at Marao atoll in the Maldives have proven illusory as well. However, there has been an emerging support network in the Indian Ocean, which are not full blown military bases but which are increasingly enabling China to deploy at regular intervals for dual purpose utilization. China’s anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden have led China to seek and gain friendly reprovisioning access at Salalah (Oman), Aden (Yemen), and most recently Djibouti. Three port facilities are of particular note for China, namely at Hambantota, Gwadar and Djibouti.

Hambantota is particularly striking as not only was it set up under Chinese financing, but problems of repaying Chinese loans incurred in developing the port led Sri Lanka in December 2017 to give a 99-year lease to the state-owned China Merchants Port Holdings (CMPH) company. This has led to the damaging regional image of “debt diplomacy” being pursued by Beijing.

Gwadar has already been mentioned in connection with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Developed as a new deepwater port on the Makran coast of Pakistan, Gwadar has caused palpable Indian concerns as one of China’s “string of pearls” in the Indo-Pacific. Gwadar’s initial phase-I development was funded by Chinese investment, with the port opening in 2007. Initially, Gwadar was operated by a Singaporean company, but in late 2015 was given to the state-owned China Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC) under a 40-year lease. Gwadar gives the Chinese navy another future berthing place in Pakistan, alongside its traditional use of Karachi.

Djibouti is of particular significance as being China’s first explicit overseas military base. Initially China’s deployments of anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden in 2009 were coupled with denials that it intended to set up any overseas base.³⁴ A decade later and “berthing facilities” opened up at Djibouti in September 2017, complete with the stationing of Chinese marines and live firepower drills being carried out by an ongoing Chinese garrison. China’s Ministry of National Defense argued that “the meaning of the Djibouti base for China” was that “responsibilities today have gone beyond the scale of guarding the Chinese territories.” and that “overseas military bases will provide cutting-edge support for China to guard its growing overseas interests,” concluding that “Djibouti is just the first step.”³⁵

Such basing and support facilities in the India Ocean facilitate increasing Chinese naval deployments into the Indian Ocean, deployments which are part of China’s maritime strategy, to now consider.

IV. Maritime Strategy

China's official military strategy, defined in 2015, was that "the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests."³⁶ China continues to officially stress cooperative peaceful nature of its maritime drive, the "harmonious ocean" (*hexie di haiyang*) being a recent catchphrase coined for the outcome of China's growing naval presence, and slotted alongside the other foreign policy catchphrase of "harmonious world" (*hexie shijie*).

China's maritime strategy is based on a simple premise, to develop its "sea/maritime power" (*haiquan*) capabilities.³⁷ China's hopes for establishing "maritime power" are designed to establish energy security flows in the Indian Ocean, underpin the maritime Silk Road initiative, and gain control in its (disputed) claims areas of the East and South China Seas. Hence Liu Zongyi's sense that "China's maritime power strategy" involves "maritime security, especially the protection of China's islands in East and South China Seas and China's energy and trade sea lanes."³⁸

The 2013 *Defense White Paper* outlined a "strategy to exploit, utilize and protect the seas and oceans, and build China into a maritime power."³⁹ It is no surprise to find the maritime logic of Alfred Mahan—with his geopolitical emphasis on *seapower* applications in the Pacific and Indian Oceans and on the usefulness of basing/berthing facilities—gaining popularity in Chinese strategic thinking. Such "naval nationalism" has involved public sentiment as well as government utilization.⁴⁰ The 2015 *Military Strategy White Paper* argued that "the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans" and for China "building itself into a maritime power."⁴¹ This maritime drive has been directed at the highest level from Xi Jinping. In 2013, he pinpointed the need to "'strategically manage the sea' [*jinglue haiyang*], and continually do more to promote China's efforts to become a maritime power."⁴² Xi went on to argue in 2017 that "a strong navy [...] is a pivot for building the nation into a 'great maritime power' [*haiyang qiangguo*]."⁴³

China's maritime policy is based on a drive for a *blue water* navy, with forward projection into the South China Sea, penetration of the "island chains" in the Pacific, and development of a "two-ocean" navy operating not just in the Pacific Ocean, but also in the Indian Ocean.⁴⁴ This was encompassed in the 2013 PLA *Science of Military Strategy* sense of a Chinese "arc-shaped strategic zone that covers the Western Pacific Ocean and Northern Indian Ocean."⁴⁵

4.1 Blue Water Navy

A blue water navy is one that operates on the oceans. Chinese expectations are high that "the Chinese navy must grow into a blue-water navy" since "China is growing into a global power and should have a navy that fits its status."⁴⁶ Consequently, Chinese naval strategy has moved from a "near-coast defense" (*jinnan fangyu*) strategy prior to the mid-1980s to the "near-seas active defense" (*jinhai juju fangyu*) after

the mid-1980s, and then to the advancement of a “far-seas operations” (*yuanhai zuozhan*) strategy by the mid-2000s.⁴⁷ The far seas are in effect the Indo-Pacific stretches of the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean, those two waters being the arena for “China’s expanding maritime ambitions.”⁴⁸ These are on top of China’s naval drive to establish its “core interest” (*hexin liyi*) claims over the South China Sea.⁴⁹

In terms of assets, China’s maritime power projection is being driven through aircraft carrier acquisition and construction. China obtained the hulk of the former ex-Soviet period aircraft carrier the *Varyag* in 1998, before going on to re-commission it as the *Liaoning* in September 2012, with the carrier being judged as battle ready in November 2016. What is of significance is its deployment, accompanied by supporting warships and tanker ships, as a carrier battle group into the South China Sea and the West Pacific in 2017 and 2018.

Other assets are also coming on line for China’s “far sea” deployments. Three (maybe four) indigenous aircraft carriers are being built, of increasing size. The first of the indigenous new Type 001A (*Shandong*) indigenous aircraft carrier conducted various sea trials through 2018, with induction envisaged for 2019. Construction of the Type 002 aircraft carrier (with rumors of a second one of this type) has already begun in 2017, with launch expected in 2020, and active service by 2023. Indeed, the first steel was cut for the Type 003 nuclear-powered aircraft carrier in December 2017. The new Type 055 guided missile class of destroyers, launched in 2017 and on display at China’s Navy Review in April 2019, are earmarked for operation in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, in their own right and as part of aircraft carrier battle groups. China’s technology drive is evident in its successful testing at sea of the world’s most powerful naval gun, an electromagnetic (rather than gunpowder) railgun with 124-mile range in January 2019, the first nation to achieve this.

Not only are China’s maritime forces getting more sophisticated and more powerful, the successful and ever accelerating construction program during the 2010s has led to significant numeric advances.⁵⁰ Figures from 2018 spanned (a) the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) with 300 surface ships; (b) the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) with 225 offshore armed vessels including the *Zhaotou*-class cutters which are the world’s largest coast guard vessels and displace more than most modern naval destroyers; and (c) the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM). The PAFMM and CCG are able to help exert Chinese control in the South China Sea, leaving the Chinese navy able to deploy more widely into the Indian and Pacific Oceans (through the “island chains”) under its “two-oceans” strategy. This is not a comparative exercise, but although the U.S. main fleet of 285 ships has been overtaken by China’s 300, the U.S. maintains a significant lead in aircraft carriers, 11 at present, which generates the increasing tempo of Chinese aircraft carrier construction.

This growing depth was evident in the naval review held by Xi Jinping in the South China Sea waters off Hainan in April 2018, which featured 48 warships, 76 aircraft and more than 10,000 personnel—the biggest naval parade since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.⁵¹ The naval review held in April 2019, again reviewed by Xi Jinping, featured 36 warships. It was judged by the Chinese

media as a “show of the PLA Navy’s magnificent development over the past years,” including the new Type 055 destroyer the Nanchang, the largest surface vessel other than an aircraft carrier ever built in Asia, as “a new icon” representing China’s “high seas” capabilities.⁵² The official state outlet *Xinhua* ran an article on April 23, 2019, titled “Strong Chinese navy a blessing for world peace,” but such a development was as likely to worry China’s maritime neighbors.

4.2 Island Chains

Chinese strategists are concerned with two island chains constricting China. One is the “first island chain” (*diyi daolian*) running from Japan through the Ryukyus, Taiwan and the Philippines. The “second island chain” (*di'er daolian*) runs down from Japan to the Northern Marianas and Guam.⁵³ The Chinese state media has been explicit on this maritime strategy, whereby “the Chinese navy has fulfilled its long-held dream of breaking through the ‘first island chain blockade,’ and its vessels have gained access to the Pacific Ocean through various waterways,” leaving a situation in which “the Chinese navy has the capability to cut the first island chain into several pieces.”⁵⁴ Benefits of this strategy are clear in China: “obviously, to break through ‘the first chain’ [...] would mean that the effective security boundary of China really pushed to the deep-sea areas of the western Pacific.”⁵⁵ Penetrating the first island chain means pushing past Taiwan or Japan.

Naval projection around Taiwan has become routine. The *Liaoning* aircraft carrier, accompanied by five other vessels, went through the Bashi Channel separating Taiwan and the Philippines in July 2017 to conduct training exercises east of Taiwan, and again in April 2018. Chinese airpower is also extending its area of operation. Aircraft exercises around both sides of Taiwan conducted in December 2017 and April 2018 were described in the Chinese media as “routine breaking [of] the ‘first island chain.’”⁵⁶ PRC pressure on Taiwan continued to mount throughout 2018 and 2019, with Taiwan frantically trying to nestle under the U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) umbrella. Any Chinese reincorporation of Taiwan would bring Beijing immediate geopolitical advantages accruing from the deep waters along Taiwan’s east coast.

Japan is also particularly concerned about China, where China’s strategy includes regular naval deployments since 2013 through the Miyako Strait that cuts through the Ryukyu chain.⁵⁷ In such a vein, the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier, accompanied by five other vessels, went through the Miyako Strait in January 2017 to carry out training exercises in the Western Pacific. Similarly, China deployed six Xian H-6K long-range heavy bombers through the Miyako Strait in July 2017, telling Japan it should get used to this as an ongoing routine. The deployment of the *Liaoning* aircraft carrier battle group into the Western Pacific in April 2018 was made for specific “confrontation exercises” according to China’s Ministry of Defense.⁵⁸ Confrontation against who was left unstated, but the implicit targets were U.S. and Japan.

It is worth noting that in 2003, for example, in their article published in *Guafang Bao*, Jiang Hong and Wei Yuejiang depicted the first island-chain (normally thought

of as stretching from Japan to Sumatra) as bending around all the way to Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean.⁵⁹ This points to China's "two-ocean strategy."

4.3 Two-Oceans

The final development in Chinese military strategy has been its shift into a "two-ocean" (*liang ge haiyang*) strategy, of operating not just through the first and second "island chains" of the Pacific, but also of deploying into the Indian Ocean.⁶⁰ India is increasingly sensitive to this Chinese presence in what India considers to be its own strategic backyard and to a degree "India's Ocean."⁶¹ For India, China's growing maritime presence in the Indian Ocean creates maritime encirclement to match land encirclement of India.

Such naval force posture brought Chinese naval operations into the eastern and then western quadrants of the Indian Ocean on an unprecedented scale in 2017. It was striking that in February 2017 there were 11 Chinese warships simultaneously operating in the Indian Ocean—in the shape of the earlier mentioned flotilla drilling in the East Indian Ocean, the newly arrived anti-piracy escort force of three warships patrolling the Gulf of Aden, and its preceding anti-piracy escort group being on port call to Cape Town on its way back to China.

In the eastern quadrant of the Indian Ocean, February 2017 witnessed the Chinese cruise missile destroyers *Haikou* and *Changsha* conducting live-fire anti-piracy and combat drills to test combat readiness. Rising numbers of sightings of Chinese surface ships and submarines in the eastern quadrant of the Indian Ocean were particularly picked up in India during summer 2017, a sensitive period of land confrontation at Doklam.⁶² This Chinese presence included Chinese surveillance vessels dispatched to monitor the trilateral *Malabar* exercise being carried out in the Bay of Bengal between the Indian, Japanese and U.S. navies. In the western quadrant, another first for Chinese deployment capability was in August 2017 when a Chinese naval formation consisting of the destroyer *Changchun*, guided-missile frigate *Jingzhou* and the supply vessel *Chaohu* conducted a live-fire drill in the waters of the western Indian Ocean. The reason given for the unprecedented live-fire drill was to test carrying out strikes against "enemy" surface ships.⁶³ The enemy was not specified, but the obvious rival in China's sights was the Indian navy, which was why the *South China Morning Post* described the drill as "a warning shot to India."⁶⁴ By August 2018, a total of 14 Chinese navy ships were operating simultaneously in the Indian Ocean.

V. Conclusions

The article started by describing China's strategy as seeking to establish control of the South China Sea mostly enclosed within its 9-dash claims and of the East China Sea, and from there penetration into the Western Pacific and Indian Oceans. China has achieved substantive success in this drive for a two-seas control followed

by a strong two-ocean presence and consequent influence. However, there are some problems that China is now facing related to its Indo-Pacific drive.

Firstly, China's drive for seapower has been underpinned by its economic growth, but as its economy slows and is increasingly faced with an aging population, economic constraints loom large. Hence Erickson's warning that "the true long-term cost of sustaining top-tier sea power tends to eventually outpace economic growth by a substantial margin. For all its rapid rise at sea thus far, China is unlikely to avoid such challenge."⁶⁵

Secondly, China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative has lost some of its initial shine, with a degree of disenchantment apparent around the Indo-Pacific where "debt distress" has become a rising issue in 2018. Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, the Maldives and Djibouti fall into significant to high risk debt trap categories.⁶⁶ China risks being tarnished with the "debt diplomacy" label, already seen with Hambantota. A degree of local backlash has emerged over the MSR, with Malaysia canceling two Chinese-funded MSR infrastructure projects, a \$20 billion East Coast Rail Link and two energy pipelines worth \$2.3 billion, in August 2018, and Myanmar seeking to reduce the scale of a China-led special economic zone project in the western state of Rakhine.⁶⁷ Meanwhile domestic criticism of China over-extending itself (*dasabi* "throwing money around") in doubtful MSR projects has been rising in China.⁶⁸

Thirdly, China's Indo-Pacific push has triggered widespread balancing against it. Since late 2016 and late 2017, Japan and the U.S., respectively, have led the way with their call for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP), followed by the French call in 2018 for a "Indo-Pacific axis" (*l'axe Indo-Pacifique*) between China-concerned democracies in the region. China's state media has made a particular point of criticizing French, Indian, Japanese and U.S. espousal of the "Indo-Pacific" as being orchestrated against China.⁶⁹ Moreover U.S. deployments to both the South China Sea (as did Japan, France and the UK) and the Taiwan Straits (as did France) accelerated during 2018 and 2019.

This reflects security dilemma problems in which China's growing presence across the Indo-Pacific is triggering other Indo-Pacific actors to cooperate together to constrain China, and is alienating local opinion.⁷⁰ China's push into the Western Pacific generates security worries for Australia, Japan and, above all, for the U.S.⁷¹ In turn, China's militarization program in the South China Sea is of growing concern to Australia, France, India, Japan and the U.S. Finally, China's push into and across the Indian Ocean raises security concerns for Australia, Japan and the U.S. and, above all, India. The strategic geometry has gone against China. Beijing hopes to peel Australia, Japan and especially India away from U.S.-led Indo-Pacific constraint of China.⁷² However, convergent simultaneous concerns have led to the re-emergence in late 2017 of the "Quad" format between the U.S., Japan, Australia and India, complete with Indo-Pacific rhetoric and specific calls for observance of the rule of law in the South China Sea. China has denounced such a quadrilateral development.⁷³ The Quad political formation is also complemented by growing military cooperation in the India-Japan-U.S. (IJUS) and Australia-Japan-U.S. (AJUS) trilaterals.

China's official view on the "Indo-Pacific strategy" being pursued by U.S., Japan, India and Australia has been that it was a "headline grabbing idea," but "like the sea foam in the Pacific or Indian Ocean [...] soon will dissipate."⁷⁴ Unfortunately for China, general balancing dictates, along the lines outlined at the start of this article in Stephen Walt's *Balance of Threat* theory, are increasingly operating in the region to China's detriment. Here China's "aggregate [economic] power" and "offensive [military] capabilities" when combined with "[perceived] offensive intentions" and "geographic proximity" precisely explain the widespread balancing against China in the Indo-Pacific. It is a fact that China's aggregate economic power and military capabilities (particularly in terms of its naval program) continue to expand, reducing the U.S. relative economic and military advantage, overtaking Japan economically and militarily, and increasing China's military superiority over India. A rising China may of course continue to emphasize its benign intentions and the win-win nature of its growing presence.⁷⁵ However, a lack of transparency feeds the widespread perception that China has offensive intentions. This is particularly acute among China's immediate neighbors, where China's geographic proximity is all the more worrying. This was well illustrated during Spring 2019 in the South China Sea, when Chinese pressure on the Philippine holding of Pag-asa/Thitu in the Paracels backfired and brought a tilt by Manila toward closer security cooperation with the U.S.

China's success in power projection is consequently simultaneously the source of constraint by concerned Indo-Pacific powers. David Kang argues that China's rise is likely to generate a return to older Sino-centric hierarchy, rather than Western balancing models.⁷⁶ However, empirically it is clear that the more China pushes out across the Indo-Pacific, the more it is faced with various balancing geo-economic and geopolitical counter responses from other neighboring Indo-Pacific powers. Mearsheimer's words were prophetic at the start of the decade, arguing in terms of IR realism logic, that "most of China's neighbors, to include India, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, [...] Vietnam—and Australia—will join with the United States to contain China's power."⁷⁷ This was an Indo-Pacific listing.

Two qualifications are worth pointing out. Firstly, balancing operates on a spectrum, where strict overt explicit containment of China is applicable for understanding U.S. strategy, but where delicate implicit constraint of China is better applicable for understanding Indian strategy. Moreover, balancing is to some degree combined with some degree of economic engagement (especially noticeable in Southeast Asia⁷⁸ with ASEAN and with Indonesia)—a combination which represents hedging, of hoping for the best through economic engagement but preparing for the worst through security balancing. Nevertheless, even those economic engagers with China are also taking prudent security precautions against China. Various Indo-Pacific countries remain reluctant to rely on China's statement of benign intentions, and remain ready to insure against a future Chinese power push in the future by developing various institutional and military constraints on China, and thereby not cede the direction of the region to China. In short, China's power projection success remains subject to security dilemma dynamics continuing to generate balance of threat calculations against China responses. From the calculation comes the

response, as fear and distrust of Chinese motives, particularly with regard to the South China Sea, lead to greater explicit and implicit counterbalancing moves around China in the Indo-Pacific.⁷⁹ In the Indo-Pacific, China will probably stay uncomfortably exposed by its very success.

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