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Examining the Sino-Indian Maritime Competition: Part 3 – China goes to sea

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Key Points

- China's national strategy is dependent upon its economic growth.
- It needs to securitise its SLOCs and, especially, its energy imports upon which its entire economy rests.
- It therefore needs to employ a navy capable of performing this function.
- China's rapid naval growth and maritime activities in the last two decades has followed directions not congruent with the protection of its SLOCs
- This has caused regional and other states to question its motives.

Summary

Mahan believed economic growth leads to increased naval prowess, which often leads to a desire for hegemony. He saw this progression as a zero-sum construct, pre-dating Mearsheimer's theory of offensive realism.¹ Mahan's exposition on seapower was integral to the changing worldview of a rising power, the USA. This correlation was shown in the preceding section. This part of the paper will try to understand why China has turned to the sea, its naval growth, and if its maritime endeavours are defensive or offensive in nature. These findings will, in turn, determine if India should be concerned by China's activities, especially in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). This examination begins by studying China's economic need for

the sea, its naval growth and, finally, its maritime objectives. It will apply some of the previously-discussed elements of Seapower to understand these issues. It will examine China's economic growth in Mahanian terms and determine if its primary desire is to protect its economy by developing its naval prowess or if that development is, simultaneously, the outcome of a desire for regional hegemony.

Analysis

The Maritime Emphasis of China's Strategy

It is because of the perception of navies being realist instruments of state power that national strategic culture is closely allied with them. Strategic culture is "an inherited body of political-military concepts based on shared historical and social experience".² It shapes a state's perception of international events, producing considered military actions. Strategic culture is learned by a state's succeeding generations through texts which embody a national political-military literary tradition which allows leaders to form ideas on how the world works and to develop preferences for types of responses. Thus, in the context of this paper, many Chinese scholars see Chinese strategic culture as unique, possessing an emphasis of ethical and human factors in security issues, as opposed to Western cultures which emphasise military might.³ In this perspective, Chinese strategic culture shows a preference for non-violence. This is disputed by Alastair Iain Johnston who believes China's strategic culture demonstrates a large degree of *realpolitik*, permitting its leaders to view war as a central feature of interstate relations.⁴ Scobell argues that China's history inclines it towards the use of force. He argues that strategic culture should be studied in relation to China's security policy for two reasons: first, because Chinese policy is severely influenced by its civilisational history affecting its tendency to use force and, second, because China has a "unique traditional philosophy".⁵ In his view, Chinese assumptions about its perennial justness increase its propensity to use force by giving it a "defensive moral rationale for using force, even offensive force".⁶

China's economic growth over the last three decades has been rapid, making it the world's second largest economy. China has made manufacture and export a fundamental element of its growth strategy. Consequently, its trade has soared from \$115 billion in 1990 to \$2.9 trillion in 2010. Trade constituted 32 per cent of China's GDP in 1990 and a 62 per cent in 2007.⁷ By 2030 China's share of global sea-borne trade is expected to be twenty-four per cent of an estimated twenty-four billion tonnes, necessitating an enhanced infrastructure.⁸ Thus, in 2004 Shanghai's ports ranked second in the world by volume of cargo handled and surpassed Hong Kong in 2007.⁹ The volume of cargo handled at Shenzhen port alone surpassed the combined total from Tokyo, Kobe and Yokohama, Japan's three busiest ports.¹⁰ Reports indicate the Pearl River delta ports in Guangdong province will overtake Hong Kong by 2015 if current progress is maintained.¹¹ The port of Qingdao in Shandong province increased its sea freight handling by thirty per cent in 2002, making it the dominant maritime hub north of the Yangtze River.¹²

China has become the world's largest ship-builder, surpassing Japan and South Korea.¹³ The Cosco Shipyard Group, China's largest ship-builder, has increased manufacturing capacity in

all its shipyards. In Dalian capacity rose by 73 per cent by 2005¹⁴, including the creation of the world's largest dry dock, which caters to very large crude carriers (VLCC).¹⁵ Also in 2005, citing national security concerns due to a shortage of ships, China's Department of Transport stated the country needed a fleet of VLCCs capable of transporting more than fifty per cent of its energy products in Chinese hulls,¹⁶ leading to the observation that China's VLCC fleet will more than double by the middle of this decade.¹⁷

China's ship-building efforts also include naval hulls. Its naval modernisation includes the building and creation of platforms, weapons systems, infrastructure and the software to manage these assets.¹⁸ According to *The Military Balance 2012*, the PLAN comprises 876 vessels including 78 principal surface combat ships and 71 submarines.¹⁹ Arguably the most impressive element of China's naval modernisation has been the growth of its submarine fleet. Since the mid-1990s, it has acquired twelve *Kilo*-class attack submarines from Russia in addition to building its own *Song* and *Yuan* classes. Reportedly China inducted twenty three indigenously-built conventional submarines between 1995 and 2007.²⁰

Submarines, however, are not suitable instruments of power projection, so China has also constructed surface strike ships with extended ranges. Over the last decade it has bought or built several destroyers and frigates. These include four Russian *Sovremenny*-class destroyers, five classes of indigenous destroyers and four classes of frigates.²¹ It has also designed and built large amphibious (landing) ships, supply ships to service its long-distance destroyers, and developed naval command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) capabilities.

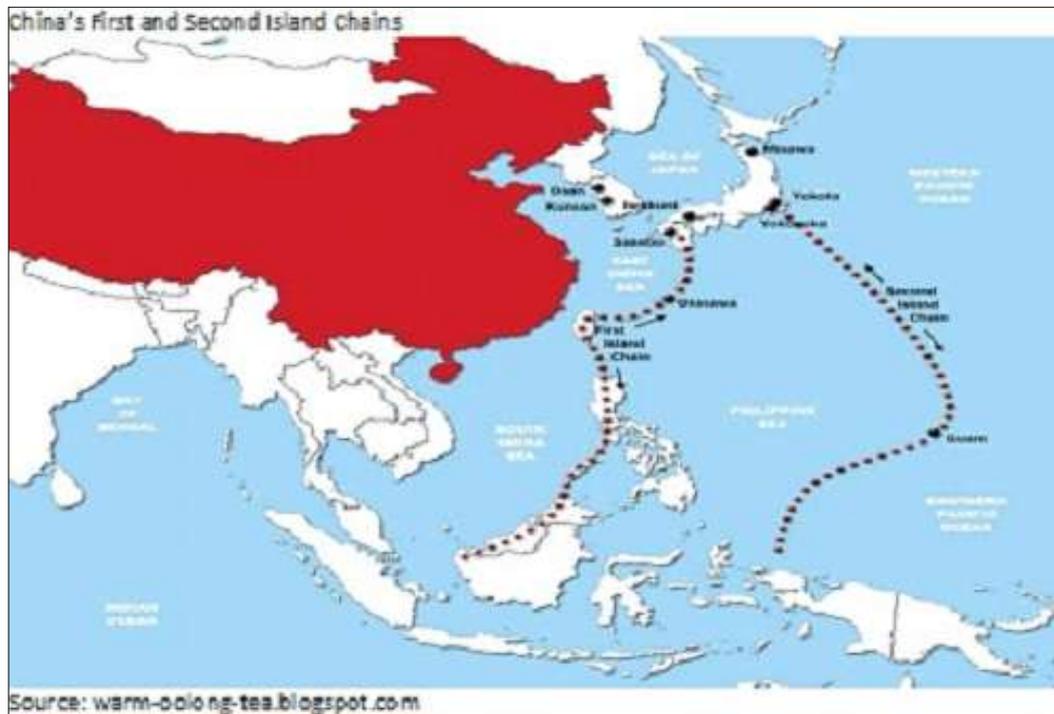
A Possible Rationale for China's Naval Emphasis

China's stated first priority is to "re-integrate" Taiwan, explaining its need for amphibious ships. It is also creating blue-water capacity beyond the "first island chain" – the Kuril Islands, Japan, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines and Indonesia. The "second island chain" runs roughly north to south from the Kuril Islands, through Japan, the Bonin, Mariana, and Carolina Islands, and Indonesia. These two lines extend approximately 1,800 nautical miles from China's east coast. Breaking free of the USA's domination of the two lines is a key goal of its maritime strategy, explaining why it conducted naval exercises through the first island chain in April 2010.²²

This strategy is a direct emulation of the USSR's strategy of equally-spaced, roughly parallel sea lines of defence ("thresholds") situated at varying distances from its coasts, each defended by weapons systems to deny the USA sea access and dominance. The first threshold consisted of surveillance ships, aircraft and, satellites, the second land-based, long-range bombers, and the third submarines. Having acquired the submarines, the rationale for China's emphasis on developing electronic surveillance systems and an indigenous global positioning system is now apparent. Writing of the Chinese Admiral Liu, who is often referred to as the Chinese Mahan, McDevitt states,

When one compares the Soviet strategy of fifteen years ago (in the mid-1980s) to what we believe is China's first- and second-island strategic construct, the parallels are striking. ... When Liu's thinking is compared to Soviet naval strategy, especially

Admiral Gorshkov’s notions of positioning a series of increasingly powerful defensive layers the closer one approached Russia’s coast, the Soviet influence is clear. Arguably, Liu’s strategy could be characterised as Soviet naval strategy with Chinese characteristics.²³



Liu proposed a “three island chain” approach in 1988, according to which China would establish a permanent blue water presence in the first “island chain”, along a Japan-Taiwan-Philippines axis including the South China Sea by 2010. By 2025 it would establish a similar presence in the second “island chain”, stretching from the Aleutians through the Mariana Islands, to the east coast of Papua New Guinea, and including the Strait of Malacca. By 2050, its reach would extend to the third “island chain”, starting in the Aleutians and ending in Antarctica, including waters off New Zealand and Australia.²⁴

Effectively, Liu was distilling Mahan’s theories of seapower and adapting those to China’s geographical constraints. Given the fluctuating relationship China had with the USA and USSR, however, Liu could not mention either Mahan or Gorshkov in his writings. More recently, however, Chinese analysts have no inhibitions about citing either. At a 2004 “Symposium on Sea-Lane Security” held in Beijing, Wang Zaibang, Vice President of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, quoted directly from Mahan’s works, almost without exception, his most aggressive statements and precepts, equating command of the sea with overbearing power that negates an enemy’s access to the sea.²⁵

Xu Qi, a senior PLAN captain argues that while China’s economic growth demands a turn to the sea, it is threatened by the USA’s naval dominance in the South and East China Seas. He notes that China’s “passage in and out of the open seas is obstructed by two island chains. [China’s] maritime geostrategic posture is in a semi-closed condition”,²⁶ adding, “From a geostrategic perspective, China’s heartland faces the sea, the benefits of economic development are increasingly dependent on the sea, [and] security comes from the sea”.²⁷

The solution, he argues, is to develop naval power. He calls for an “unceasing move towards a ‘blue-water navy’ [and] expand the scope of maritime security defence”.²⁸ A blue-water navy would need to “cast the field of vision of its strategic defence to the open ocean [and to] develop attack capabilities for battle operations [along] exterior lines”.²⁹ This argument could well have been taken from Mahan’s writings.

Similarly, Professor Ni Lexiong of the Research Institute of War and Culture reminds China of its humiliation by Japan in 1894 – 1895 when the Japanese fleet crushed its navy. Asserting that “the key to winning that war was to gain command of the sea”, he writes that Mahan,

... believed that whoever could control the sea would win the war and change history; that command of the sea is achieved through decisive naval battles on the seas; that the outcome of decisive naval battles is determined by the strength of fire power on each side of the engagement.³⁰

The foregoing examples make the point that China’s naval strategists are becoming increasingly assertive and Mahanian in their outlook. It is therefore probable that China will seek to maintain the security of its commercial SLOCs. In other words, if Chinese strategists apply Mahanian theory to the Yellow, East China and South China Seas, they must seek to assert command of these seas, which parallels Mahan’s writings on USA’s need to dominate the Caribbean. Using Mahanian theory, China must guarantee sea-going communications along its coast; these could be threatened by, say, US forces situated in Okinawa which could easily be positioned at the junction of the East China and South China Seas.

Since China will not willingly depend on a security umbrella provided by another state, it must securitise the SLOCs which carry its trade and commerce, which is best done by claiming the South China Sea as its own body of water. It claimed virtually the entire sea in 1992, putting this position into domestic law.³¹ China has made clear its willingness to use force to back up its maritime claims. In 1976 its naval forces took the Paracel Islands from Vietnam, and in 1988 the PLAN fought a Vietnamese flotilla to occupy part of the Spratly Islands and install anti-ship missiles on Woody Island. In 1995, after the USA withdrew from the Philippines, China seized Mischief Reef from within the Philippines’s two hundred nautical mile exclusive economic zone and fortified it in 1998.³²

In this, China has once again conformed to Mahanian theory: establishing forward bases, extending its outward defence perimeter, strengthening its SLOCs and seeking control over the approaches to the Strait of Malacca, itself the conduit for a full sixth of world trade and the SLOC for vital energy imports for China, Japan and other East Asian countries.³³ Thus, while some analysts might emphasise the potential under-sea hydro-carbon deposits of the East and South China Seas, these seas are strategically important to China because of their geography too. China views them as one continuous ocean. In order to command it, China’s navy must be able to operate freely within it. Thus China claims them and their resources.

This thinking was first presented by China in its Defence White Paper, *China’s National Defence in 2004*. It provides an appraisal of China’s strategic environment and the strategies it requires to flourish. It was more or less re-stated in the 2006 paper, *China’s National Defence in 2006* and again in *The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces*, published

in April 2013.³⁴ The 2006 paper notes that “Security issues relating to energy, resources, finance, information and international shipping routes are mounting”,³⁵ requiring the military to diversify its roles and missions, a concept elaborated upon in the 2013 paper.

This need to defend its international shipping routes requires China to focus on the regional environment, in the first instance, since its SLOCs pass relatively close to Vietnam, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines and the Strait of Malacca. To China, Taiwan represents the most tangible and immediate impediment to the securitisation of its SLOCs and any maritime ambitions it may have in the region and further afield. Its geographic position allows it to thwart virtually all power projection from the mainland. As the map above demonstrates, the island chain of which Taiwan is a major part stretches from Japan to the Philippine archipelago, virtually encompassing the Chinese mainland which arcs into the Pacific Ocean. Taiwan lies off-shore in the centre of the Chinese coastline; it has, therefore, the potential to block all of China’s access to the sea. In naval terms, Taiwan can potentially block the Chinese north and south fleets from amassing. It is also the most effective barrier to Chinese naval operations beyond the first island chain. China learned the value of Taiwan in the Korean War of 1950 - 1953. After US President Truman ordered the Seventh Fleet to the Taiwan Strait, General Douglas MacArthur stated that Formosa (Taiwan) was “an unsinkable aircraft carrier”, able to project American power along China’s coast in a containment strategy.³⁶ The island’s position along with its ties to the USA have caused resentment in Beijing since the CCP cannot achieve its goal of national unification and also poses a major security threat to China’s development. The Chinese analyst Lin Zhibo sums the situation up:

“Militarily, Taiwan is a potential which the USA could use in the western Pacific. The use of Taiwan could enable effective control of sea lines of communication between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia and the Middle East.³⁷ ... Thus the USA sees Taiwan as “an unsinkable aircraft carrier”, giving it a maximum degree of control over China’s East and South Sea fleets.³⁸

Lin probably had the implied threat posed by two US carrier groups deliberately positioned in the vicinity during the Taiwan Crisis of 1996 in mind when he wrote that.

To overcome this handicap, China must possess a navy capable of circling the island at will. This could explain its massive ship-building program. On the other hand, “unifying” Taiwan with the mainland will be more to Beijing’s liking since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will have taken another step towards its stated goal of “unifying” China. It could be argued that nationalism presses the CCP to integrate Taiwan with the mainland. While true to a degree, it is equally arguable that it is Mahan’s theory which drives China’s desire to achieve this objective, nationalism being the vehicle used in the process.³⁹

Like Taiwan, Japan poses another maritime security risk to China. The lay of the Japanese home (four main) islands, the Ryukyus and the outlying islands and atolls all constitute an impediment to any Chinese maritime power-projection aspirations. The length of the Japanese archipelago, when combined with its situation close to the East Asian land mass, virtually guarantee tensions with a maritime-constrained China. The Japanese home islands stretch approximately 1,200 km, forming a crescent which shadows China’s eastern seaboard. It thus poses an obstacle to any projected Chinese naval power from most Chinese

ports north of Xiamen.⁴⁰ Furthermore, the Ryukyu Islands, according to Wu Qingli, a Chinese analyst, “plays a major role in effectively controlling the Asia-Pacific coast”.⁴¹ In fact, any Chinese notions of a freely-mobile navy were undone when in 2004 a Chinese *Han* class, nuclear-powered attack submarine, which had left Qingdao and circumnavigated Guam, moved into Japan’s maritime territory between the Miyako and Ishigaki Islands. According to Taiwanese sources, the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force had tracked the submarine from the moment it left Chinese territory.⁴²

More recently, there has been increased tension over the ownership of the Senkaku / Diaoyu Islands, which are claimed by both China and Japan. China, as it does with Taiwan, places the dispute in the realms of nationalism, sovereignty, and its long-term access to the resources in the surrounding sea-bed. While this may be true, a regional map demonstrates that control of these islands allows China the opportunity to outflank Taiwan, which could also explain Taiwan’s claim to the islands.



Tokyo has well-developed maritime defence strategic thinking. It needs to protect 27,000 kilometres of coastline with little strategic depth (Honshu Island, for instance, stretches two hundred and fifty kilometres from West to East at its widest). Japanese defence planners, therefore, have always considered forward defence at sea, necessitating an advanced navy.⁴³ Combined with this, its latent major-power potential, its huge maritime defence area in comparison to its much lesser land area, and its recent gradual departure from its post-World War Two pacifism all conjoin to make Japan a formidable adversary to China.⁴⁴

It is reasonable to assume that Beijing will turn its attention to the Indian Ocean once it has secured the East China, Yellow and South China Seas to its satisfaction. That is of little surprise. Since it is energy products which fuel China’s economy, and since China is a net importer of energy, it must necessarily secure its energy-focussed SLOCs. The question,

however, must be asked: are China's efforts in the Indian Ocean an attempt to securitise its energy SLOCs or aimed towards something else? This question will be answered by examining China's activities in the region.

China's energy consumption has more than doubled over the last two decades. Without domestically-available energy products, its dependence on imports has blown out.⁴⁵ In 2003 China became the world's second-largest consumer of petroleum, surpassing Japan. Also in 2003, imported energy products accounted for more than 30 per cent of total Chinese oil consumption. In 2013 China became the world's largest global energy consumer according to the International Energy Agency (IEA).⁴⁶ US analysts predict that oil demand in China will at least double over the next two decades,⁴⁷ and foreign supplies will account for over 75 per cent of that demand.⁴⁸ The US National Intelligence Council estimates that oil consumption needs to grow by 150 per cent by 2020 to sustain China's current growth rate. Essentially, its demand for oil will be almost equal to the demand of the USA at the time.⁴⁹

The demand for oil pressured Beijing to secure an uninterrupted flow. China imports the bulk of its oil from the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa, forcing it to look carefully at its energy SLOCs, especially as they converge at the Strait of Malacca, through which over 75 per cent passes.⁵⁰ Chinese analyst Shi Hongtao states,

It is no exaggeration to say that whoever controls the Strait of Malacca will also have a stranglehold on the energy route of China. Excessive reliance on this strait has brought an important potential threat to China's energy security.⁵¹

This thought is echoed by Zhang Yuncheng⁵² and Zhu Fenggang.⁵³ Other Chinese strategists see the USA's recent pivot to Asia as an attempt to "encircle China"⁵⁴ and "blockade the Asian mainland (China in particular)"⁵⁵ from Guam and Diego Garcia.

The USA, however, is not the sole cause for China's concerns in the Indian Ocean. It sees India as a challenge to its interests in the IOR. The importance China gives to India is gauged by the attention it pays to India's rising maritime power.⁵⁶ Some Chinese strategists allege India is the dominant power in the IOR and, given its great-power aspirations and potential, could become China's equal,⁵⁷ countering its attempts to exert control in the IOR. Added to this, India's energy requirements will likely create a zero-sum approach at sea.⁵⁸ Consequently, they see India's maritime ambitions in geopolitical terms. Zhang Ming posits, "The Indian subcontinent is akin to a massive triangle reaching into the heart of the Indian Ocean, benefitting any from there who seek to control the Indian Ocean".⁵⁹ Xie Zhijun, another Chinese commentator alleges Mahan declared,

Whoever controls the Indian Ocean will dominate India and the coastal states of the Indian Ocean as well as control the massive area between the Mediterranean and the Pacific Ocean.⁶⁰

Quoting Jawaharlal Nehru and the Indian strategist, K M Panikkar, Zhao Bole, Professor of South Asian Studies at Sichuan University, argues that India's rise is due to four main geopolitical factors. First, India and its surrounding areas possess many natural resources; secondly, it is the most powerful state in the IOR; third, the physical distance between New

Delhi and Washington gives India space to manoeuvre despite the primacy of the US navy in the Indian Ocean; and fourth, India borders economically dynamic regions such as the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China itself.⁶¹ He claims India's non-aligned stance during the Cold War camouflaged its concern with maritime issues.

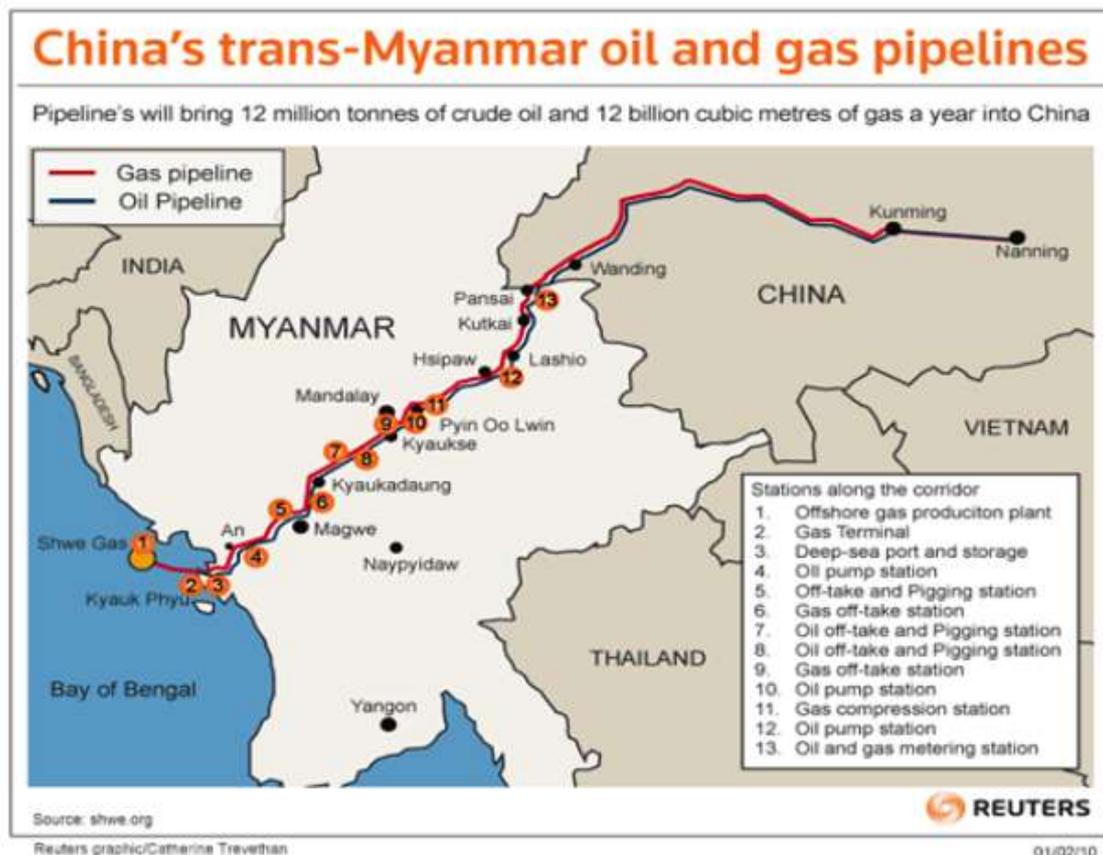
After the Cold War, however, India has taken a close interest in South-East Asia via its "Look East" policy. Zhao Gancheng argues the policy has major geo-strategic implications for India's great-power aspirations. Acknowledging its strategic motivations, he states India's increased interaction with ASEAN will tempt the USA to view it as a potential balance to China.⁶² Hou Songlin, a Chinese scholar, argues that the policy has maritime implications for ASEAN states. He alleges its second stage will expand into Indo-ASEAN cooperation on counter-terrorism, trans-national crime fighting and maritime security which "represent an Indian grand strategy to control the Indian Ocean, particularly the Malacca Strait".⁶³

China enacted a considerable response. A 2005 report by US defence contractor Booz, Allen and Hamilton alleged China had a long-term geo-strategy to construct military bases and facilities in areas proximate to its trade and energy SLOCs.⁶⁴ Called its "String of Pearls", the document alleged China was creating bases in the South China Sea, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Africa, the Suez Canal, Venezuela and the Panama Canal - all sources of China's energy imports or close to its trade and energy SLOCs. In the IOR they stretch from Hainan Island in China's south to the Horn of Africa and include Woody Island in the South China Sea, Sittwe in Myanmar, Chittagong in Bangladesh, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Harao in the Maldives, Gwadar in Pakistan, and points in Kenya and Sudan. The strategy included a proposal to create a canal through Thailand's Kra Isthmus so as to bypass the Malacca Strait.⁶⁵ One report indicates China has concluded a secret treaty to construct a submarine base in the Maldives.⁶⁶



While each "pearl" provides China fast access to its SLOCs, they provide two other functions: the ability to watch over and balance India's ports and naval bases in the IOR, and to,

potentially, encircle India. It has established at least four electronic listening ports in the Andaman Sea at Manaung, Hainggyi, Zadetkyi Island, and the Cocos Islands (close to India's naval base in the Andaman Islands) in Myanmar.⁶⁷ China has also constructed an integrated transportation system linking its Yunan Province with Kyaukpyu Port at Sittwe in Myanmar, passing close to the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh, which it claims as South Tibet.



In March 2001, Pakistan announced China would help it to create a new port at Gwadar. Though discussed earlier, planning was hastened after the 1999 Kargil Crisis between India and Pakistan. During the conflict, the Indian Navy blockaded Karachi harbour, which carries over ninety per cent of Pakistan's trade and the greater part of its oil imports, exposing a critical Pakistani vulnerability.⁶⁸ The Pakistani government saw Gwadar as a means to empower the Pakistani Navy to challenge India's.⁶⁹ The port was deepened from eleven to nineteen metres, enabling it to host aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines.⁷⁰ Gwadar is strategically significant for two major reasons. First, it reduces India's ability to blockade Pakistan during a war. Second, it turns Pakistan into a major route for trade and transport with the Central Asian Republics. From the Chinese perspective, a stronger Pakistan is better able to balance India, an essential part of China's security.⁷¹

Thus, Garver and other analysts of Sino-Indian relations argue that both countries are engaged in an offensive-realist struggle for power balancing,⁷² resulting in a situation Jervis described as a "security dilemma".⁷³ They link China's growing energy interests to its security policies, characterising it as a "revisionist" (i.e. not a *status quo*) power.⁷⁴ China characterises its increasing competitiveness, based upon its rising economy and military might, in zero-sum terms, a trend they see as dangerous as it could lead to regional conflict.

There are a number of compelling reasons that drive China to modernise its navy. Its energy imports play too important a part in its economic development to risk its safety. China must be able to protect its trade and energy SLOCs, and it has taken the necessary steps to do so. The issue, however, lies in their nature.

Its “island chain” strategy demonstrates China’s use of its circumstances, its need to securitise its SLOCs, to achieve ends beyond its stated need. The attention and effort given to “integrating” Taiwan with the mainland and the claims made regarding the sovereignty of the Diaoyu / Senkaku Islands - and the South China Sea itself - negate security in the East China and South China Seas.⁷⁵ This is an expansionist strategy, not a defensive one. To this extent, China displays the strategies enunciated by Mahan and falls in line with Mearsheimer’s theory of offensive realism.

Similarly, China’s strategy in the IOR shows Mahanian characteristics. Here, even more than in the western Pacific Ocean, China demonstrates that its strategy could be put to dual use. While it is in place ostensibly to protect its SLOCs, its “String of Pearls”, for instance, could be used to contain India, which fact has not escaped the attention of Indian strategists. This examination, then, provides grounds to assume that China’s strategy is offensive in nature.⁷⁶ In adhering to Mahan’s theory of seapower, China aspires to regional hegemonism and sees the modernisation and enhanced capability of its navy as a key stratagem in achieving that goal.

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