

***How is China expanding its Sea Power?  
Exploring the Improvements and Prospects Regarding  
China's Maritime Strategy***

Master Thesis

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING SEA POWER</b>	<b>6</b>
Section 1. Theoretical Framework	6
Defining Sea Power	6
Two Opposing Visions to Sea power	7
Linking Mahan and China's Approach Towards Sea Power	8
What is a Blue Water Navy?	11
Deterrence	12
The Maritime Silk Road Initiative and the String of Pearls	13
Section 2. Methodology	14
Indicators	16
Research Objectives and Data Limitations	17
<b>CHAPTER 2: CONTROLLING THE ADJACENT SEAS</b>	<b>19</b>
Introduction	19
Understanding the roots of China's quest to control its near seas	19
Assessment of China's advancements in its adjacent seas	23
Conventional forces and the prospects of limited-scale attacks	27
Conclusion	30
<b>CHAPTER 3: THE MARITIME SILK ROAD INITIATIVE AND THE STRING OF PEARLS THEORY</b>	<b>32</b>
Introduction	32
China's interests in the IOR and the acquisition of its first overseas bases	33
The Maritime Silk Road Initiative and the String of Pearls Theory	35
Conclusion	39
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>42</b>

## Abbreviations

A2/AD	Anti-Access/Area Denial
ADIZ	Air Defense Identification Zone
ASBM	Anti-Ship Ballistic Missile
ASCM	Anti-Ship Cruise Missile
BMS	Ballistic Missile Submarine
CCG	China Coast Guard
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
EMALS	Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System
FONOP	Freedom of Navigation Operation
IOR	Indian Ocean Region
MOOTW	Military Operations Other Than War
MSRI	Maritime Silk Road Initiative
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
SSN	Nuclear-Powered Attack Submarine
STOVAR	Short Take-Off But Arrested Recovery

## Introduction

In October 2006, the USS Kitty Hawk, an American aircraft carrier was conducting joint exercises with its escort and the Japanese navy in the East China Sea when a Chinese submarine surfaced five miles from them without having been preliminarily detected. The incident showed how the most symbolic battle horse of Washington's foreign policy was not that invulnerable as many American experts might have thought (Russell, 2017). Such maneuver was a clear message addressed to the United States to call into question Washington's dominance over the seas. This was the prelude of a new Chinese maritime strategy. In recent years, China's economy has only grown, and the annual GDP growth has consistently been above 6% (World Bank, 2018). China's economy has now expanded on a global level, but this growth has brought a set of new challenges that could threaten both China's investments and interests abroad. China's approach towards the global order seems to be shaped by a rather realist appraisal of interstate relations and this could explain why despite both its strong economic and military power, China still feels insecure. Kaufman (2010) has argued that China's history and the memory of the Century of Humiliation influences how Beijing's decision-makers perceive the international order. Indeed, such assessment towards the international stage might have shaped China's strategic thinking, and this may explain why China is developing different means to hedge against what is seen among Chinese decision-makers as a U.S led containment of China. China's perception of its periphery and the different objectives that Chinese decision-makers are trying to fulfill could be put parallel to the rising influence of the principles put forward by Alfred Mahan, an American naval strategist from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century among China's maritime strategy (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2005).

Mahan analyzed Great Britain's history, and he concluded that sea power was the main enabler for a country to become a world power. As such he developed his own maritime thought and used his different personal relationships to advocated his ideas among Washington decision-makers to transform his country into a great power. Mahan argued the United States had to develop its sea power in order to become a great power. He stressed his country had to take an active approach to improve the United States geostrategic posturing within its periphery as well as to acquire overseas bases for both commercial and military uses. The Mahanian principles followed by late 19<sup>th</sup> century America have enabled Washington to become a superpower, and this seems to have inspired Chinese strategist. Mahan tenets could be a good framework to implement Xi Jinping's desire for national rejuvenation. By examining Mahan's influence over China's current maritime strategy, this thesis will aim at giving a comprehensive analysis of different issues that have often

been analyzed separately within the International Relations discipline regarding China's foreign policy. Indeed, this thesis will show how issues related to the East and South China Seas, China's naval development, the acquisition of overseas bases as well as the Maritime Silk Road are for instance intertwined problematics that can be related to China's decision-makers will to transform their country into a great sea power as advocated by Mahan. Understanding how China's develops its sea power is important as China's rather unilateral and offensive stance could affect the security dynamics of the Asia-Pacific which is the wherein the global economic center of gravity has shifted (Patalano, 2013). On the other hand, the different infrastructural and port projects China's in conducting around the world, and specifically in the Indian Oceanic Region (IOR) could enable China to improve its political influence, its economy as well as its military presence in this strategic region of the world, thus increasingly refashioning the political order of the Asian continent.

This thesis is structured into three main chapters. Chapter 1 will discuss key debates in the field and sets the theoretical framework that will be used to guide this research. The concept of "sea power" and its key constituents will be explored in order to assess what characteristics and enablers better correspond to China's current naval development. Thereafter, Mahan's sea power principles will be explained and associated to China's current maritime strategy. Other theories such as conventional military deterrence and the diplomacy of the red lines, will be explained as these theories will be used to better illustrate the tactics used by China to improve its sea power. Chapter 1 will end by discussing the methodology and the operationalization chosen to conduct this research. Chapter 2 will discuss China's motives and methods to assert its control on its adjacent seas. Furthermore, an assessment of the military balance of the region will be done to understand how conventional deterrence affects both power dynamics and countries' resolve to counter Chinese assertiveness in the East and South China Seas. Chapter 3 will enquire China's prospects of acquiring new overseas bases. The Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) and the String of Pearls theory will be explored for the purpose of evaluating whether or not infrastructural and economic Chinese led-projects have created spill over political leverage for China to acquire new military bases.

## Chapter 1: Understanding Sea Power

### Section 1 Theoretical Framework

#### *Defining Sea Power*

Scholars and strategists in defense studies coined the term “sea power” and frequently reference term in the context of describing a nation’s naval presence and capabilities. However, the liberal use of “sea power” to cover different naval events has undermined the definition of the term (Till, 2010). Even Mahan, who was the author that contributed the most to the spread of the concept, never really outlined the characteristics of sea power. However, a strong focus has been dedicated regarding the notion of power within the international relations discipline, and this may help better understanding what the concept of sea power entails. According to Till (2010) “power” is divided into two different components, the inputs, and the outputs. Sea power as an input would correspond to the instruments, the material components that allow states to make use of the sea. This includes such things as having a maritime industry and a military-complex that will allow the country in question to build ships and vessels for its commercial fleet, its navy as well as its maritime law enforcement agencies. On the other hand, sea power as an output refers to the objectives, the intentions and consequent actions one actor is willing to conduct at or from the sea. Sea power is, however, a graduated concept, and it can differ significantly around the world. A strong sea power will rely on the good combination of one's civil and military capabilities (inputs) and the rate of success regarding the tasks assigned to them (outputs), but in reality, as it will later be discussed, the objectives and characteristics of navies around the world can strongly differ depending on their governments assessments vis-à-vis the global order.

Throughout history, and specifically during the modern times, acquiring a strong sea power relied on four factors - maritime trade, maritime resources, naval strength, and maritime supremacy - that would mutually reinforce each other (Gough, 1988). At that time the maritime trade was the '*raison d'être*' of the navies, the latter were set to protect and enhance the commercial and strategic prospects of their country to achieve maritime supremacy. According to Harding (2002), sea power relies on how a country copes with the following concerns: navy, domestic politics, maritime

geography, resources, maritime economy, and technology. The scope of this research is driven by the fact that China's current maritime strategy seems to be giving great importance to the aforementioned features. According to Till (2010) humans took the seas for different reasons that he describes as the "four historic attributes of the sea" which characterize the sea as a resource, a medium of transportation and exchange, a medium for information and the spread of ideas, and as a medium for dominion (p. 23). He argues these sea features can translate into either cooperative or more conflictual patterns amongst countries that make or want to make use of the seas. For instance, the prospect of oil resources that are to be found in seabeds is a good example of how 'sea attributes' can lead to either cooperation, competition or conflict. Although advocates of globalization argue that economic interdependence renders cooperation more likely than conflict or competition, it is worth noting that this norm is not universally accepted. Indeed, the perception of states regarding global order varies depending on each country's history, politics, economic interests or security assessments regarding international security. Depending on this, countries will develop their sea power accordingly.

### ***Two Opposing Visions to Sea power***

The 21<sup>st</sup>-century naval developments will largely depend on how countries discern and engage with globalization. Till (2010) has developed a classification in which he categorizes and provides the key features of the two current main naval approaches around the world. At one end of this spectrum are the post-modernists navies. This approach embodies the visions of post-modernist states which perceive globalization as a positive sum game. Realist assessments towards the international system less drive Post-modernist countries which believe globalization is a common ground for cooperation and inclusion (Ghiselli, 2015). However, what happens far away can have adverse consequences as globalization increases interdependencies. Therefore, post-modernist navies will adopt a forward-leaning posture to prevent and respond to emerging threats that might disrupt the 'system'. Post-modern navies will, as a result, support multilateral institutions and mechanisms that contribute to both settling conflicts and preventing threats to the global order (Till, 2010). Post-modernists are less driven by power politics, and thus will not focus on developing their naval capabilities for high-intensity contingencies or conventional war scenarios. They will rather develop their naval capabilities around specific tasks as they assume there is no need to assemble a navy aimed at responding to the full spectrum of threats. Therefore, their navies will be complementary to the ones of other countries, and their main tasks will evolve around low-intensity issues such as piracy, terrorism and military operations other than war (MOOTWs). Regarding their

area of work, they will mostly operate near coastal waters rather than on deep waters as in their view most of the issues regarding maritime security are located near the waterfront (Yetkin, 2013). Furthermore, they would establish sea control, that is "the grand enabler that allows the sea to be used for whatever purpose that will serve the interests of the power that controls it" to deploy boots on the ground for expeditionary operations, or what is also known as liberal interventions (Till, 2010, p. 7). In such case, vessels would mainly provide a supportive role to the forces operating on the ground by providing air cover, air defense systems as well as the logistics needed for the deployment of troops. The key features of postmodern navies are the specialization of naval forces for joint operations and an open approach towards the defense industry.

On the other part of the spectrum, modern navies evolve and fulfill tasks with more traditional approaches towards the sea. Their countries tend to be more skeptical vis-à-vis globalization and its continuity. Indeed, modernist states argue the current global order should not be taken as granted, and that in case the latter might be disrupted, countries should be prepared to compete against each other to survive. According to Hoslag (2010), modernist states are guided by a greater realist appraisal of international relations, and they tend to adopt mercantilist policies regarding the global economy. They tend to have a zero-sum game vision of the international system, and this is the reason why they develop navies able to address the full spectrum of threats. They are likely to structure their navies according to the capabilities of others to have a better balance of power against symmetrical competitors in high-intensity warfare scenarios (Yetkin, 2013). Modern navies are primarily aimed at defending the interests of their states rather than on defending the international system itself. Keeping their political independence is critical for them, and this explains why they prefer using bilateral agreements instead of multilateral mechanisms, they are also expected "to exhibit lower levels of effective compliance with international maritime conventions" (Till, 2010, p. 16). Moreover, modern navies will work on improving their ability to ensure sea control in high-intensity scenarios at any time. One of its main tasks will revolve around improving and keeping a credible nuclear deterrence. The key features of modern navies evolve around acquiring a complete range of naval capabilities and on an indigenous defense industry (Till, 2010).

### ***Linking Mahan and China's Approach Towards Sea Power***

The two different naval categories described above are archetypes. Navies around the world will never strictly correspond to one or the other category, and they will mostly combine features of

both naval models. It is certainly true that China's navy can be used to fulfill tasks generally attributed to post-modern navies as Hirono and Xu (2013) argue, an example being human relief. However, points outlined in Chinese white papers, the nature of recently acquired military capabilities, and China's assertive stance in both the East and South China Seas seem to indicate that its navy follows a modernist approach regarding sea power that is inspired by Mahan writings (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2005). Several factors can state this point of view. China is sometimes described as a mercantilist state, as its different economic and monetary policies have been designed to advance its economy at the expense of international trade rules (Atkinson, Cory & Ezell, 2017). Although it would be misleading to assert China perceives the global economy as a zero-sum game, it seems realist assessments towards the international system rather drive China's decision-makers political actions. In July 2016, China rejected the ruling from the Permanent Court of Arbitration that established China's claims in the South China Sea had no legal basis (Reuters Staff, 2015). Moreover, regarding a vast array of issues, China prioritizes either working alone or via bilateral agreements to keep its political leverage and strategic independence. For instance, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) first deployment beyond regional waters for counter-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden was carried out on individual bases, and cooperation with other navies present in the region was relatively low. Furthermore, China's military build-up largely relies on its defense industry, and the capacities Beijing is acquiring offers a complete ability to respond to the full spectrum of threats (Bitzinger, 2017). In light of the mentioned factors, it seems China's navy correspond to a greater extent to a modern rather than a post-modern navy.

In the last decade, Mahan ideas have gained momentum amongst Chinese strategists. According to Holmes and Yoshihara (2005), during a Chinese conference in 2004 on maritime security held in Beijing, “scholar after scholar quoted Mahan” (p. 25). Mahan's vision of international trade was rather conceived as a zero-sum game in which mercantilist approaches prevailed. He thought acquiring a strong navy was the best enabler to defend one country's trade and interests against rival nations. The cornerstone of its maritime thought evolved around three elements: a strong navy, a merchant marine, and overseas bases. He believed the combination of these different elements would lead up to a virtuous circle, thus leveraging global opportunities for the concerned country. On the one hand, the navy would protect one's country economic interests and important sea lines of communication (SLOCs), overseas bases would improve the navy's room for maneuver and further its country strategic expansion while revenues from trade would provide the economic means to build and sustain the navy. He advocated such sea power had to enable his country, the United States, to prevail against other nations in both peace and war times. Indeed, Mahan ideas

where regrouped under different essays which advocated that if the United States were willing to acquire a great power status, it would have to develop its sea power. Since then Mahan principles have been theorized and used by different nations such as Germany and now China. However, these expected payoffs would never take place if a country's navy and merchant ships could not deploy without the threats of blockades or attacks on their periphery. Having the means to control important choke points such as straits, canals and SLOCs is critical to allow a country to conduct such a strategy (Gough, 1988).

Mahan was willing to transform his country, the United States into a global power and he used his different political relations, in particular, with Theodore Roosevelt, to promote his maritime thought amongst 19<sup>th</sup> century Washington decision-makers. Mahan advocated that Washington had to control the approaches to the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico if the country was willing to realize its full political and economic potential. At that time, the United States was increasing its primacy on the American continent – it had acquired new footholds in Cuba and Puerto Rico after the wars against Spain – but European powers were still involved in the region. Washington saw in the European powers' blockade of Venezuela a strategic move directed at reinforcing their influence on regional affairs that could even lead to the installation of European military bases in the region. On a geostrategic level, such a presence was seen as a threat to Washington's ambitions. Indeed, the region was home of the Panama isthmus – that would later become a canal – which was critical for the U.S economy. This isthmus improved trade between the two coasts of the United States and with the South American and Asian continents. The United States had assembled a competent navy that could concentrate forces more easily than Europeans, and this allowed Washington to use its naval might to deter Europeans from further actions (Homes and Yoshihara, 2005). The Roosevelt corollary – Theodore Roosevelt was largely influenced by Mahan – would later impede European nations using debt collections as a means to intervene in the affairs of the continent (Karsten, 1971). European navies left the region, allowing Washington to shape the American continent's order according to its interest. However, unlike the United States, China has been surrounded by stronger regional competitors, and the country does not enjoy direct access to oceanic waters (Vego, 2004).

Within the literature, the most frequent advanced explanatory factors regarding China's naval development either evolve around the Taiwan issue, the quest of regional hegemony or a 'Mahanian turn' (Ghisseli, 2015). These different arguments all have diverging assessments regarding the scope of Beijing's political ambition and the consequent naval strategy that supports it. According to

Ghisseli (2015) however, the 'Mahanian turn'- which is the most ambitious project - seems to be the most accurate argument underpinning China's current maritime strategy. He argues that such problematics as the reunification with Taiwan and the quest for regional dominance should rather be seen as prior issues Beijing seeks to resolve to further its Mahanian project. In this view, which is adopted in this thesis, it is argued that Chinese decision-makers perceive the East and South China Seas in similar ways to how Mahan viewed the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. Mahan stressed a navy had to be able to enforce sea control to cope with geographic, commercial and military issues. He was an advocate of leaning forward actions and stated, "communications must be assured, either by overwhelming control of the sea, making as it were its own territory or else, by a well-knit line of posts properly spaced from the home country (Mahan, 1911, p. 344). In light of the above, the militarization of artificial islands and China's quest to acquire new military bases seem to be inspired by Mahan ideas. As Geoffrey Till (2010) mentioned in his book *Sea power: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, countries that embrace Mahanian approaches towards their naval strategy will have a "blue water tendency" (p. 51). This means such countries will consider acquiring large naval forces with full-spectrum capabilities able to ensure sea control on a global level as the best way to further their maritime strategy.

### ***What is a Blue Water Navy?***

Navies can be depicted in three different colors: brown, green, and blue, depending on their ability to conduct operations in determined geographic areas. These colors "denote generally the proximity of land" (Rubel, 2010, p. 44). Brown refers to either fluvial or coastal environments, green to littoral zones, and blue to the oceans. More precisely, a blue water navy is a navy that is 'able to "operate at an acceptable degree of risk in water of each colour" (Rubel, 2010, p. 45). On an operational level, this implies that a blue water navy can project power and conduct operations on extended lines across deep oceans over a sustained period. Blue water capabilities are thus a matter of degree, and their power projection reach can range from a regional to a global level (Todd and Lindberg, 1996). In this research, the blue water navy concept will be referred to as a navy's ability to project power on a global level.

Although war is rarely desired, blue-water navies are characterized by their ability to respond to the full spectrum of threats regardless of the geographic location. Countries that are willing to acquire blue-water capabilities need to have the appropriate hardware to respond to threats that could originate from the air, the surface, the sub-surface and the cyber-space. Being able to operate freely

and safely is necessary if a navy aims to project power (Gough, 1988). Countries undertaking such a project must fix other shortcomings related to geography, including overseas bases, logistics, specific maritime environments, if they want to prevail during a crisis or war scenarios and this might be the reason why China might be trying to extend its strategic depth eastwards by building and militarizing artificial islands. However, deterrence is often more important than preparation for war itself, and naval might is in most of the cases used for this purpose rather than for attacking an enemy. As it will be explained in the next section, shows of forces and military build-up are often directed at convincing a rival that its navy would be defeated in case of war, or at least that the costs of resisting or attacking would have disastrous consequences for him. According to Holmes (2012) these are the different elements China needs to improve on if it is willing to acquire blue water capabilities: controlling the near seas, logistics, acquiring overseas bases, gaining more experience at sea, and finally taking a more offensive posture, which means adopting a mindset that focuses on matters beyond its near seas.

### *Deterrence*

To assess Beijing's control over its adjacent seas, this thesis will draw on conventional deterrence theory. This theory will serve as a reading grid to further analyze whether or not China's different tactics are improving its balance of power in the region while it may also undermine any overt reaction from other countries. Deterrence as a whole is defined by "the use of threats by one actor to dissuade another actor from initiating some form of action" (Andersson, 2015, p. 474). Deterrence can be achieved through two kinds of tactics: preventing one actor carrying out determined actions or compelling him to adopt specific behaviors. The failure of deterrence is relatively easy to measure, and it will be determined as soon as war erupts. Deterrence is a phenomenon that requires at least two actors. The defender, which tries preventing the other actor of acting, and the aggressor who will either comply with the defender's conditions and terms or confront him (Tertrais, 2016). Conventional deterrence is composed of three different elements: technical ability, political will, and communication. The technical ability relates to the possession of military might that in theory gives credibility to the defender's threats. Political will describes the determination officials showcase in making use of force to defend specific interests. The third and last element is communication, it enables to improve the credibility of the two latter factors, and deterrence as a whole (Stone, 2012).

Good communication is paramount for building an effective deterrence with regards to whom one is aiming to deter. Military parades and shows of forces can nurture the credibility of a defender's deterrence. Indeed, one's technical ability needs to be regularly displayed to show the targeted countries it possesses a credible military might and the political will to make use of force to defend its interests. When it comes to technical ability, the general military balance should be relativized. As Stone (2012) puts it, deterrence can fail if one actor believes he can make a quick win against his opponent. The important point relies on one's ability to deploy larger forces and striking power on the shorter space of time as possible (Rhodes, 2000). Reducing an adversary's room of maneuver is therefore not only valuable to undermine such outcomes but also to improve one's own deterrent power. However conventional deterrence does not bring the same level of consensus as nuclear deterrence does. This is mainly because the destructiveness arising from conventional weapons is smaller in space and time. Conventional deterrence is therefore not that homogenous and targeted countries can respond to it in different ways (Rhodes, 2000). China's development of area denial bubbles along its coasts and within contested territories, as it will later be shown, are aimed at improving Beijing's conventional deterrence in the region. Red lines diplomacy is another concept that falls within the deterrence theory. Red lines are political abstractions, and they are drawn in order to manipulate "an adversary's intent through statements for deterrence purposes, referring to the deliberate crossing of a certain threshold by an adversary, and relevant counteraction if this threshold is crossed (Tertrais, 2016, p. 6). Red lines could indeed be anything but countries all over the world agree "full-fledged military aggression against their sovereign territory would constitute crossing a red line" (Tertrais, 2016, p. 7). The diplomacy of red lines can, however, fail for various reasons. Either because the attacker is not convinced of the defender's resolve or because the attacker knows he will be able to prevent reactions from the defender if he acts below the threshold.

### ***The Maritime Silk Road Initiative and the String of Pearls***

In recent years China's growing influence in the IOR has raised a lot of concerns among both Indian and American security experts. China is involved in different infrastructural and economic projects regrouped under the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) that should boost the maritime economy of the region and enable China to find new markets for its industry. While China has stressed this project was aimed at improving the economic ties between countries from the Indian sub-continent, East Africa, and Easter China, different experts have argued geostrategic prospects rather drove the MSRI. Such assessments of China's presence in the region corresponding to the so-called String of Pearl's theory which argues the different port projects conducted and financed

by China are primarily driven at enabling China to acquire new military bases in the region for its navy (Dixon, 2014). As it will later be discussed in chapter 3, understanding the nature of the MSRI, as well as the different issues this initiative is confronted to, is the best way to acquire a juster and less frightening evaluation of China's policy in the region and the consequent security dynamics it could bring for the years to come. Based on this analysis, chapter 3 will analyze the Chinese motives and prospects regarding the acquisition of a second overseas base in the IOR.

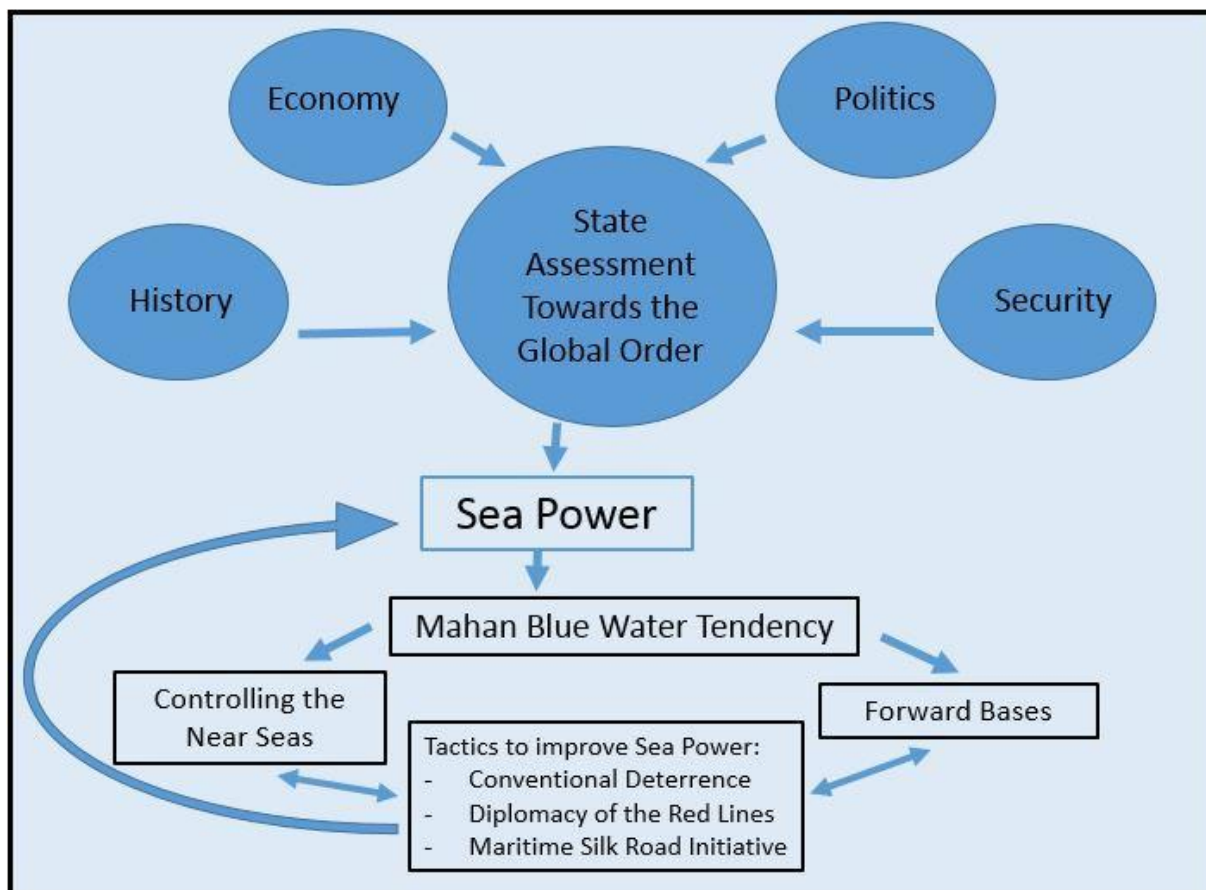
## Section 2. Methodology

This section will give an overview of the methodology and the operationalization used to examine the research question as well as of the limitations that might be encountered in the course of this process. As covered previously, Beijing's rejection of the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling which stressed the non-legal foundations of its 'historical' maritime claims in the South China Sea as well as the fact that China's naval development mainly relies on its defence industry are two factors that can allow categorizing China's naval strategy as modernist. As it will be shown throughout this research other factors as history (e.g., Century of Humiliation), energy security, the stability of the party-led regime in China, and the desire to maintain the economic growth are all components that can also shape China's modernist appraisal of the international order and its ensuing maritime strategy. China's modernist approach towards the sea seems to evolve around Mahanian principles. As Till (2010) mentioned, countries that draw their naval strategy on Mahanian precepts will tend to acquire blue water capabilities as they believe this is the best way to further their sea power and protect their sea borne interests Mahan argued that if a country was willing to realize its full political and economic potential it first had to ensure control of its peripheral environment and important maritime choke points. Acquiring a strong navy, on the one hand, was directed at ensuring local preponderance, and the acquisition of overseas bases would allow a country to further both its power projection and ability to increase its political and economic power on a global level.

The figure below illustrates the operationalization that will be used for this thesis research. If China is willing to achieve its Mahanian inspired maritime strategy successfully it will first have to control its adjacent seas, the South and East China Seas, and to acquire new overseas bases for both its navy and merchant marine. The following chapters of this thesis research will be structured according to these two problematics. Chapter 2 will analyze why and how China is increasing

control over these two seas. This chapter will examine the different methods China is using to pursue its objectives through the theoretical lens of the diplomacy of red lines and conventional deterrence and evaluate the degree of control China has been able to achieve so far over these seas. Chapter 3 will firstly analyze recent developments concerning China's first overseas base in Djibouti as this could be a step stone regarding future naval bases. Afterward, the expansion of China's political and economic interests in the IOR will be examined through the Maritime Silk Road Initiative to provide a better assessment regarding the security dynamics in the region, and the consequent military outcomes this might bring in the coming years.

Figure 1. Thesis Operationalization



### *Indicators*

The conventional deterrence of a country strongly relies on three different elements. The credibility showcased by a country's political elites to make use of the force to defend national interests and

the technical ability that would allow such determination to be carried effectively. The last and third element is communication which is the means by which the credibility of the two elements above are enhanced to produce a deterrent effect towards a targeted audience. Shows of forces or military drills can typically illustrate communication. In chapter 2 the effectiveness of China's conventional deterrence will be assessed by looking at the different indicators stated in the table shown below. On the other hand, China's red lines diplomacy will be analyzed through the use of its fishing militias and coastguards. About the last chapter of this research, the Maritime Silk Road Initiative will be looked out to analyse if, for the present time and the short time, China is leveraging new opportunities to acquire new bases for its navy.

	<b>Indicators</b>		
<b>Conventional Deterrence</b>	<u>Political will:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Statement in top officials' speeches</li> <li>● Budgets allocated to the military</li> </ul>	<u>Technical ability:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The range of ASBMs and ASCMs</li> <li>● Nature of recent military drills</li> <li>● The range of A2/AD capabilities</li> </ul>	<u>Communication:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Shows of force</li> <li>● Military drills</li> <li>● Political declarations</li> <li>● Framing in Chinese state-run medias</li> </ul>
<b>Red Line Diplomacy / Gray Zone Deterrence</b>	Fishing militias: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Tasks</li> <li>● Equipment</li> <li>● Actions</li> </ul>	Coastguards: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Tasks</li> <li>● Restructuring</li> <li>● Equipment</li> <li>● Actions</li> </ul>	
<b>Maritime Silk Road Initiative</b>	Port infrastructures: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Dual-use facilities</li> <li>● Geostrategic position</li> </ul>		

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Debt trap diplomacy</li> </ul>		
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### ***Research Objectives and Data Limitations***

Most of the research regarding China's naval strategy has often confined the role of the PLAN to a regional level or associated to confined problematics such as military nationalism or the prospects of natural resources in China adjacent seas. This research is innovative in that it will demonstrate how a set of different issues such as such as the territorial issues in the South and East China seas, the MSRI, the String of Pearls, and China's military build-up are all problematics that are linked to China's willingness to conduct a sea power grand strategy. The methodology used for this thesis is a qualitative analysis, and research will mostly be based on secondary sources containing qualitative data. Multiple sources will be used to control the accuracy and reliability of the sources. Secondary sources will mainly come from think tanks working on strategy and military security matters, CSIS, RAND Corporation, IISS - International Relations and International Security journals, naval military academies, and defense magazines. Primary sources as white papers will be used if an English version exists. Chinese English written media will also be used, as they will provide information that adequately reflects the political will of Chinese decision-makers.

A lot of research regarding China's maritime strategy, and specifically its naval developments is conducted by either American or Indian think tanks and scholars. While India's concerns with regard to China can be explained by the PLAN increasing presence in the Indian Oceanic Region (IOR) which India considers as its backyard, American concerns vis-à-vis the PLAN on the other hand seems be related to a shared "geostrategic perspective" which here correspond to the principles laid out in Mahan writings (Till, 2010, p. 332). This is important to acknowledge as such appraisal regarding China could nurture a to alarming narrative vis-à-vis China's foreign policy. On the other hand, conventional deterrence can affect an actor's resolve regarding a specific issue. However, it is difficult to gauge accurately if his compliance is just correlated to this only variable. Furthermore, the acquisition of specific military equipment does not necessarily mention the concerned government intentions and in which situations a country might use them. **Indeed**, China has often been unclear and vague concerning its defense expenditures and strategic goals, and this is another point that needs to be mentioned. This research discusses a current topic. Therefore most of the analysis and sources used have been found by following the twitter accounts of renowned experts working on China's foreign policy. In order to avoid any normative bias, this

analysis will rely on the triangulation of Chinese sources (Chinese official documents, political declarations and newspapers), empirical facts, other countries strategic analysis as well as on research provided by different experts working on maritime security.

## Chapter 2: Controlling the Adjacent Seas

### *Introduction*

In the past decades, China's economic growth has been impressive, and the quality of life of millions of Chinese citizens has improved. This has however brought many new challenges for China and the CPC. Indeed, if the current party-led regime seeks to maintain its legitimacy, keeping the economic growth will be critical. In order to maintain and strengthen its legitimacy, the CPC has been working on three different axes to reinforce its position on both a domestic and external level (Parton, 2017). Ensuring to keep China's economy growing has become vital for the party, specifically now that the Chinese economic interests have expanded on a global level. The rationale for protecting SLOCs and Chinese interests abroad have therefore gained momentum (Yahuda, 2013). On the other hand, the regime has worked on portraying itself as the only actor able to defend China's territorial integrity and national sovereignty. By using history as a “malleable instrument”, the CPC has constructed a narrative that lays the ground for enhanced public support towards the party (Parton, 2017, p. 44). Thirdly, attaining the Chinese Dream and restoring the country's great power position on the world stage is another goal that the CPC aims to achieve. This chapter will explain how China's development of both area-denial capabilities and naval forces would reinforce both the country's sea power and consequently the CPC above agenda.

### *Understanding the roots of China's quest to control its near seas*

According to a great power historical analysis, it should come to no surprise why China is willing to increase its control on its near seas. Throughout history, different countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and the USSR, have in their quest of becoming great powers, all asserted their primacy against regional competitors by controlling their near seas (Vego, 2004). Reinforcing their geostrategic position around their periphery was an intermediary step before projecting power and influence further ashore. Mahan ideas stress such path; however, unlike 19<sup>th</sup> century America, China has been surrounded by stronger competitors who have undermined its sovereignty and territorial integrity during the Century of Humiliation. This era still shapes China's strategic thinking, even though most of the countries that had undermined China's sovereignty throughout that era are not anymore perceived as threats, the American presence in the region and

its specific relation with Japan are viewed in Beijing as an obstacle to China's revival (van der Putten, 2017). According to van der Putten (2017), Beijing will not feel reassured about its security and political expansion as far as it will not be able to increase its confidence in countering and deterring any U.S lead containment against China.

Chinese concerns towards its maritime environment are however not new, and they can be traced back to the eighties during the time that Liu Huaqing was the commander of the PLAN. The former was often portrayed as the Chinese Mahan and the father of the modern PLAN as he supported the idea that China should think beyond its coastal waters (Murphy & Yoshihara, 2015). He developed the island chains theory that evolved around three steps that should guide China's naval strategy to acquire blue water capabilities that would ultimately enable the country to compete against the American mastery of the seas. The first step consisted on acquiring the capabilities to operate and gain superiority within the first island chain, which stretches south of the Japanese archipelago passing south through Taiwan and the east coasts of the Philippines archipelago till the coast of Borneo. The second step would consist of projecting power towards the second island chain, which stretches from the Bonin Islands to the Marshall Islands. In the last step, the PLAN should have had acquired blue water capabilities evolving around carrier battle groups able to project power on a global level by 2050 (Rubel, 2010). Liu acknowledged his theory could not be implemented during his lifetime as Deng Xiaoping's policies prioritized the development of a low-profile approach that should enable China to develop itself. On the other hand, China had neither the industrial nor the financial resources to pursue such a project. China today as the industrial capabilities, the economic means and more importantly the political will to enforce such project, and Deng Xiaoping's doctrine seems to have been abandoned under Xi Jinping. The militarization of artificial islands, the development of area denial strategies, and the build-up of a strong navy seem to be all means directed at overcoming unresolved issues – Taiwan, territorial claims, United States strong presence within the first and second island chains- that Liu was already seeking to overcome.

Around a decade ago, Beijing started developing a “doctrine of offshore defense and limited area denial” or what is also known as an Anti-Access/Area-Denial – A2/AD – strategy (Horta, p. 394, 2012). This doctrine was originally limited and developed to improve Chinese sea control against the United States within 200 miles of its coast in case of a declaration of independence by Taiwan. It is argued such doctrine was developed to counter the U.S military overwhelming technological superiority that was displayed during the Gulf War and the 1996 Taiwan Crisis (Bitzinger, 2011).

Indeed, these events raised concerns among China's decision makers regarding their powerlessness to counter a U.S. military intervention at a time when the pro-independence movement was gaining momentum in Taiwan. Directly competing with the U.S. state-of-the-art capabilities was however impossible either on an industrial or economic level. The most cost-effective means to counter the U.S. military superiority was largely inspired on how the USSR dealt with the U.S. military superiority during the Cold War (Henrotin, 2017). Consequently, Chinese early area denial capabilities relied on shore-based cruise missiles and ballistic missiles, on small stealth missile boats and on a large submarine fleet (Agnihotri, 2012; Bitzinger, 2011). Regardless of nationalist feelings, Taiwan holds a central place in China's maritime aspirations. The island occupies an important geostrategic position between the East and South China Seas, it controls the approaches to important SLOCs and can also be used serve as a fulcrum for the U.S fleet present in the region. Reunification with Taiwan is key for Beijing has it would not only allow China to control the northern approaches to the South China Sea but also to reinforce its strategic depth by extending its frontiers eastwards as well as to acquire direct access to oceanic waters (Vego, 2004).

Early shore-based A2/AD capabilities have enabled China to assert its primacy in the South China Sea, China's assertive actions in the region have benefited from this shore-based protective umbrella while furthering territorial claims in the Paracels and the Spratlys. Chinese authorities have often declared they were determined to defend China's historical rights. However, they have intentionally been imprecise regarding the nature of possible infringements to this question, to affect rival's calculus. Some experts have contended historical rights could be included within China's core interests. Regardless if this is accurate or not, this may have been directed at drawing red lines to either deter or intimidate rivals from further action. In a meeting with US Defense Secretary of Defense James Mattis, CCTV reported Xi Jinping declared "China Stance is firm and clear and that it will never surrender an inch of its land" (CCTV, 2018). The advancements in China's maritime ambitions have not solely relied on military means. Indeed, China's approach regarding its maritime claims is hybrid as it also involves the use of its coastguards and fishing militias. The approach taken has deliberately been incremental to avoid any "overt counteraction" in the region (Parton, 2017, p. 51). Beijing has engaged in what is known as a "grey zone coercion" (Harold et al., 2017, p. 1) which is a strategy stressing the use of actions that remain below the red line threshold - here understood as military aggression - to further its agenda. Such method has enabled China to enforce its maritime claims while keeping tensions and confrontation out of the military realm at a time when the regional military balance was not that favorable to Beijing. The use of fishing militias and coastguards, although prominent, has not been exclusive, and operations

have also been conducted in combination with the PLAN. Regarding fishing militias, experts have argued that such force was well structured and that it was a “state organized, controlled force operating under a direct military chain of command to conduct Chinese state-sponsored activities” (Kennedy & Erickson, 2017, p. 2). Fishing militias is a valuable force in that it can accomplish a vast array of tasks, such as patrols, intelligence gathering for the PLAN and China Coast Guard as well as harassment actions vis-à-vis other countries’ vessels – either military or civil – navigating in waters claimed by Beijing. Their use is critical for Beijing as they provide more flexibility to advance China's territorial claims in the region as their actions blur the boundaries of traditionally settled tolerance threshold and red lines, and the consequent responses one should take.

The 2009 South China Sea incident involving Chinese trawlers and the USNS Impeccable – a surveillance ship that was conducting ocean surveillance operations – is an example on how fishing militias are at the forefront when operating together with the PLAN and the coastguards to chase 'foreign' ships from claimed waters without firing a single shot. In the last years, the role of fishing militias has been reinforced within the framework of China's maritime strategy. According to Kennedy and Erickson (2017), some militiaman “have been photographed loading crates labeled “light weapons” onto one of their several dozen newly delivered large vessels, all of which boast mast-mounted water cannons, collision-absorbing rails, and reinforced hulls highly feature for aggressive spraying and ramming” (p. 10). What is more, new acquired ships tonnage is often higher in comparison to most other nation’s coastguard ships in the South China Sea and militiaman are trained by PLA instructors which globally improves militias' ramming ability as well as techniques to better harass and deter non-Chinese ships. The construction of artificial islands has also improved their ability to fulfill their tasks. Some fishing militias are for example headquartered on Woody Island in the Paracels and have the equipment to increase detection and tracking of 'foreign' ships navigating in surrounding waters. The same should apply in the Spratlys.

The role of China's law enforcement bodies in asserting China's maritime claims has also been reinforced and improved since 2013. Before this period, five different law enforcement agencies co-existed and often competed against each other. The lack of coordination between the former and their ill-defined roles undermined Beijing's prospects to use such forces to advance its territorial claims effectively. Four of these agencies have now merged under a unified structure that is the China Coast Guard (CCG) (Morris, 2013). In a comparable case to fishing militias, CCG is now increasingly equipped with larger vessels – in the future some decommissioned frigates – and enhanced weaponry (Morris, 2018). In the South China Sea, such equipment upgrade might

intimidate weaker countries like Malaysia and the Philippines as most of the new CCG vessels have more tonnage than some of these countries naval patrollers. On the other hand, the fact that in March 2018, CCG has passed under the command of a military structure – the People's Armed Police (PAP) – is a strong indication that proves Beijing is willing to boost and strengthen its 'low-profile' ability to assert its territorial ambitions (Zhen, 2018). So far, the actions implying at one time or another the PLAN, the coastguards and fishing militias have been very successful. All these different forces have enabled China to gradually assert its primacy without a single shot being fired in the South China Sea. In both the Paracels and the Spratlys, China has now installed communications systems that will improve intelligence gathering as well as the interoperability between fishing militias, CCG, and the PLAN which will further China's control over the South China Sea.

### ***Assessment of China's advancements in its adjacent seas***

China's strategy to increase its control over its adjacent seas has been very ingenious in that it has combined the use of three different forces – fishing militias; coastguards, and the military - to advance its assertiveness. As mentioned earlier, China has primarily used its coastguards and fishing militias to advance its maritime territorial claims in the region. Nonetheless, PLAN vessels have at times been used to back up these forces in case of escalation as well as to further deter regional actors and foreign countries via displays of force. Navies can be used to conduct gunboat diplomacy which emphasizes the use of threat or the use of limited force to further the political objectives of their respective country (Gosh, 2001). Unlike land or air power, sea power is a much more effective tool of statecraft as its use is submitted to fewer restrictions. Indeed, navies can operate more freely, unlike vehicles or aircraft, as military vessels do not – in most of the cases – need to have the permission of sovereign states to pass from one point to another. The vast majority of the seas around the globe are international waters, and even exclusive economic zones and territorial waters – although to different degrees – of foreign states are geographic areas where navies can freely navigate (Widen, 2011). As such, navies are a sophisticated means to send a political message or to advance one country's national agenda without crossing red lines, as the environment in which they evolve, allows them to blur their intentions. Moreover, fleets on their own have great leeway as they can combine “the elements of land, air and sea power” (Gosh, 2001, p. 2007).

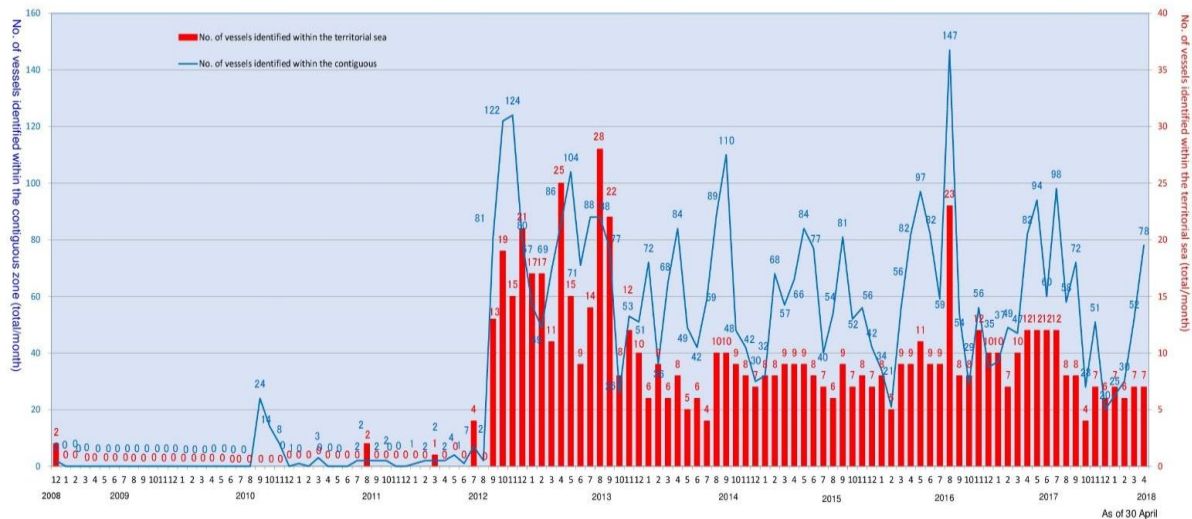
Shows of force, military drills as well as political declarations can all be interpreted as means of communications directed at ensuring the credibility of a country's political resolve and military capabilities which are key determinants of conventional deterrence (Stone, 2012). China has often used the military threat as a tactic to further its political ambitions. Therefore, the build-up of its military might has been of great significance. Military spending is an important variable when it comes to military capabilities. In 2013, at the highest levels of tensions in the South China Sea, the aggregated defense budget of the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia amounted to \$ 11,1 billion, compared to \$ 112 billion for China (Frécon, 2018). Such an asymmetry regarding defense spending combined to repeated Chinese displays of force has raised the bids for any contender willing to defy China's assertiveness. However, unlike nuclear deterrence, conventional capabilities do not achieve the same deterrence effect towards targeted countries. The former will indeed react differently depending on their assessments, the stakes at issue and their military capabilities. While conventional deterrence unsuccessfulness cannot be assessed as far as war has not irrupted, its success is more complicated to determine. In the South China Sea, conventional deterrence seems to have been very successful vis-à-vis Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines as Beijing has established *faits accomplis* – construction and militarization of artificial islands – in both the Paracels and the Spratlys without incurring any military response from these actors. For the period 2016-2017 Malaysia's military spending has even shrunk to 16% (Tian, Fleurant, Kuimova, Wezeman & Wezeman, 2018). This could indicate some regional countries have resigned themselves to accepting China's prominence. However, it is difficult to measure if this is only due to China's deterrence. Indeed, the prospects of Chinese investments may have convinced the governments of the less developed economies not to antagonize too directly China in the region.

The conduct of freedom of operations (FONOPs) is another good indicator to attest other's countries resolve to balance out China's assertiveness. Freedom of navigations operations *sensus stricto* is a maneuver involving a vessel's non-innocent passage within 12 nautical miles of artificial islands or reefs claimed by a country aimed at stressing the non-territorial nature of the former waters. Such operations involve either no prior notifications nor identification vis-à-vis the actor that claims territoriality on such features (Frécon, 2018). Many navies from Australia, France, Japan, the United States and other countries have allegedly conducted FONOPs in the region, however only the U.S Navy has done so if we stick to the strict definition of FONOPs. Other navies do navigate in the East and South China seas, but they do not stress the non-territoriality of waters adjacent to Chinese built artificial islands. Koh (2018) furthermore contends that these different operations are not directed at stopping or reducing the ongoing construction on artificial islands

but rather at dissuading China to raise the bidding regarding territorial expansion to new islets further. According to Parton (2017) commencement of construction works on Scarborough Shoal could trigger a heavier response from Washington. China has so far abstained from construction works since it seized the Shoal from the Philippines in 2012 after repeated standoffs. However, the fact that China has launched the biggest dredger in Asia – The Tiankun – undermines such prospect (Lingzhi, 2017). Gaining new outposts on the Scarborough Shoal could enable China to build a triangle between major outposts in the Paracels and the Spratlys that would reinforce China's ability to increasingly deny and police the South China Sea at the expense of other nations (Batongbacal, 2016).

In the East China Sea, China faces a tougher rival. So far, Japan has shown more determination to counter China's assertiveness regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute. The establishing of an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) by China in November 2013 and the greater usage of the PLAN in the East China Sea, could be understood as a tactic used to intimidate a stronger rival by putting up the ante. Aircraft that enter an ADIZ without prior notification can be intercepted by fighter aircraft and even shoot down if they are considered as a threat (Sevastopulo, 2013). Such methods are in line with conventional deterrence theory that stresses that the use of a heightened threat of force can reinforce deterrence effects against rivals. The 2013 event involving a Chinese frigate locking its fire-radar on a Japanese destroyer is another concrete illustration of this phenomenon (Yoshida & Aoki, 2013). The two events above took place in 2013, and it is worth looking at Figure 2 to see that 2013 was the year in which both the number of intrusions and the number of vessels navigating within Japan's contiguous waters was at its height. Ever since these figures have shrunk, and this may announce a reversal in China's strategy to further its territorial claims. As of May 2018, Japan and China agreed upon mechanism – including a hotline between top defense structures- to avoid a military escalation in the East China Sea (Osaki and Kikuchi, 2018). Such policy of appeasement may however just have enabled Beijing gaining time, similarly as it did when it started negotiations regarding a code of conduct with the ASEAN at a time when the construction of artificial islands was yet not consolidated by China. On the other hand, such agreement might also be utilized in Beijing as a recognition regarding the disputed nature of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

Figure 2. Records of intrusions of Chinese Government and other vessels into Japan's territorial seas



Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan

Over the recent years, Japan has taken a proactive role in promoting regional security via its defense diplomacy. Tokyo has donated vessels for the coastguards of Malaysia and the Philippines to boost these countries ability to counter China's coercion, while its navy has multiplied the exercises with regional actors like India and Singapore (Langloit, 2018). In 2016, Japan signed a contract to acquire 30 new assault amphibious vehicles (AAV-7) that could likely be used to defend the Senkaku Islands in the case of increasing tensions with China. Moreover, Japan Izumo-class and Hyuga-class helicopter destroyers could without too much difficulty host F-35B aircraft that would increase Tokyo power projection in the region. On the other hand, the American military presence in the region is viewed as vital for Japan's security. The 2018 Japanese White Paper stressed the necessity “to secure the presence of the U.S military in Japan” (Ministry of Defence, 2018, p. 284) to ensure the deterrent power of the US-JAPAN alliance in the region. The stationing of U.S forces in places like Okinawa is important to stress, as the island occupies a central position regarding important choke points. The island is located next to Japan's most important SLOCs, it controls the approaches between the continent and the Pacific Ocean and is at a relatively short distance from flashpoints such as Taiwan and the Sensaku/Diaoyu islands. This strategic U.S positioning, on the one hand, enables to deter China from going too far in its actions while its relative distance prevents tensions from escalating suddenly. Furthermore, under the Trump Administration, Washington has reiterated its security commitments towards Tokyo by announcing that “Senkaku Islands fall under article 5 of the US-Japan Security Treaty and reconfirmed the United States obligation to defend the islands” (National Institute for Defense Studies, 2018, p. 220).

### *Conventional forces and the prospects of limited-scale attacks*

China's military power has strongly improved in the recent years, and modernization efforts have focused on every sector of the army and the navy. Since the beginning of its sea denial approach, China has focused much of its attention on developing and acquiring know-how regarding Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles (ASBMs) and Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles (ASCMs). The development of shore-based ASBMs such as the DF-26 and the DF-21D has sometimes been qualified as 'game-changers' (Bitzinger, 2018). The DF-26 has a range that could vary between 3000 and 4000 km and it could threaten most of the regional actors, including the U.S military presence and its bases in Japan and Guam (Asian Times Staff, 2018). On the other hand, the DF-21D with a range of 1500km can strike moving targets at sea such as aircraft carriers and other military vessels in the Western Pacific (Erickson, Montgomery, Neuman, Biddle & Oelrich, 2017). Regarding ASCMs, China has deployed its YJ-62 and YJ-12B – with ranges of 222 km and 380 km respectively - on its outposts in the Paracels and the Spratlys. However, the reach of the YJ-12B can be extended, as H-6 bombers are now able to operate from the different airstrips constructed in both the Paracels and Spratlys. On the other hand, many new commissioned ships will be equipped with YJ-62 ASCMs while acquired Russian build submarines and destroyers – Kilo-class and Sovrenemmy classes - are equipped with sophisticated Russian ASCMs (O'Rourke, 2018).

Figure 3. Chinese Power Projection Capabilities in the South China Sea



Source: Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative

The construction of outposts in the Paracels and the Spratlys has enabled Beijing to further its A2/AD bubbles in the South China Sea and consequently its deterrent power. Indeed, China has installed in its different outposts as well as in the Pacific both communication and jamming systems

that would improve its ability to monitor the submarine, naval and aerial activities of other countries in the region (Stashwick, 2018; Panda, 2018). China relies on one hand on anchor points such as shore-based ASCMs, ASBMs, and militarized artificial islands while submarines, surface vessels, and civilian means – fishing militias and China's Coast Guard- provide greater flexibility and efficiency to this A2/AD mechanism. The combination of these various components has improved China *de facto* control on China's adjacent seas – although to a different extent - in times of peace and war. So far, grey zone coercion and conventional deterrence have successfully supported China's ambition in the region, without raising any military counteraction nor political strong opposition. However, recent events have shown China's behavior increasingly concerns important countries like the United States, France, India and the United Kingdom in the Asia-Pacific. France and India have for instance signed an agreement that would allow the Indian Navy to use the French military bases in the Indian Ocean (Bouissou, 2018). This would be directed at countering China's assertiveness in both the Asia-Pacific and the Indian Oceanic region. Furthermore, in reaction to a new Chinese militarization in the Spratlys, Washington has not invited China to participate to the RIMPAC exercises while for the first time in years two U.S vessels have conducted a FONOP in the Paracels (Freiner, 2018).

U.S Navy conducted FONOPs have repeatedly been used by Beijing to nurture its security narrative and to justify the increasing militarization of its outposts for defensive purposes in the region. Although deterrence by denial is a rather defensive posture, the defense can foreshadow the offensive as Henrotin (2017) puts it. The essential point is whether China will remain satisfied with its different *faits accomplis* and *de facto* territorial gains. If not, it remains to be seen if Beijing will continue using its transversal approach - which revolves around the use of its dollar diplomacy to weaken Taiwan, its grey zone coercion, and conventional deterrence – to further its control over its adjacent seas rather than making use of its military force. Under Xi Jinping's military command, structures have been reorganized and improved, and the party control over the military should enable China to reinforce both its deterrence and power projection capabilities (Wuthnow & Sanders, 2017). For many years, experts have argued that China had no timeline to solve its territorial claims in the region and that this was related to China's cultural uniqueness. It seems however that Xi Jinping has asked its strategists to set a time frame for China to realize its maritime ambitions. In such a case, the use of military force will certainly play a stronger role. Between March and May of 2018, China's has multiplied military drills, continued to militarize its outposts in the Spratlys, and conducted several shows of forces in the South China Sea and near Taiwan. A major show of force involving approximately 40 ships, including submarines and China's first aircraft

carrier, was conducted at the end of March 2018 (Pearson & Torode, 2018). On the other hand, amphibious military exercises that would arguably improve the capability of China to seize other nations outposts in the East and South China Seas have also been repeated in the recent months.

China has improved its ability to conduct amphibious operations, new amphibious ships have been acquired while interoperability between marine corps, the PLAN, and the Chinese airforce has increased. Mercier (2018) has argued these forces could be used to conquer Taiwan; this seems however unlikely as conducting such a large-scale invasion requires much more amphibious capabilities than the ones Beijing currently possesses. On the other hand, an invasion of Taiwan would undoubtedly raise a much more worldwide political opposition as compared to the *faits accomplis* China has enforced throughout the years in the region. Continuously isolating Taiwan by imposing an exclusive choice between Taiwan and Beijing to countries that are willing to strengthen diplomatic relations with China or imposing a naval blockade might prove more effective on the short-term to further the One-China policy. China could work on furthering its control on adjacent seas by attacking other nations outposts in the region by relying on its outposts in the South China Sea and its amphibious and naval capabilities. China first aircraft carrier could furthermore provide air cover to these forces while operating. In its bigger outposts – Subi, Mischief, Fiery Cross reefs – China could host up to 2400 troops on each island that could easily overwhelm other countries military outposts in the region (Scarr & Torode, 2018). What remains uncertain is whether all these different improvements are just directed at strengthening China's deterrence or at improving Beijing's ability to conduct attack against other nations presence in disputed waters shortly. What is certain is that it seems too late to take actions other than diplomatic to hedge against China. An article released in the Asia Times reported that a U.S Admiral said on April 2018 to the United States Senate Committee on Armed Services that “China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States” (Asia Times Staff, 2018, para. 4).

### ***Conclusion***

Growing Chinese control over the East and South China Seas could have different implications either on a military and geopolitical level. China pays great attention in countering intelligence gathering by Washington and its allies as it was best illustrated with the incident implying the USNS Impeccable (which was a spy vessel). Indeed, most of China's ballistic missile submarines (BMSs) and nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN) are located on Hainan Island in the South China Sea. Countering intelligence gathering in adjacent seas is not only important for the credibility of

China's nuclear deterrence but also for its advancement. Although the nuclear power balance is largely in favor of Washington, China could upgrade its nuclear deterrence by transforming the South China Sea into a strategic bastion for its BMSs. In the future, China might acquire missiles with ranges between 10.000 and 12.000 kilometres, which would allow Chinese BMSs to strike on American soil without even being obliged to cross the first island chain. This is a major reason that might explain China's will to control the whole South China Sea and the nature of the different equipment it has installed in its different outposts in the region (Sheldon-Duplaix, 2018). On the other hand, Mahan stressed a country did not necessarily need to have the stronger fleet in the world to dominate its periphery as far as it could overcome its major rivals by acquiring local predominance (Holmes & Yoshihara, 2005). In theory the U.S Navy is much stronger than the PLAN, however, in case of conflict, China will have the advantage of being at home and it will be able to use its shore and island-based A2/AD capabilities as well as to concentrate its forces easily. On the other hand, the U.S Navy would have to operate far from home, and it would have to operate along larger distances to sustain its logistics. In the case of a Taiwan contingency, the United States might have difficulties in sustaining their security commitment towards Taiwan. Furthermore, the United States has security commitments all around the world, and it seems unlikely it would concentrate all its forces against China. Moreover, the U.S Navy operability is arranged according to a rule of thirds which means that only one-third of its forces are in peacetimes immediately available. The other third is unavailable due to maintenance and repairs while the last one should be training to prepare it for future operations. In case of an open conflict between China and the United States, Washington would be able to deploy up to half of its forces, but to reduced capacity and less rapidly than China. The prospects above are not to be neglected as they might enhance the effectiveness of China's deterrence towards the United States. Indeed, the prospects of losing battle groups before even having reached Chinese waters to assist Taiwanese forces will undoubtedly affect the calculus of American decision-makers to counter China's assertiveness. In the future, the growing military power of China and its improved regional geostrategic position in the South China Sea will enable Chinese decision-makers to shape the regional dynamics according to their interests and agenda, and the expense of the United States.

## **Chapter 3:**

### **The Maritime Silk Road Initiative and the String of Pearls Theory**

#### ***Introduction***

In 2017 China's military acquired its first overseas base in Djibouti which definitively demonstrated Beijing's naval strategy was not solely confined to a regional level as different scholars have long argued. China is increasing its economic and political presence in the Indian Oceanic Region (IOR), and this would explain why “Beijing is contemplating a two-ocean naval strategy” (Krupakar, 2017, p. 207). In the last decade, scholars and international security experts have widely discussed what the underlying objectives behind China's involvement in different infrastructural and economic projects in the IOR as well as the possible military implications these developments could bring for the future. China is aware that developing a strong sea power would be one of the best ways to achieve a global power status in the coming decades. As a result, China's maritime approach not only focuses on developing its naval component but also on improving its sea-borne trade prospects. China is developing different economic and infrastructural projects – ports, economic zones, power plants and highways- branded under the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) that should reshape the economy of the region and enable China to diversify both its energy and trade flows as well as to help Chinese companies to find new markets for their industrial overcapacity. The fact that most of the infrastructural projects conducted in the region are Chinese government-sponsored has raised concerns amongst Indian and American strategists who have argued the MSRI was driven by strategic prospects and China's will to acquire new bases for its navy in the IOR (Dixon, 2014). Such a realist assessment regarding Chinese investments in the region is often illustrated by the so-called String of Pearl's theory which argues military purposes solely drive the MSRI. The main objective of this chapter is to provide a thorough analysis concerning the acquisition of a new Chinese military base in the IOR. This chapter will firstly analyze the ongoing developments in China's first military base in Djibouti as the nature of this base could set a precedent for future Chinese bases. The chapter will consequently analyze China's geopolitical interests in the IOR as well as some features of the MSRI to provide a more comprehensive understanding of China's maritime strategy in the region and the consequent naval and strategic developments they could bring for the years to come.

***China's interests in the IOR and the acquisition of its first overseas bases***

China's stance towards the international stage seems to be shifting, and Beijing is taking an active approach when it comes to defending its interests. The acquisition of its first overseas base in a strategic point such as Djibouti – located adjacent to Bab al-Mandab strait and other important chokepoints such as the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz– illustrates Beijing's forward-leaning strategic posturing. Indeed, China's economic ties have expanded beyond the Pacific, and this explains why Beijing's is willing to secure both its economic investments and interests abroad. China's growing interest regarding the IOR evolves around issues such as, sea-lines, energy security, economic prospects and regional stability, that are deemed critical for sustaining the economic growth of China and consequently the legitimacy of the current party-led regime (Krupakar, 2017). The security of sea-lines is crucial for Beijing, in fact, 40 percent of Beijing's gross domestic product relies on trade of which between 90 to 95% relies on maritime trade. Oil supply is another great concern for Beijing as oil imports needed to sustain the economy are set to increase. The majority of China's energy and trade flows are conveyed by the sea through narrow chokepoints such as the Bab al-Mandab and Malacca Strait which can easily be blocked to Chinese ships by rival nations or disrupted by pirate activities (Lanteigne, 2008). On the other hand, as it will be shown subsequently, China is developing different economic and infrastructural projects that should bolster the economy of the Indian sub-continent. Indeed, Chinese companies have important stakes in the region, and the fact that the MSRI is government sponsored explains China's concerns regarding the security and stability of the IOR.

What happens far away can disturb the smooth running of international trade as the piracy activities in the Gulf of Aden, and the civil wars in both Yemen and Libya have shown. The presence of Chinese citizens in Africa and the Middle-East has only grown by the enlargement of Chinese interests in these regions. However, many of the countries where China has stakes are often unstable, and they are either confronted with political or social unrest (Zerba, 2014). The need to urgently evacuate Chinese citizens from conflicts occurring in both Libya and Yemen, although successful, showed how demanding it was for the PLAN to sustain the logistics for the evacuation of its citizens so far from the mainland. The acquisition of a first overseas base in Djibouti will enable China to better cope with such contingencies in the future. While Chinese authorities have repeatedly presented their base as a 'logistics facility' aimed at sustaining peacekeeping and anti-piracy operations in the region, many experts have argued this base could also be used for more assertive purposes, such as power projection. According to a report presented to the American

Congress, intelligence gatherings and satellite imagery have shown China is building facilities and infrastructures that could host up to 10.000 troops and a PLAN flotilla. Docks would allow harboring four ships from most of the vessels' type within the Chinese navy; it is argued an airbase might also be under construction (O'Rourke, 2018). So far China has signed a ten years lease with the Djibouti government for this first base which could be extended to ten more years (Jacobs & Perlez, 2017). According to Connors (2018) China is using a 'debt trap diplomacy' to gain strategic and military concessions from Djibouti and other countries in the IOR that might not be able to cover repayment of debt-based Chinese loans. Therefore, in light of the above, it seems unlikely that another ten years lease will not be resigned for the use of a Chinese base in Djibouti.

China's presence in Djibouti is there to remain for at least twenty years, and the acquisition of a first base in the Horn of Africa will allow China to both improve its soft and hard power in the Eastern part of the Indian Ocean. Indeed, China is improving its image among African nations by contributing to peacekeeping efforts on the continent and by also financing the construction of the new headquarters of the African Union. This might lay the ground for China to increase its involvement in the region. For long, China has promoted a non-interventionist stance towards other countries to distinguish itself from western countries 'imperialism'. However, as Chinese economic projects and interests will continue to grow such an approach might prove difficult to sustain. Indeed, China is taking a more proactive and preventive stance to ensure the sustainability of both its investments and different interests, and the new anti-terrorism law issued in 2015 allowing Chinese armed forces to intervene abroad might be a stepstone of a more interventionist China (Duchâtel, 2016). The acquisition of a base in Djibouti will improve China's power projection as well as its deterrence thus allowing Beijing to increasingly shape the geopolitics of East Africa, the Middle-East as well as the Indian Ocean. This geostrategic stronghold will facilitate China's navy operability along external lines and will improve its ability to monitor important SLOCs and energy flow passing through the Gulf of Aden and the Persian Gulf. The location of China first overseas base in Djibouti is no mere coincidence. Indeed, Beijing has been attentive in countering the String of Pearl's theory which is a narrative portrays China's rise as very military-driven and concerning. China is not the first country to have had acquired a base in Djibouti, other important nations such as the United States, France, and Japan already have military bases in the country, and this is a major reason why China has chosen this location. China can easily justify its military presence in that part of the globe -Chinese-sponsored investments in Djibouti, piracy in the Gulf of Aden, peace-keeping missions on the African Continent- without nurturing unjustified concerns from rival nations (Touchard, 2018).

### *The Maritime Silk Road Initiative and the String of Pearls Theory*

The MSRI is a Chinese-based economic development enterprise designed to improve the flows of goods between Southeast Asia, East Africa and the Indian sub-continent via the maritime domain. The initiative is often portrayed as the corollary of the Belt and Road Initiative and is directed at developing the maritime economic potential of the IOR by improving both the lines of communication and port installations of the region (Esteban, 2016). Since Xi Jinping launched the MSRI in 2013, there has been a lot of debate among experts regarding the main drivers of this project. At one end of the spectrum, scholars have contended the MSRI was purely driven at empowering the region and that economic inclusion was the motto rather than the exception. On the other hand, other experts have argued the MSRI is being used to push Beijing's military-driven agenda. Such analysis argues that China uses its different port projects in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar for obtaining new overseas military bases for its navy. While these realist assessments have mainly been produced by the concerns amongst American and Indian strategists regarding a rising China, the rather too enthusiastic vision regarding the MSRI has to a certain extent been shaped and encouraged by the Chinese authorities. Indeed Chinese decision-makers are willing to address the String of Pearl's narrative, which argues China is using its infrastructural projects to encircle India by acquiring new military bases in the region, as it could tarnish China's image and key foreign policy objectives (Blanchard & Flint, 2017). As this section will show, the nature of the MSRI should rather be placed in between these two visions. Whether intended or not, the MSRI will undoubtedly comprise political as well as security dimensions and only time will tell if this project is more about military strategy or economic cooperation.

As Blanchard and Flint (2017) put it "global investment and trade require a physical presence to secure those investments and enable the operation of the global economy"(p. 235). China has growing interests in IOR countries that are subject to either social or political unrest, and this will compel China to be increasingly involved in the security of the Indian sub-continent. One of the MRSI biggest projects evolves around the development of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which will link the inland ill-connected regions of Xinjiang and northern Pakistan to the deep-water port of Gwadar, Pakistan. The CPEC is one of China's key projects, it will, for instance, connect the MSRI to the One Belt One Road Initiative and will also enable China to diminish its dependency upon energy routes transiting through the Strait of Malacca (Chung, 2018). In recent years, the enterprise of the CPEC has been confronted by different security issues. Indeed, the corridor passes through dangerous provinces such as Baluchistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Tribal

Areas as well as the disputed Kashmir where armed groups ranging from varying Islamist factions, rebel groups, as well as criminal groups, operate (Esteban, 2016). In recent years, Chinese employees working on the CPEC have increasingly been exposed to a hostile climate, some workers have either been murdered, attacked or kidnapped (Yousafzai, 2017). Although additional Pakistani forces have been deployed in the region, in the eyes of China, Pakistani authorities seem to be unable to guarantee the safety and the security of both Chinese workers and assets in the country. Moreover, the Pakistani population's hostility towards the growing Chinese presence in less dangerous places such as Gwadar is growing and it is expected that China will deploy up to 100.000 marines to ensure the viability of the CPEC. Although Pakistani people are increasingly hostile to the Chinese diaspora, by 2023 500,000 Chinese citizens are expected to move to Gwadar to work on the CPEC project. This only number will be equivalent to twice the total number of the Gwadar district population and will probably bring new security challenges (Brewster, 2018).

The MSRI will assuredly reshape the geopolitics of the IOR. For long, the presence of mountains across the northern approaches to the Indian continent and the very few overland routes between the Indian sub-continent and the rest of Asia have isolated the IOR from the rest of Asia. The new passages created by the MSRI will affect the geographical nature of the continent which according to Brewster (2017) has been historically characterized as "a semi-closed strategic space capable of domination by a single naval power"(p. 287). By controlling important choke points in the Suez Canal, the Cape, Singapore, and India, Great Britain has been able to dominate and deny access to other great powers in that part of the world during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Following the American dominance of the IOR against the USSR, both India and China seem to be now willing to assert their control over the region which would explain the military rivalry between these two countries and Indian's concerns regarding a Chinese String of Pearls in a geographical area that New Delhi considers as its backyard. In fact, the historical, geographical configuration of the IOR has provided a preponderant position to India vis-à-vis neighboring countries like Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bangladesh. The fact that most of these countries have warmly welcomed Chinese investments can be explained by both their desire to balance out India's predominance over the region as well as by their weak economic situations (Chung, 2018). China has much more resources than India to provide economic incentives to countries within the IOR, its investments in the region will continue, and this seems to have convinced India to push back. In any case, the increasing competition between China and India, the growing Chinese assets as well as the new flows of populations and goods following the MSRI will bring new security challenges that might both require and legitimize the presence of Chinese forces in the IOR. In light of the above, China's

growing military presence in the region should be seen as a consequence of the security matters surrounding the MSRI rather than an ultimate goal in itself, as argued by the String of Pearls (Brewster, 2018).

So far, China has not signed an official agreement to acquire a second overseas base, and there has been great speculation among experts regarding the location of a future Chinese military base. Experts have argued that China would probably acquire a new base in a country with which it has strong and stable relations. In light of the above, China's second military base will most likely be located in Pakistan. China is indeed one of Pakistan's biggest partners, and the Chinese investments in the country regarding the "CPEC are equivalent to the value of all foreign direct investment inflows into Pakistan since 1970" (Chung, 2018, p. 318). A Chinese military base in Pakistan would strengthen even more the current strategic ties between Karachi and Beijing. Allowing China to acquire a permanent base in its country would allow Pakistan to increase deterrence towards its historical Indian rival. Indeed, Pakistan mainly relies on the port of Karachi for trade and energy supply as well as for its naval forces, and this has been a strategic shortcoming during the Kargil War. During the conflict, the Indian navy was able to blockade the port of Karachi without much problem thus cutting energy supplies required for Pakistan to continue the conflict (Gosh, 2001). Since one of China's biggest project revolves around the deep-port of Gwadar, experts have contended China's next base might be located there. The port of Gwadar is important for various reasons. It will be used as an energy hub that should allow China to decrease its dependence on existing routes transiting through the Malacca Strait where up to 90% of its oil imports are transported (Ji, 2007). On the other hand, its geostrategic position, it is adjacent to the Strait of Hormuz, and it monitors the eastern approaches of the Indian Ocean, would enable China to better monitor SLOCs and oil flows coming from the Persian Gulf.

Media reports and intelligence gatherings have argued the second Chinese overseas base would rather be located in Jiwani, Pakistan - 70 kilometers from the commercial port of Gwadar. The base would include an airbase that could host all types of assets from the Chinese air force (Chan, 2018). Such geostrategic position would enhance Beijing's deterrence in the area and help Beijing to better monitor other countries military activities by installing the similar surveillance devices it has deployed in the South China Sea (Krupakar, 2017). On the other hand, it would also enable China to open up a new front in the IOR in case of major crisis following a conflict in its adjacent seas. It has been argued military bases could potentially be built in the different commercial deep-water ports China is building in the IOR. China would use these ports for both a commercial and

military use, and it is in this sense that the different port projects developed by China have been portrayed as new 'Pearls'. Accordingly, the location of a new Chinese base could be located in Salalah (Oman), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Bagamoyo (Tanzania), Sittwe (Myanmar), Chittagong (Bangladesh), and Seychelles (Jennings, 2017). China might also want to secure its oil supplies from Angola which is one of China's biggest oil importers (Horta, 2012). Acquiring a base closer to the Cape of Good Hope would enhance the security of its energy flows in that part of Africa. The String of Pearl's theory is somehow inaccurate as these ports have so far not become permanent military bases. Indeed Beijing is watchful in addressing the String of Pearl's narrative which could bring great powers and regional countries to push back against the rising Chinese influence in both the IOR and the Asia-Pacific. As Blanchard and Flint (2017) put it, the different projects China is involved in "allows for competing geopolitical representations that are simultaneously the outcome and the "fuel" for ongoing agency" (p. 238). This is the reason why China might use these different ports for logistics purposes (refuelling, the supply of food, ammunition) rather than as permanent military bases.

China naval presence in the IOR will increase in the region regardless of whether it will acquire new permanent bases or not. China's debt-based loans to most of its MSRI partners have enabled China to acquire the lease of regional ports (e.g., Hambantota) (Schultz, 2017). Connars (2018) argues countries unable to reimburse their debts might make some strategic concessions to China, enabling China to have a military base in their countries for example, to cancel or reduce their debt. On the other hand, India and China seem to be engaged in a security dilemma for acquiring new military bases in the IOR at the expense of the other. Indeed, different important countries such as France, the United Kingdom, and the United States have strengthened military ties with New Delhi in order to counterbalance China. France and India have signed an agreement that will allow the Indian Navy to use all the different French Bases within the Indian Ocean (Bouissou, 2018). Moreover, as of June 2018, the President of Seychelles halted an agreement that had to allow the Indian Navy to acquire a military base in this IOR archipelago (Bagchi, 2018). It has even been argued China has conducted naval exercises to deter India from intertwining in the political crisis that is shaking the country (Miglani & Aneez, 2018). In light of the different statements found in Chinese White Papers, and regarding China's carrier developments, it seems however unlikely China will not acquire new permanent military bases for the coming years. The 2014 Chinese White Papers states that "The PLAN will enhance its capabilities for strategic deterrence and counterattack" (Jianing, 2016, Section 2). Without additional bases, such mission might be difficult to sustain. Chinese media such as the People's Daily and the Global Times can also provide valuable

information regarding the foreign policy advocated by Chinese decision-makers, and expected defence outcomes.

One such example came in May 2018, when the *Global Times* quoted Liang, a Chinese military expert, who argued that “At least six aircraft carriers need to be built by China to safeguard national security and protect interests overseas” (Huan, 2018, 1<sup>st</sup> para.). These requirements may prove to be true as another military expert quoted in the *Global Times* contended that “China will build about 10 more bases for the six aircraft carriers” (Xi & Caiyu, 2017, 9<sup>th</sup> para.). Such developments would mark a major shift in China’s operational capacity, as their only operational aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*, is an reconditioned Soviet aircraft carrier (Gady, 2018). However that China’s first ever built carrier and a second aircraft carriers are in the final stages of development indicates that the above estimations may be accurate. While the construction of these carriers is a big improvement regarding China’s naval development, their capabilities must be weighed. Indeed China’s two first aircraft carriers will use short take-off but arrested recovery systems (STOBAR) to launch fighter jets and they will be equipped with conventional propulsion systems. This will limit the capabilities of their embarked forces as well as of the power projection capabilities of the carriers. The decks of these carriers will be unable to launch planes required for intelligence gathering, early warning and strategic strikes as these planes are too heavy to take off from ski-jump ramps, which will probably limit their power projection to China’s adjacent seas. These two carriers could mainly be used to deter regional rivals and provide additional air cover to protect PLAN vessels conducting operations aimed at furthering China’s territorial claims in both the East and South China Seas (Erickson, Denmark & Collins, 2012). China's third and fourth aircraft carriers will be larger and differently equipped which will allow these carriers to carry more planes. China’s third carrier will seemingly be equipped with an electromagnetic aircraft launch system (EMALS) that will allow China to launch a greater variety of planes, with both bigger payload and fuel load, at a stronger pace (Xiaoci & Yuandan, 2018).

China's fourth carrier could be a major improvement as it is argued it could be nuclear-powered. According to a *Global Times* press release, one of China’s main shipbuilders has contended one of its projects might revolve around the construction of a nuclear-powered aircraft. This would allow the PLAN to increase its ability to ensure sea control as well as to sustain operations far from home over a larger amount of time (Yuandan & Tiantian, 2018). Such an improvement would shorten the technological gap between the PLAN and the U.S Navy (Lin & Singer, 2018). According to these different sources, China might acquire between 4 to 6 aircrafts carriers in the

coming years. However the know-how required to master such equipment will take time and require additional bases before China might be able to project its naval might all around the world in similar ways as the United States

### ***Conclusion***

China's different infrastructural and economic projects are expanding its influence as well as its military ability to better sustain longer time operations in the IOR and in other places far from the mainland. While China has improved its ability to securitize important SLOCs its power projection capabilities remain relatively unequal if compared to other actors such as the United States and India which have more naval bases in the region. The acquisition of a new base in Djibouti has however been a major improvement, and China has now a new geostrategic position which will enable it to monitor important choke points in the Gulf of Aden and the Persian Gulf as well as the eastern approaches to the IOR. So far, the most recent developments have argued China might acquire a new permanent base in Jiwani Pakistan, and in the ten to fifteen years to come a third aircraft carrier with an EMALS systems and a fourth one that might be nuclear-powered and similar in tonnage and size as the U.S Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft-carrier might be incorporated to the PLAN. In the years to come the above developments and China's growing economic presence might create spillovers effects that could further reinforce China's ability to both acquire new military bases as well as to influence the geopolitics of the region. On the other hand, the United States 'withdrawal of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and its increasing unilateralism towards the global order and historical allies is ideal for Beijing's decision-makers as it will give more room for China to occupy the power vacuum left by Washington.

## Conclusion

China's control over its adjacent seas, and particularly in the South China Seas has only increased in the last years, and the FONOPs conducted by the United States have not been able to stop China's advancements in the region. On the contrary, China has used these different events to justify the militarization of its outposts in the South China Sea. China is now far ahead, and it seems unlikely that countries from the region will push back. Indeed, the prospects of Chinese investments in relatively poor countries of the Asia-Pacific seems to be more important for their governments than denouncing China's stance in the region. Vietnam, Japan, and India are the only countries that are showing more determination to remain firm against China, but classical methods to counter China are not providing any results. China's use of a gray zone coercion is very effective in that it has redefined the 'rules of the game', and how affected countries normally respond when their sovereignty is undermined: this gives great leeway to China. Indeed, countries willing to contest Chinese *faits accomplis* would have to take the initiative. This last point is ingenious as it would legitimate a strong response from China, that could present itself as the defender. On the other hand, acquiring the capabilities to counter China's deterrence is not easy. This process would take time and require huge investments and planification on both a doctrinal and industrial level. The only country that could step up would be the United States: this scenario, however, seem to be unlikely. Indeed, the prospects of loosing vessels and the risk of losing reputation may dissuade the United States from acting. Indeed, the A2/AD capabilities China has developed are very complete, and they have improved China's room of maneuver to refashion its regional order.

On the other hand, the fact that the current U.S administration is acting on unilateral bases could enable China to fill in the power vacuum left by Washington, thus undermining the U.S influence in the Asia-Pacific and the IOR. China is leading many different projects not only in Asia, but all around the world, and it has acquired port hubs in many regions including Europe (major holder in the port of Rotterdam). While these different investments are raising concerns among many western strategists, it remains to be seen if China will use its increasing naval power and ownership of important port hubs in an exclusive manner. What is certain, is that this growing sea power would allow China to shape the geopolitics of important regions around the world. Its military might will also enable China to enforce its interests as well as to defend them. China could indeed follow the path of the United States, which in more than one occasion has defended its interests at the same time as it has defended the interests of the world economy. This was the case, for instance, for the Gulf War, in which the U.S allowing to reestablish the normal flows of natural resources

needed for the functioning of the world economies. China is a world maritime economy and its navy has now acquired Bluewater capabilities. However, China is not yet able to deploy them over sustained time all around the world. If China can build confidence in the countries where it is massively investing, it will in the coming decades be able to strengthen its strategic partnerships, which could enable it to acquire more bases all around the world.

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