



UNIVERSIDADE
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Beijing's Maritime Strategy in the South China Sea

Degree: MA in Governance, Leadership and Democracy Studies

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Master Thesis written under the supervision of Professor Miguel Monjardino.

Institute for Political Studies

September 2023

Lisbon, Portugal

Abstract

The present study aims to analyse, evaluate, and comprehend some of the main factors that may explain China's strategic aspiration to become a Great Maritime Power. Using historical background within the approaches applied during the Ming and Qing dynasties, it will try to better identify the origins of this ambition. Afterwards, we will focus on the methods that are being used in the contemporary era with the aim of giving China a sturdy, undisputed, and prominent place in the world arena. Finally, we will try to present the key points so that we can understand why China wants to be a dominant great maritime power. For this dissertation I will use a geopolitical and strategic studies methodology.

Since China is gaining a greater importance worldwide having more and more countries engaged or interdependent economically, commercially, or politically with it every day, we believe this to be an important topic to analyse and discuss, mainly from the perspective of a western outlook, and most important from a European citizen, since it can give to this dissertation a perspective from an outsider. However, this theme also has implications in the European level and that is why it is also important to raise awareness to it.

In the final remarks, we will seek to conclude specifying the reasons that have led China, over the centuries to this day, to adopt a maritime strategy for the 21st century and how this choice has influences Beijing's foreign policy. We are going to focus on five main topics — What is Maritime Power?, History – Ancient China and the Sea, China Dream, Modernisation of the Chinese Navy, and The 21st Century Thucydides Trap.

Keywords: Maritime Power; Chinese Navy; China Dream; PLA Navy; South China Sea; Belt and Road Initiative. 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

- China – People’s Republic of China
- CCP – Chinese Communist Party
- Taiwan – Republic of China
- SCS – South China Sea
- PLA – People’s Liberation Army
- PLAN – People’s Liberation Army Navy
- ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations
- BRI – Belt and Road Initiative
- 21st century MSC – 21st century Maritime Silk Road
- MOOTW - Military Operations Other Than War
- UNCLOS - United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
- U.S.A. or U.S. – United States of America
- EU – European Union
- WW II – World War II
- FONOPs – Freedom of Navigation Operations.
- SLOC – Sea Lines of Communication.

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Acronyms and Abbreviations	4
Introduction	6
I. What is a Maritime Power?	13
I.I Key Instrumental Concepts	13
I.I.1 Sea Power	13
I.I.2 Maritime Power	17
I.I.3 Maritime Strategy	18
II. History - Ancient China and the Sea	20
II.1 Ming and Qing Dynasties: Sea Endeavours	20
III. China Dream	28
III.1 Ideological frames in contemporary China	28
III. 2 ‘China Dream’: The Awakening	32
III. 3 Chinese Maritime Rights and Interests	40
III. 4 The Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road	44
IV. Modernisation of the Chinese Navy	56
IV.1 The Chinese Maritime Strategy in the South China Sea	56
IV.2 The PLA and PLA Navy	66
V. The 21st Century Thucydides Trap	75
V. 1 The Unites States of America and the South China Sea: An outlook.	75
V. 2 21st Century Thucydides Trap	90
Conclusion	95
Bibliography	105

Introduction

What explains China's ambition to be a Great Maritime Power or even the Greatest Maritime Power of the 21st century? To answer the question, we must know about China's ancient history and how it influenced its leadership in the last decades. Ages ago, China did not show its will to explore the seas for trade or export its culture and values in a consistent way. The ocean was seen as a natural border which should never be trespassed. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the Song Dynasty, in the ninth century, the maritime space developed a crucial role for China's economic and commercial progress. Naturally, it became increasingly important for the Song leadership. The sea made China secure.

However, with the founding of the Ming Dynasty in 1368, foreign trade lost its priority to the Emperor, as the Government saw it as a possible threat to the unity of the empire¹, bringing attention to the political and centralised control as a way of exercising power², an unpleasant and unpopular approach in the economic matters, based on the "conventional Confucian view of agriculture as the main source of the country's wealth, trade as ignorable and parasitic and frugality as the prime imperial virtue"³. According to this assessment, trade was only made as tribute missions between China and the most important countries at the time, which among them were Japan, Korea, and the Ryūkyū Islands, that could bring any benefits to the country, namely produce sufficiently to fulfil Chinese needs. Over the years, the political and military strategy became less ambitious and less aggressive. So, it was developed and

¹John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 133, "(...) when certain sectors of China showed a tendency to grow through industry or foreign trade, the Ming government saw no reason to help them but rather opposed such a growth of imbalance which "in turn would threaten the empire's political unity."

²Catarina Abreu de Pinho, "What China cease to be a sea power by the mid-fifteenth century?". Essay written for the MA in Governance, Leadership and Democracy Studies course of Leadership and Strategic Challenges.

³Angela Schottenhammer, "China's Rise and Retreat as a Maritime Power", ed. Schottenhammer Angela and Antony Robert J. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 129.

implemented to preserve Chinese maritime and territorial borders and as well as to promote the peace and the territorial integrity of the Empire by not messing with other neighbouring countries. Therefore, the traditional view of Chinese emperors was to view private maritime trade as an instrument for coastal protection rather than a tool to achieve political power. A strategic dilemma between the sea and the land characterised the Ming Dynasty. On the one hand, the Chinese feared a possible resurgence of Mongol power, which indeed happened and led them to an inland focus. On the other hand, their maritime borders were becoming important just as a protective aspect to avoid the attack of pirates but also from the intrusion of Europeans trying to make clandestine trade of Chinese goods.

However, the maritime trade continued to be present on the lives of the Chinese population, since fisherman needed to pursue with their jobs to subsist, and therefore did it illegally, through smuggling, ‘piracy’ trade, or even emigration overseas⁴, increasing China’s presence abroad⁵. As a consequence of this unceasing uprising, during the new Yongle Emperor reign (r. 1403-1424), came the famous Zheng He’s expeditions as a way of demonstrating China’s status as the leading power in political, social, and cultural terms in the Asian macro-region. The purpose of these expeditions was to give diplomacy a leading role and to manifest and evidence China’s maritime authority, as it became a member of the South Sea World Economy, making China at the heart of maritime trade. Nevertheless, these expeditions did not last long. As it was said previously, “the influence of some important Confucianists in the government – fundamentally against the trade and contact with other countries –, or the incredibly amount of money that was spent during these voyages, led to the

⁴ Angela Schottenhammer, The “China Seas” in world history: A general outline of the role of Chinese and East Asian maritime space from its origins to c. 1800, *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures*, Volume 1, Issue 2, 2012, Pages 63-86. “But Ming China’s new maritime policy not only prevented many foreign merchants from coming to China to trade it also deprived great parts of the coastal population of their former livelihoods. Many Chinese who had depended on maritime trade for their living were now driven into smuggling, either becoming ‘pirates’, emigrating or both”.

⁵ “as a consequence of the new Ming policy, trading centres also shifted away from the Chinese littoral to other region”. *Ibidem*, 80.

abolition of such events”⁶ ⁷. Nevertheless, this was not the only reason. In fact, after the death of the Yongle Emperor, it stopped making sense to pursue the expeditions, as under his power, the Government was its main sponsor, leading to tensions between the defenders of the seas and the neo-Confucianists. To sum up, it is understandable why China withdrew from the seas when they were at the pinnacle of naval power⁸. As it was said previously, the Chinese were less ambitious. Firstly, as their external trade was very much residual and their continental borders security, mainly the northern one, were at risk because of the Mongols. Secondly, they were facing the expenses brought by the construction of the ‘Great Wall’ and by the extravagant measures taken by the emperor to move the country’s capital from Nanjing to Beijing. And thirdly, because of the order for construction of the ‘Forbidden City’. That said, it is crucial to be aware that the Ming Dynasty made a poor geostrategic assessment in leaving the seas and paying attention to the South coast, “as the decline of the Ming maritime power with the persistence of the maritime prohibitions led to the uprise of piracy and illegal activity in the South seashore, mainly by the Japanese. This event analysis leads us to realise that the coastal borders were never a fundamental part of the Ming dynasty political or geostrategic agenda and lost even more importance when this rivalries between supporters of trade in the seas⁹, and defenders of maritime restrictions¹⁰ began to increase, alongside with violent confrontations in the sea frontiers because of the consequential illegal trade and disagreements between coastal

⁶ Catarina Abreu de Pinho, “What China cease to be a sea power by the mid-fifteenth century?”. Essay written for the MA in Governance, Leadership and Democracy Studies course of Leadership and Strategic Challenges.

⁷ John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 138.

⁸ John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 139. “In short, anticommercialism and xenophobia won out, and China retired from the world scene. (...) The contradiction between Ming China’s superior capacity for maritime expansion and conservative Neo-Confucian throttling of it suggests that Ming China almost purposely missed the boat of modern technological and economic development”.

⁹ F. W. Mote. *Imperial China: 900-1800* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 617. “Blue China refers to the blue waters of the ocean and its doorways to the outside world, to entrepreneurship and individualism supported by the private mercantile activity that could not be bureaucratized and controlled.”

¹⁰ *Ibidem*. “(...) Yellow China refers to Yellow River (...). It stands for cultural conservatism, wasteful use of manpower, uneconomic investment in public works that officials could plan and direct keep under their control.”

population that depended on the seas to survive¹¹. This “had a huge institutional and cultural impact on China for many centuries, something that still today influences their national and foreign strategy”¹². According to the decisions made by the current Chinese Government in concerning its national and foreign policies, it is noticeable that the Ming Dynasty history is present with the purpose of avoiding taking similar mistakes. Furthermore, nowadays, China has all the resources necessary to become once again a great maritime power as the Ming Dynasty. However, it has something which that dynasty did not have — the will to enrol in this journey, represented by the implementation by Chinese President Xi Jinping of policies such as the *Twentieth First-Century Maritime Silk Road* (21st MSR) or the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI).

China’s integration into the phenomenon of Globalisation has been and has been very important since the 1980s, particularly regarding its maritime and technological development. Although there has always been caution on the part of the Chinese Communist Party in opening its country to the world and free trade, as this can be dangerous in political and economic terms, some key points have always been taken into account. All resumes in five points. Firstly, “catalysing economic reform, through propelling structural reforms, and pushing back against conservative vested interests. Secondly, strengthening marketization and competition by exposing Chinese companies to foreign competition to improve domestic supply productivity, profitability, and innovation. Thirdly, security technology and innovation by accessing foreign technology and know-how to enable economic development and innovation. Fourthly, attracting capital inflow since foreign investment boosts domestic growth, upgrades industry, and improves efficiency in China’s financial markets. And lastly, to conclude, deepening economic ties since strong trade and investment ties help expand China’s economic power.

¹¹ Catarina Abreu de Pinho, “What China cease to be a sea power by the mid-fifteenth century?”. Essay written for the MA in Governance, Leadership and Democracy Studies course of Leadership and Strategic Challenges, 9.

¹² *Ibidem*, 4.

Real and prospective of opening China's market helps secure market access for Chinese companies abroad for exports and investment"¹³. The BRI and the 21st MSR intend to design and implement a vast network of connections and economic corridors that would link China to the rest of the world, with diverse infrastructures along the main routes (internal and external), facilitating trade with its final destinations and imports, in a sense reverse, of goods and raw materials. Globalisation has a significant impact on this. In fact, it "has promoted the sustained and healthy development of China's economy, it has spurred trade and investment, intensifying pressure on cross-border capital flows, and it has boosted national income but also expanded the domestic income gap"¹⁴. Contrary to the European countries of the fifteenth century, China is now facing its moment of colonisation¹⁵. First, it faced colonisation in terms of getting into other countries through policies such as the BRI, which is having an enormous impact in Africa and South America to use this country's resources, either raw materials or workers. Second, China realised that opening its gates to the world is very important for its development as a country and a Great Power. To complete this 'mission', it will have to compete with countries such as the United States of America, or European countries, which are already one step ahead in their development as maritime and commercial powers.

This dissertation was built around four main topics – Maritime Power, the South China Sea, the Chinese Navy, and Globalisation. These topics are divided into five chapters and thirteen subchapters – "What is Maritime Power?", "History – Ancient China and the Sea", "China Dream", "Modernisation of the Chinese Navy", and "The 21st Century Thucydides Trap".

¹³ Alexander Brown, John Gunter, and Mark J. Zenglein, "China's shifting approach to economic globalization", *Merics China Monitor*, October 2019.

¹⁴ The People's Bank of China, "How Globalisation has Affected China and Related Policy Issues" (December 21, 2018), BIS Paper No. 100.

¹⁵ Amitai Etzioni, "Is China a new colonial power?: How well do the claims of neocolonialism stand by?", *The Diplomat*, November 9, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/11/is-china-a-new-colonial-power/>

The dissertation begins with a concise introduction with a brief presentation of this dissertation theme and outlines the methodology used during the writing process, justifying the follow-up. These reasons led to choosing this study topic and the intended aim, ending with the presentation of the structure used to perform the thesis. The first three chapters are intended to give us a historical and political framework of China's relationship with the sea in the past and how and, more importantly, why it is willing to change that relationship in the years to come. The fourth chapter addresses the Chinese change of paradigm concerning its navy and the modernisation carried out in recent years, notably to deal with countries such as the USA, which are increasingly present in the South China Sea. The fifth and last chapter discusses how China's Maritime Rapprochement has had implications for the relationships with the major powers in this geopolitical zone, such as the United States of America and Japan.

The first chapter, "What is Maritime Power?" — is divided into one subchapter that is, therefore, divided into three topics that are intended to present to us the primary three key concepts — *Sea Power*, *Maritime Power*, and *Maritime Strategy* — in order to understand the notion of Maritime Power and what defines it. To begin with, it will present the definition of the concepts previously announced since they are all an integral part of the concept of Maritime Power. Secondly, it will present the concept of Maritime Power, which was beforehand decomposed so that we can understand its importance for our analysis of the central theme.

The second chapter, entitled — "History – Ancient China and the Sea" — will follow a structure focused on one crucial issue, "Ming and Qing Dynasties: Sea Endeavours", that is going to focus on the main aspects that led China to a rapprochement to the maritime environment, namely because of the country's history path along the centuries.

The third chapter — "China Dream" — will address the Chinese motivation to become a significant great maritime power. The chapter divided into four subchapters – "Ideological Frames in Contemporary China", "China Dream: The Awakening", "Chinese Maritime Rights

and Interests”, and “The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road”. The main topic here is to understand China’s position to have a place in the geostrategic and geopolitical arena alongside the leading great maritime powers, namely the United States of America.

The fourth chapter — “Modernisation of the Chinese Navy”— has the same structure as the previous ones and is composed of two subchapters. It will start with the description of “The Chinese Maritime Strategy in the South China Sea”, the main Maritime arena where China can have a more excellent position as a maritime power and where it can conduct its navy development and geostrategy in maritime terms. Then, we will focus on “The PLA and the PLA Navy”, the Chinese armed forces, and their role in this significant plan.

The fifth and last chapter – “The 21st Century Thucydides Trap” – shows not only the tensions rising between China and the United States of America in the SCS, but also the rising tensions between their neighbours, namely the Philippines, Malaysia, but mainly Taiwan, which is the giant spotlight of tension in the region nowadays. The conclusion of this dissertation will try to gather all the arguments analysed during the work and answer its central topic, “What is Beijing’s Maritime Strategy in the South China Sea?”. In the final remarks of this dissertation, the intention is to reach an outcome of the reasons that have led China, over the centuries to this day, to achieve a prominent position, especially in the South China Sea region and, in what way, this has taken an increasingly strong position on the Chinese foreign policy agenda.

I. What is a Maritime Power?

I.I Key Instrumental Concepts

I.I.1 Sea Power

The definition of sea power goes back to the growing hegemony of classical Greece that “remain the foundation for any enquiry into the meaning of seapower as strategy, culture, identity or empire”¹⁶. The genesis of what has been called *seapowers* is related to Athens due to its geographic position and the Piraeus Port that links the city to the Aegean Sea. Consequently, Athens became a huge constructor of ships and vessels, essential for creating the “first seapower great power”¹⁷. One can say that the construction of this condition came not from what was the centre of civilisation but through the response given by the “marginal coastal communities to the limited terrestrial opportunities by developing the Mediterranean trade networks that supplied vital resources – timber, copper, and tin – to the great land empires of Egypt, Anatolia, and Mesopotamia”¹⁸.

John Ruskin (1819-1900), an influential English intellectual, identified themes “that recur in all the great seapowers: inclusive politics, the central place of commerce in civil life, and opposition to universal monarchies, hegemonic powers intent on conquest and dominion. Above all seapowers fought for trade”¹⁹. Andrew Lambert, the author of the book *Seapower States* makes a transposition to the present showing that the “British had recently levered open the Chinese Empire with amphibious power, as the Venetians used the Fourth Crusade to create

¹⁶Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires And The Conflict That Made The Modern World*, (London: Yale University Press), 2019, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 17.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 1.

their seapower empire”²⁰ presenting this ambition cultivated by China to become a great maritime empire. This desire also developed due to China’s economically troubled period throughout much of the 20th century, where it was obliged to sign treaties with the greatest potentials of the time, such as the US, the UK, France, the Netherlands, and Japan. This round of treaties began in 1842 with the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing with the United Kingdom, which “ceded Hong Kong Island to Britain in perpetuity and stipulated that five ports were to be opened to foreign trade: Canton (Guangzhou), Amoy (Xiamen), Foochow (Fuzhou), Ningpo (Ningbo), and Shanghai. These became known as Treaty Ports and were the first in an ever-increasing series of settlements that spread themselves across the country until January 11, 1943, when the Chinese and the British signed the Treaty for the Relinquishment of Extra-Territorial Rights in China, ending the system after 101 years”²¹. Through this analysis, it is easy to realise that it was this *forced opening* through the introduction of treaty ports that “have allowed China to adjust to globalization, and their legacy is China’s place in the world today”²². The great maritime powers that existed were the Athenian Empire, the Roman Empire, the Republic of Venice, and Great Britain’s Empire, and were defined as “maritime imperial great powers, dependent on the control of ocean communications for cohesion, commerce, and control. As a group they did more to advance trade, knowledge, and political inclusion, they shaped the global economy and the liberal values that define the contemporary Western world”²³. Andrew Lambert mentions that “while continental great powers from Persia to the People’s Republic of China create both powerful navies or overseas empires, their acquisition did not change the underlying culture of the state which has been, in almost all cases, terrestrial

²⁰ Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires And The Conflict That Made The Modern World*, (London: Yale University Press), 2019, 1.

²¹ Bracken, G, “Treaty Ports in China: Their Genesis, Development, and Influence”, *Journal of Urban History*, 45, 168–176.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires And The Conflict That Made The Modern World*, (London: Yale University Press), 2019, 5.

and military, excluding merchants and financiers from political power. In general terms these states were too large and too powerful to profit from a sea identity”²⁴. As we will see below, this was the position taken by Imperial China during the end of the Ming Dynasty.

The “Mahanian doctrine of sea power, developed by Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan – American naval officer and educator”²⁵ –, was widely used, namely, by the United States of America, when implementing and developing its sea power. This doctrine “drew on Britain’s example in attempting to persuade U.S. leaders of the signal importance of sea power in ensuring economic survival in the increasingly competitive and interdependent world of late nineteenth century”²⁶. In this sense, “a seapower, the ancient Greek *thalassokratia*, was a state that consciously chose to create and sustain a fundamental engagement between nation and ocean, from political inclusion to the rule of law, across the entire spectrum of national life, in order to achieve great power status. It was a cultural choice, not a question of naval power”²⁷.

We must consider the fact that a distinction is made between what was the definition of a seapower in the nineteenth century, and its current definition, as many actors appeared, and others eventually disappeared from the arena of action, as was the case of the Venetian Empire, the Roman Empire, or the Carthaginian Empire. Nowadays, the definition of a seapower takes into consideration major great powers, which mainly already have contact with the sea since they are connoted as maritime states, *such states*, as the United States of America (USA), Japan, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Singapore and, more recently, the People’s Republic of China. According to this analysis, “the cultural legacy of seapower states remains

²⁴ Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires And The Conflict That Made The Modern World*, (London: Yale University Press), 2019, 6.

²⁵ Daniel Moran and James A. Russel, *Maritime Strategy and Global Order: Markets, Resources and Global Order*, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 263.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires And The Conflict That Made The Modern World*, (London: Yale University Press, 2019), 323.

fundamentally important in the contemporary world where ‘Western’ states, liberal, inclusive polities, engage with the world by sea, for trade, culture, and security”²⁸. Concerning China, we must realise that, in the past, its maritime ambition did not go beyond its own instead generously defines littoral. Andrew Lambert argues in his book that during the previous dynasties, “China ships and rhetoric served internal agendas while Chinese attitudes to the sea remained profoundly negative. Therefore, if China remained a vast land empire it would never become a seapower, containing many subject peoples, where the key to the Mandate of Heaven (*Tianming*)”²⁹ “is to feed the people and maintain domestic order. The sea was so unimportant, or so dangerous, that China did not have a navy (which is not the case nowadays). Instead, there are three separate forces (as we will mention later), revealing described as the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), which operate independently of one another”³⁰. The PLAN is composed by the Submarine Force, the Surface Force, the Coastal Defence Force, the Marine Corps, and the Naval Air Force. It is also divided into three fleets which are the North Sea Fleet, responsible for the Yellow Sea, the East Sea Fleet, the South Sea Fleet responsible mainly for the South China Sea. In conclusion, we can say that the “seapower strategy focused on controlling the sea for security and economic advantage, not the empty glory of naval battle. The seapower states that used it operated at the watery margins between great land powers in eras of balance and stability”³¹.

²⁸Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires And The Conflict That Made The Modern World*, (London: Yale University Press), 2019.

²⁹ “The **Mandate of Heaven** was the divine source of authority and the right to rule of China’s early kings and emperors. An important element of the mandate was that although the ruler had been given great power, he also had a moral obligation to use it for the good of his people, if he did not then his state would suffer terrible disasters and he would lose the right to govern”. Mark Cartwright, “Mandate of Heaven: definition”, *World History Encyclopedia*, 25 July 2017.

³⁰Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires And The Conflict That Made The Modern World*, (London: Yale University Press, 2019), 313.

³¹ *Ibidem*, 18.

I.I.2 Maritime Power

Professor Geoffrey Till³² writes in his book *Sea Power*, that maritime power has a definition that, overtime, has been somewhat uncertain and too comprehensive, in the sense that both civil elements and military elements can be referred to “as a nation’s maritime capabilities”³³. However, this can be set “as ability to use the sea to exert military, political, or economic power or influence. The maritime power of a state reflects sea-based military capabilities, such as ships and submarines, as well as a range of military land-based assets and space-based systems that may or may not be operated by the navy. It also includes civilian capabilities, such as a coast guard, port infrastructures, merchants shipping, fishing, and shipbuilding”³⁴. During the Sixteenth International Seapower Symposium organised by the U.S. Naval War College in 2003, the then-commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, Adm. Thomas H. Collins³⁵, gave definition of maritime power: “Twenty-first-century maritime power speaks to a nation’s needs beyond purely military capabilities needed for war fighting. (...) It includes, for each of us, the use of the seas to preserve marine resources, to ensure the safe transit and passage of cargoes and people on its waters, to protect maritime borders from intrusion, to uphold its maritime sovereignty, to rescue the distressed who ply the ocean in ships, and to prevent misuse of the oceans. These are timeless national interests, which are more relevant than ever, that collectively can be described as a nation’s maritime security and safety interests”³⁶.

³² British, born in 1940. Professor of Maritime Studies at King’s College and naval historian.

³³ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 3.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ Naval War College. The U.S., “Sixteenth International Seapower Symposium: Report of the Proceedings”. *International Seapower Symposium*, 2003. 42.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 43.

At the 18th Chinese Communist Party Congress in 2012, Secretary General Hu Jintao announced that “China, a traditional continental power, should become a maritime great power, as aspired to become a leading, perhaps the leading, maritime power”³⁷. Never a leader of the CCP has said this before. After this Party Congress “it has become clear that while China defines “maritime power” in its broadest sense, it also has concluded that its coercive elements are central to the protection of, and advancement of China’s maritime rights and interests and they are not limited to the navy but include the coast guard and maritime militia”³⁸. This definition has had important implications. To start with, Beijing must have a strong and technologically advanced navy. On top of that, it must also have “a large and effective coast guard, a first-class merchant marine and fishing fleet, a globally recognized shipbuilding capability, and the ability to extract economically important maritime resources”³⁹. All *modus operandi* is essential for Chinese to ensure its safety as well as to put into practice its ambitions and leading role.

I.I.3 Maritime Strategy

Strategy is a key vector for planning the method used during the action plan. In this case, we will focus solely on the concept of maritime strategy and try to understand what its pertinence is for this dissertation. As Daniel Moran and James A. Russell say in the introduction to their book *Maritime Strategy and Global Order: Markets, Resources and Global*

³⁷ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 1.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, 4.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

Order “strategy means a course of action, conducted by a political community in its relations with others, in which the use of force is not ruled out”⁴⁰.

The maritime strategy has a “dual nature”⁴¹. As Clausewitz mentioned, given that it uses “naval forces to achieve political ends by their impact on international trade”⁴². In fact, what illustrates the territorial maritime strategy is exclusively the weapons that are used for the implementation of this plan, which in this case are the ships, and which have as their objective “secure or deny access to resources, to markets, to enemies, to allies, to battlefields, and to information”⁴³. The maritime strategy is crucial for constructing a stable international system to maintain peace on land and at sea. For that stability to be feasible, it is imperative to design a strategy to help establish an order to achieve it.

⁴⁰ Daniel Moran and James A. Russel, *Maritime Strategy and Global Order: Markets, Resources and Global Order*, (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), ix.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, x.

II. History - Ancient China and the Sea

II.1 Ming and Qing Dynasties: Sea Endeavours

Trade is at the heart of the history of East Asia, particularly for private merchants, in terms of diplomatic contacts between governments, official institutions, and their neighbour countries, and for clandestine purposes, such as migration and expeditions⁴⁴. The maritime space was always important for China. As Angela Schottenhammer notes, “during probably most of the time periods from antiquity through the middle to early modern period it was in fact China that was the, if not always political, but at least economic and cultural centre of the macro-region, which – although it was undoubtedly – primarily a continental power - was also quite active in maritime space”⁴⁵.

As we have seen in the introduction, the Chinese saw the ocean for centuries as a place of division, a natural border which should not be trespassed. The first interactions with the seas were in the Qin-Han Dynasty – Early Imperial China – only with close neighbours, particularly between China and Korea⁴⁶, but also spread to a large part of Southeast Asia (what is now Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, and the Philippines).

From 1368 to 1644, the Ming Dynasty established itself after the fall of the Mongol Yuan State⁴⁷. It was founded by Zhu Yuanzhang, also known as the Hongwu Emperor (r.1368-1398). Ming China is a “unique case of a continental power blessed with sufficient wealth, raw

⁴⁴ “This geographical zone was mainly used by fishermen, private and official traders, government institutions, pirates, travelers for both commercial, military, diplomatic and private purposes, such as migration and voyages”. Angela Schottenhammer, “The “China Seas” in world history: A general outline of the role of Chinese and East Asian maritime space from its origins to c. 1800”, *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures*. No. 2 (December 2012), 64.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, 67. “The first contacts on sea routes were of course established with close neighbours in the region. From approximately the fourth century BC relatively lively shipping developed in the Northeast Asian waters, in particular between China and Korea.”

⁴⁷ *Idem*. “China’s Rise and Retreat as a Maritime Power”, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 202.

materials, technological acumen, and native talent to emerge rapidly as a sea power. This case also highlights the choices that states make about their strategic and economic priorities and the constraints on those choices created by resource limitations, institutional structures, and ideology”⁴⁸. That said, it represents a case that destabilises the idea of geopolitical determinism, demonstrating that, as important as geography is the policy decisions that the leadership of a country or an Empire makes.

The third Ming Emperor, Yongle, reigned from 1403 to 1424. During his sovereignty, he always showed an interest in the regions outside China’s southern border, and so his main goal was to show neighbour countries China’s power “and to perceived it as the strong country he believed it had been in earlier Chinese dynasties, such as the Han and the Song”⁴⁹. Therefore, the Emperor decided to demand some ocean expeditions to the south and west of China, specifying that the “extremely advanced technology and all the riches the country had to offer”⁵⁰ would be used as a way to “overwhelm foreign peoples and convince them beyond any doubt about Ming power”⁵¹. Following this came the famous Zheng He’s expeditions — a well-known Muslim eunuch — ordered by himself as a way of demonstrating that “China was the unchangeable maritime power in the world”⁵². These expeditions — a total of seven performed between 1405 and 1433 — “were of an enormous dimension”⁵³, and their primary purpose was to postulate the authoritarian power in the Asian macro-region and further on, as well as to

⁴⁸ Andrew Erikson, Lyle Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, *China Goes to the Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2021), 241.

⁴⁹ Hucker, C. O., “Yongle”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 1, 2022.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² Angela Schottenhammer, “China’s Rise and Retreat as a Maritime Power”, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 203.

⁵³ “(...) it is clear that never before had both the China Seas and the Indian Ocean seen any naval manoeuvres of similar dimensions.”. *Idem*, “The ‘China Seas’ in world history: A general outline of the role of Chinese and East Asian Maritime space from its origins to c.1800”, *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 1, (November 2012), 81.

impose Beijing's status as the leading political, social, and cultural power, at least in Asia⁵⁴, a vision that was supported by the Emperor.

These expeditions did not serve the same purposes as European colonialist empires. They legitimised the Emperor's preferred choice of using diplomacy to develop political and economic relations with his neighbours. These expeditions were important in fostering China's powerful maritime authority in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Despite the importance these expeditions had and the prominent position in which they placed China during the mid-15th century, they ended up putting it in a position of decline in terms of maritime economy and naval power in the mid-16th century. In other words, "with China standing in the apex of nautical technology at the beginning of the dynasty in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, only to decline into a militarily backward state in the seventeenth century, it became wholly dependent on foreign technology in a desperate battle to stave off its inevitable effect"⁵⁵.

Nevertheless, the ultimate decision of China to leave the seas followed their option to turn inward and take care of its internal borders as well as its internal economy and political stability. These Chinese political and military stances became less ambitious and aggressive for several reasons. In order to maintain their maritime and terrestrial borders intact and peaceful, China should try not to bother with countries that did not bring any benefits to the Empire, namely countries that did not produce sufficiently to fulfil Chinese needs or that did not have enough people to serve them profitably. Besides, never a Chinese government evaluated private trade as an asset for their political power, and the politics regarding maritime influence were mainly to protect their coast. The Imperial Bureaucratic Elite in Beijing was equally afraid that money and possessions in private merchants' hands could threaten the

⁵⁴ Angela Schottenhammer, "The 'China Seas' in world history: A general outline of the role of Chinese and East Asian Maritime space from its origins to c.1800", *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures* 1, (November 2012), 80.

⁵⁵ Andrew Erikson, Lyle Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, *China Goes to the Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2021), 238.

Empire as it could be converted into political current and power⁵⁶. Indeed, Ming China “had the technology, the organisational capacity, the means of becoming a great maritime empire builder”⁵⁷ and they were aware of this, but they had no critical need of that external dimension.

Similarly, the Qing Dynasty, the successor to the Ming Dynasty and the last imperial dynasty of China, founded in 1644 and extinct in 1912, also significantly impacted the institution of a coastal defence strategy. With the fall of the Ming Dynasty and the rise of the Qing Dynasty, the main concern that prevailed was the control of inner Asia, which was increasingly important because Europeans were, for the first time, arriving in Asia in the first half of the 1600s. In this sense, more pressing than moving towards creating a maritime armada, it was necessary to invest in a navy that could effectively protect the Chinese coastal zone – coastal defence or *haifang* – to cope with the arrival of these foreign peoples and preserve their continental territory. Being a concern that had already been felt in the previous dynasty, its goals were “to fight off marauding pirates from raiding China’s coastal line, to halt foreign attempts to claim Chinese territory, and to oppose efforts by either rebellious Chinese factions or ambitious tributaries to use naval forces to usurp the imperial throne”⁵⁸.

As we can see, between 1644 and 1842/3⁵⁹, the maritime transformation of China occurred in several phases⁶⁰. The first stage⁶¹, which took place during the years of 1644 and

⁵⁶ This paragraph was taken from an essay written in 2021, by me for the MA course of “Leadership and Strategic Challenges” lectured by Professor Miguel Monjardino, entitled “What China cease to be a sea power by the mid-fifteenth century”.

⁵⁷ Angela Schottenhammer, “China’s Rise and Retreat as a Maritime Power”, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 203.

⁵⁸ Andrew Erikson, Lyle Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, *China Goes to the Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2021), 289.

⁵⁹ The second and third took place between 1839 and 1842 respectively.

⁶⁰ Angela Schottenhammer, “China’s Rise and Retreat as a Maritime Power”, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 203.

⁶¹ “During the **second (1839-42) and third (1843-64) periods**, the Manchus and foreigners clashed over several issues, including the detrimental outward flow of China’s silver supplies due to foreign opium trade; the threat of oceangoing shipping competing with China’s extensive river and canal-based trade system, thereby undermining China’s traditional tax structure; and the potential loss of Beijing’s monopoly over foreign trade.

1839, “after a short period during which naval forces helped consolidate Manchu control by retaking Taiwan from Qing dynasty control”⁶², the Empire did not have a significant concern about investing in a navy and ships, rather than in what they call “continental wars, in particular wars of subjugation against Mongols, Muslims, and Tibetans, as well as to keep Russian expansionism at bay”⁶³. As we have also seen and underlined, before the Ming’s, the sea had never been seen by Imperial China as a way by which its true rivals could emerge, and therefore has never been given due importance. However, from an early age, China invested in the use of small ships, with the capacity to navigate its internal channels and coastal areas, to be able to make a small patrol of the coast to market a particular type of commodities, “like wheat raw materials, as well as market access, technological acumen, and native talent”⁶⁴.

Thus, piracy and illegal trade had taken enormous increment during the Ming dynasty and, although it has calmed down, continued pertinent during the Qing dynasty through Chinese trade with Southeast Asia. With the arrival of the first European peoples in Asia, namely the Portuguese, “traders were ready to expand into international commerce as opportunity allowed”⁶⁵. That provided a rapid growth of the Chinese navy and maritime investments, which had to adapt to the new circumstances, new actors, and new influences in furtherance of coping with the new “trade-centred community that formed the first Sino-Western meeting place of the modern age”⁶⁶. Once the Qing dynasty was more concerned with the security and maintenance of its contiguous land and sea borders, this ultimately did not

After 1842 the Manchus were gradually forced to change their policies. Following a second disastrous naval war with Great Britain and France known as the Second Opium War or Arrow War (1856-60), the Qing court finally realized that it needed to begin the task of modernizing China’s naval forces”. Andrew Erikson, Lyle Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, *China Goes to the Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2021), 289.

⁶² *Ibidem*.

⁶³ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁴ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 272.

⁶⁵ John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 194-95.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 195.

prioritise a strong and technological Navy, as “its concern was to preserve its authority both within China and on its sea and land frontiers”⁶⁷. Nevertheless, the maritime space was continuously essential and had a colossal part on behalf of China’s history⁶⁸. Since the Song Dynasty, China’s seas have been crucial for the region’s development. It started as being a regional “Mediterranean”, but it soon started to be a major point for long-distance trade, and it was integrated into what at the time was “the world-wide exchange system”⁶⁹. The Empire made a poor geostrategic assessment in leaving the seas and paying little attention to the South coast, as the decline of the Ming maritime power with the persistence of the naval prohibitions led to an uprise of piracy and illegal activity in the South seashore, mainly by Japanese. This guides us to realise that the coastal borders were never a fundamental part of the Ming Dynasty political or geostrategic agenda and lost even more importance when these rivalries between supporters of free trade in the seas⁷⁰ and defenders of maritime restrictions⁷¹ began to increase, alongside with violent confrontations in the sea frontiers because of the consequential illegal trade and disagreements between the coastal population that depended on the seas to survive⁷². The fourth and last period – between 1865 and 1895 – and which effectively interests us most,

⁶⁷ John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 197.

⁶⁸ Angela Schottenhammer, “The “China Seas” in world history: A general outline of the role of Chinese and East Asian maritime space from its origins to c. 1800”, *Journal of Marine and Island Cultures*. No. 2 (December 2012), 64. “(...) during probably most of the some periods from antiquity through the middle to early modern period it was in fact China that was the, if not always political, but at least economic and cultural centre of the macro-region, which - although it was undoubtedly - primarily a continental power - was also quite active in maritime space”.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*. “First being a regional ‘Mediterranean’, the China Seas soon developed as spring-board and starting point for long distance trade, and by Song times at the latest were firmly integrated into the world- wide exchange system as it existed at the time, an ‘international’ exchange system that admittedly was not yet a global one but that was ‘substantially more complex in organization, greater un volume, and more sophisticated in execution, than anything the world had previously known.”

⁷⁰ F. W. Mote. *Imperial China: 900-1800* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 617. “Blue China refers to the blue waters of the ocean and its doorways to the outside world, to entrepreneurship and individualism supported by the private mercantile activity that could not be bureaucratized and controlled”.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*. “(...) Yellow China refers to Yellow River (...). It stands for cultural conservatism, wasteful use of manpower, uneconomic investment in public works that officials could plan and direct keep under their control.”

⁷² This paragraph was taken from an essay written in 2021, by me for the MA course of “Leadership and Strategic Challenges” lectured by Professor Miguel Monjardino, entitled “What China cease to be a sea power by the mid-fifteenth century”.

aimed to “gradually attempt to reform and build up China’s navy”⁷³. However, this effort began too late and contributed expressively to the Chinese defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, mainly due to Japan’s much more powerful, prepared, and modern war navy. These events, a consequence of Beijing’s refusal to adopt “Western technology, weapons, and naval strategy”⁷⁴ were traumatic to the Chinese and led to a further delay in modernisation. Still, “perhaps in an attempt to retain scarce financial resources, Chinese officials were ordered to look back throughout China’s own history for appropriate models for coastal defence”⁷⁵, which turned out to be an unwise decision since navies such as the British, Continental European, and American continued to progress. Therefore, the development of the Chinese navy, “which started only after the Taiping’s were defeated in 1864”⁷⁶, was mainly due to Zuo Zongtang, the founder of the Fuzhou dockyard – a naval academy and shipbuilding centre – and Li Hongzhang, that was the “governor-general of the northern province of Zhili during 1870-95 and was a primary sponsor of China’s naval modernization”⁷⁷. Placing into perspective this context of Imperial China, its virtues, and above all, its constraints, it is perceptible that the current leadership of Beijing has carefully studied its history to prevent similar mistakes. The geostrategic debate throughout the Ming and Qing Dynasties and their dilemmas have illuminated many of the current debates in Beijing and worldwide about China’s maritime ambitions. As stated, Imperial China had to go to sea to obtain the needed raw materials. However, there was no capitalist economy “as a political purpose of China’s imperial political power nor did a capitalist economy exist that had capital accumulation as its ultimate goal”⁷⁸,

⁷³ Andrew Erikson, Lyle Goldstein, and Carnes Lord, *China Goes to the Sea: Maritime Transformation in Comparative Historical Perspective*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2021), 289.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, 304.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁸ Angela Schottenhammer, *China’s Rise and Retreat as a Maritime Power: New Discourses on China’s Role in East Asian Maritime History*, chapter XI, 210.

while Western countries, particularly European, already had. As Angela Schottenhammer outlined in her book, the fact that Imperial China did not view the sea as a wealth creator may also explain why Beijing suddenly retreated from the world oceans at a point where its naval power had just reached its peak in the early fifteenth century. In Beijing, security considerations shifted again to the continental borders, and its national economy was not dependent on such overseas undertakings. China's traditional economy never required access to foreign markets to sell its products. It is only a modern development initiated with the political-economic reform program of Deng Xiaoping and now explored with Xi Jinping's Twentieth-first Century Maritime Silk Road initiative began in 2013. But why? First, for both Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping, the sea was important to China as a way to gain a place in the world, both economically with the opening of the Chinese market to the international capitalist market, in security terms, with the adoption of Western technologies, as well as prosperity, always maintaining "the traditional Confucian state and values"⁷⁹. However why is the ocean important for Deng Xiaoping and Xi Jinping? Essentially, Deng Xiaoping saw the sea as a means of opening to China in terms of economic growth and the country's prosperity. Although "nationalism was part of his agenda, he wanted modernisation and believed this required maintaining good relationships with the major countries of the world"⁸⁰. Xi Jinping, on the other hand, sees the sea as *the* only means China has for its development as a Great Power, and that is why China claims the South China Sea and as a way to increase its influence around the whole world. In this respect, in contrast to the Europeans, Beijing skipped the age of colonialism⁸¹.

⁷⁹ John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China: A New History*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 408.

⁸⁰ Ezra Vogel, "Xi Jinping compared to Deng Xiaoping: Two Consequential Leaders of China", *The Asan Forum*, October 2015.

⁸¹ Angela Schottenhammer, *China's Rise and Retreat as a Maritime Power: New Discourses on China's Role in East Asian Maritime History*, chapter XI, 211.

III. China Dream

III.1 Ideological frames in contemporary China

To fully understand the ideology of Xi Jinping towards the sea, we need to go back to the foundation of the Chinese Communist Party and, primarily, to one of its Founding Fathers, Mao Zedong. In his essay *Engineers of the Soul: Ideology in Xi Jinping's China*, John Garnaut emphasises some of the historical points on which the Chinese Communist Party is based and that are important to understand today's politics in China. To begin, Communism had minor impact on China's ideology, ending up having a complementary role to what already existed in this country, "the classical Chinese Dynasty System"⁸². Secondly, "China has an unusual veneration for the written word and acceptance of its didactic value"⁸³. Thirdly, "Marxism-Leninism was interpreted by Mao and his fellow revolutionaries by a crucial intermediary: Joseph Stalin"⁸⁴. Therefore, "Communism – as interpreted by Lenin, Stalin, and Mao – is a total ideology, and it is Totalitarian"⁸⁵. When Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, it is possible to identify that his main goal was to "reinvigorate the ideology to an extent that have not be seen since the Cultural Revolution"⁸⁶. When the Chinese Communist Party was founded in 1921, the "motto was to repudiate and destroy everything about the dark imperial past, however, the Founding Fathers never really changed the wallpaper"⁸⁷. That meant, succinctly, that much of the concessions that characterised Imperial China continued to be considered in the "New China". Let us then begin to analyse the previous points. It is manifested that China, and the Chinese Communist Party are steeped in a culture deeply marked by ideology – "as a

⁸² John Garnaut, "Engineers of the Soul: Ideology in Xi Jinping's China", *Sinocism*, (Jan 17, 2019), 3.

⁸³ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 4.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

coherent system of ideas and ideals”⁸⁸ –, and particularly by the Dynastic System that has been present since the beginning of history of the Celestial Empire. As the Chinese have a great adoration for the written word, they are sympathetic “with propaganda and ideology transmitted by propaganda”⁸⁹, viewed as a possible mechanism to obtain and maintain control, “both in the physical battlefield through Wu – weapons and violence – and in the cultural domain through Wen – language and culture”⁹⁰. Mao Zedong’s ideological inspiration was Marxism-Leninism, and for him, Joseph Stalin was the “Great Genius”⁹¹. Therefore, like Stalin, Mao wrote a book entitled *The Short Course on the History of the Bolsheviks*, published in 1938, becoming the most similar that China had with a religious book. This book “is a manual for perpetual struggle against roll call of imagined dastardly enemies who are collaborating with imagined Western agents to restore bourgeois capitalism and liberalism”⁹². With Xi Jinping come to power sixty years later, his similarities to Mao’s political policy were remarkable to the greatest extent through Xi’s language of “party purity; “criticism and self-criticism”; “the mass line”; his obsession with “unity”; his attacks on elements of “hostile Western liberalism”, “constitutionalism”, and other variants of ideological “subversion” – this is all Marxism-Leninism as interpreted by Stalin as interpreted by Mao Zedong⁹³. During the CCP’s 95th anniversary in 2015, Xi Jinping emphasised the importance that Maoism and Stalinism still had, how existential it is these days and how it still needs to be considered as they are “the antidote to the calcification and putrefaction that has destroyed every previous dynasty, dictatorship, and empire”⁹⁴. Thus, Xi’s great project focuses on Ideological Purification, based on “war against the forces of counter-revolution that has no end point

⁸⁸ John Garnaut, “Engineers of the Soul: Ideology in Xi Jinping’s China”, *Sinocism*, (Jan 17, 2019), 5.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 6.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, 7.

⁹² *Ibidem*.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, 9.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, 10.

because the notional utopian destination of perfect communism will always be kicked a little further down the road”⁹⁵. So far, we have identified pertinent historical points that have served as the foundation for the construction and development of the CCP. Through these points, as John Garnaut identifies in his essay, it is possible to identify those who created the notion of *engineers of the human soul*⁹⁶. As we have come to realise, these personalities are Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong and, more recently, Xi Jinping. In October 2014, Xi Jinping spoke at the Beijing Forum on Literature and Art, where he revived the principles that Stalin and Mao defended about the role of the arts and literature and reaffirmed them as his own, stating that it “should only exist to serve politics as the totalitarian project of creating unity. Words are weapons for defining, isolating, and destroying opponents. And the task of destroying enemies can never end”⁹⁷.

To this day, the Chinese Communist Party has always been linked to Stalin and, it seems, will continue to be for a long time. Throughout his stay as party and country leader, Xi has been working on several documents that validate this connection to Stalin so that it is entrenched in Chinese society. This has been visible since 1989 when the party has been “rebuilding itself around what the draft National Security Law calls ‘ideological security’ including defending itself against “negative cultural infiltration”⁹⁸. For Chairman Xi, ideology is currently the main object of action because “it provides a ‘framework’ for ‘purifying’ and regaining control over the vanguard party and thereby the country and the cost of staying too far from the Maoist and Stalinist path is dynastic decay and eventually collapse”⁹⁹. In 2013, the well-known Document No. 9, entitled as *Communiqué on the Current State of the*

⁹⁵ John Garnaut, “Engineers of the Soul: Ideology in Xi Jinping’s China”, *Sinocism*, (Jan 17, 2019), 10.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, 14.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, 15.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

Ideological Sphere “set “disseminating thought on the cultural front as the most important political task”¹⁰⁰.

The purpose of this document was to demystify some of the Western ideas that, according to the document, it was trying to infiltrate them into the CCP as a conspiracy. This document highlights seven points – 1) “Western constitutional democracy was an attempt to undermine the current [Chinese] leadership”; 2) the universal values of human rights which where an attempt to weaken the theoretical foundations of party leadership; 3) the concept of civil society which is a “political tool” of the “Western anti-China forces” to dismantle the ruling party’s social foundation; 4) the Neoliberalism was a US-led effort to “change China’s basic economic system”; 5) the West’s idea of journalism was an attack to the Marxist view of news and an attempt to “gouge an opening through which to infiltrate our [Chinese] ideology”; 6) the historical nihilism was a way of trying to undermine the party history, “denying the inevitability” of Chinese Socialism; and 7) questioning Reform and Opening was an issue that needed no more discussion further”¹⁰¹.

To sum up, the party only exists if the feeling that the West is a threat is cultivated. Without this threat, there is no longer legitimacy to promote the principles adopted by the leaders of the People’s Republic of China, namely the Chinese Communist Party. The biggest problem for the West, and the world in general, is that this project that Xi is carrying out no longer has a purely national nature and has come to have a nature outside the borders.

¹⁰⁰ John Garnaut, “Engineers of the Soul: Ideology in Xi Jinping’s China”, *Sinocism*, (Jan 17, 2019), 16.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*. (All the points referred are on this page).

III. 2 'China Dream': The Awakening

In November 2012, Xi Jinping was elected president of the Chinese People's Party. He was the first Chinese leader born after World War II and the foundation of the People's Republic of China. The situation that was being experienced in China at the time, and which continues to live today, has historical roots, notably in Western and European communism of the 1930s and 1940s. First, it is necessary to understand that the Communist International Movement (Comintern) had a colossal impact on China "in the sense that a system capable of rivalling Western modern society must share its crucial trait: the power to manipulate nature"¹⁰². Secondly, it is essential to note that the admiration of Chinese leaders so far for Marxism, more appropriately, "usefulness of Marxism materialism, even if the predominance of the forces of production over political and cultural values may now be based on different arguments: predominance justified with reference to traditional Chinese pragmatism or neo-classical economics"¹⁰³.

However, as author Bruno Maçães says in his book *The Dawn of Eurasia*, although the PRC has continuously shown this admiration for Western communism and its practices, it has moved away and sought new alternatives that best represented it. This happened due to "the disappearance of the concept of 'line struggle'¹⁰⁴ which led to the complete abandonment of revolutionary communism, and the political landscape in China became one of almost complete neutralization of the political realm, which no longer represents one particular choice against alternatives, but tries to encompass as many interests and views as possible"¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰² Bruno Maçães, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of the New World Order*, (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 122.

¹⁰³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, 123. "Originally the concept referred to the political conflict between two orientations which, at a given time, represented two conflicting systems of beliefs and methods designed to attain specific objectives".

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*.

Xi Jinping's rise to the pinnacle of CCP's power and arrival at the party brought several ideas, with the underlying ambition of later arriving as president of the People's Republic of China as he came to be. A few weeks after his entrance, Xi Jinping made a speech showing his intentions for the country's future, mentioning the Chinese Dream for the first time. His speech culminated in a sentence: "I firmly believe that the great dream of the renewable of the Chinese nation will come true"¹⁰⁶. Thus, Xi planned the Third Chinese Revolution – referring to the two that had already taken place under the purview of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Despite this, the dream seems to be related to the *Century of Humiliation* that China went through during the Opium Wars after being defeated and controlled by Western forces. The main result he wants to achieve from this new and essential shift is "a new era of modernization that would lift the economy up the value chain and create a moderately well-of-society"¹⁰⁷.

This paramount concept also included a sturdy maritime strategy since it has inherent the will to build a "world-class armed forces". It consists essentially of achieving a "national renewal"¹⁰⁸ which will lead to the accomplishment of a moderately prosperous society by 2021, the hundredth anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party"¹⁰⁹ and a modern society by 2049. It became clear after the announcement of this long-term intent that it will be the main aim of Xi Jinping's agenda as long as he maintains his position as leader of the PRC since, for him, only in this way will China be able to be "promoting sustained and healthy economic development, safeguarding national sovereignty, security and development interests, realizing

¹⁰⁶ Bruno Maçães, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of the New World Order*, (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 124.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁸ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 178.

¹⁰⁹ Bruno Maçães, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of the New World Order*, (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 125.

the goal of completing the building of a well-off society, and subsequently realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”¹¹⁰.

Therefore, to achieve this goal, it would always be necessary to keep in mind the existing connection between military power and the growth of world influence – “restoring what Chinese consider China’s ancient position of centrality takes more than rhetorical exhortation. It takes the tangible capacity and capability that the PRC’s go-out strategy brings¹¹¹, but also the notion that none of these ideals will be achieved through individual striving but through a stable and strong state”¹¹² capable of pursuing the Chinese goals.

Within this framework, the process of resuming Beijing’s position of power in the world began to be put into practice – under the purview of the then-President Jiang Zemin (1993-2003) – announcing the implementation of “going out – meaning going global”¹¹³ – measures leading to increased flow of investments around the world, “accompanied by characteristic Chinese entrepreneurial skill”¹¹⁴. The key objective of this measure would be to “gather foreign know-how by purchase or other means, secure guaranteed access to raw materials and food, and create business opportunities abroad, many of them dedicated to global, especially maritime, trade”¹¹⁵. We must realise and acknowledge that one of the main measures taken to implement this idea was precisely the *Belt and Road Initiative*, as a foundational geopolitical and geo-economic venture.

Jinping’s stated goal of transforming China in a great maritime power does not only mean a country’s naval and maritime force demonstrated in acts of war or imminent tension. It

¹¹⁰ Bruno Maçães, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of the New World Order*, (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 125.

¹¹¹ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 170.

¹¹² Bruno Maçães, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of the New World Order*, (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 125.

¹¹³ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 170.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

also means projecting Chinese rights and interests into the “world-class navy strategy drawn by Xi – the grand strategy of the People’s Republic of China”¹¹⁶. Thus, it becomes increasingly distinct that for China to become a maritime power, it needs to “control its maritime sovereignty, rights and interests and deal with the threat of containment from the sea”¹¹⁷. Until 1949, China crossed what was entitled of *Century of Humiliation*¹¹⁸ regarding their armada and navy, and these were relatively weak and did not have the proper of ability to cope with major external threats, thus incapable of preventing or defending itself from attacks and invasions. Nowadays, we must acknowledge that things are not the same. Beijing’s main objective is precisely dissolving its former weaknesses, mainly naval and maritime, and to show that it is possible to reach and fulfil the *China Dream* goal.

However, the presence of the world’s top naval power, the United States of America, in the maritime space in which China is located is still quite sharp, raising some fears from Beijing, mainly due to the American naval success described in history: “The *sine qua non* of maritime power is the ability to control waters where China’s maritime rights and interests are involved, to enforce these maritime rights and interests, and to deter or defeat attempts by the United States to derail China’s growth by choking off its maritime commerce. Until it can do all this China cannot be considered a maritime power”¹¹⁹.

In 2012, the Chinese government announced, for the first time, its willingness to establish a maritime power strategy. This would mean China commit to having all the financial and technological capabilities to reach this final goal. By the time this plan was announced, the Obama Administration was at the height of its development and tactical presence in the Pacific, causing a wave of doubts and insecurities on the part of some Chinese analysts about Beijing’s

¹¹⁶ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 170.

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 171.

ability to meet the USA. Still, China has managed to exceed all “expectations strengthening and expanding every conceivable facet of maritime power, especially the navy, coast guard, and maritime militia”¹²⁰. In China’s dictionary of doctrines, maritime power has been embraced as a crucial military and political concept and course of action ever since¹²¹. By the end of that year, China had already successfully implemented the policies to reach its goal of becoming the leader in shipbuilding and maritime military cargo. At this instant, the only assignment left was achieving its position as a dominator. In 2013, the programme entitled *world-class navy* was renamed as *Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road* to be demarcated from the idea that the goals advocated by China were only a global matter and putting aside the regional ones. Since then, China has become the world’s largest shipbuilder and merchant Navy, holding two of the largest state shipbuilding companies – the *China State Shipbuilding Corporation*, and the *Shipbuilding Industry Corporation* – and has also been able to invest in technology that allows the construction of all types “of military projects, including submarines, surface combatants, naval aviation, sealift, and amphibious assets”¹²². These days, China is already a maritime power – “its navy and coast guard are the largest such services in the world, by ship count. In sum, regarding tangible measures – warships and civilian vessels of all kinds and the infrastructures needed to maintain them and build more”¹²³. The ‘China Dream’ and its aims were presented by the CCP leader at the Politburo session in July 2013. It consisted of four objectives intended to be achieved through this strategy. As Xi Jinping reiterated, China is – and will be in the coming years – a continental and maritime power, and for this to be achieved it must revolve around these points. After this presentation, “the most respected Chinese news magazine, Caixin, has defined the Chinese Dream as the dream of personal happiness for the

¹²⁰ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 173.

¹²¹ Idem, “Becoming a Great Maritime Power: A Chinese Dream”, *CAN Strategic Studies*, June 2016.

¹²² *Ibidem*.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, 175.

Chinese people: the fulfilment of China's top national priorities requires a renewed focus on happiness"¹²⁴.

First, the Beijing regime found that ocean management would be to devise a strategy that would allow them to achieve control and thus build a strong navy to protect their interests¹²⁵. Besides, it was also recognised by the Chinese military and Xi himself that the "traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned and foremost importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests"¹²⁶ a position that the Chinese government had hitherto adopted, and this territory was always recognised as a continental power, with little maritime presence. In this sense, it was necessary to replace the central position China had once taken, which Xi's predecessors had already recognised as a priority.

Since Mao Zedong's victory in 1949, a Chinese leader has never used the expression 'dream [*meng*]' to define a policy guide, as previously all Chinese population have received an education based on ideology obedience, mainly Marxism Leninism, as the guide to follow. However, when Deng Xiaoping came to power, the ideology embraced in China changed to "Socialism with Chinese characteristics"¹²⁷. Because of this, to dream was not incentivised by the government and policies were centred on the rigid five-year plans, where Chinese people "were told to work, to study, but never to dream"¹²⁸ in a disruptive instance. Chinese literature, arts, philosophy, and history display a "dream state of self-moving between rigid and fluid

¹²⁴ Winberg Chai and May-lee Chai, "The Meaning of Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream.", *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 20, no. 2 (2013), 96.

¹²⁵ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 169.

¹²⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*. "were taught to follow and obey ideology such as Marxism Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought as Chinese society's guiding principles. After Mao Zedong's death, Deng Xiaoping's changed the ideology to Socialism with Chinese characteristics".

¹²⁸ *Ibidem*.

states, right and wrong, the individual among the collective”¹²⁹. As a result of this, Winberg Chai and May-lee Chai, in their article *The Meaning of Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream*, present two questions for the use of the concept in Xi Jinping’s aim: “a) how does this concept of dream affect China’s behaviour within the international economic and political system in the 21st century when China’s emerged as the world’s second-largest economic power?, and b) how it gives us another framework for interpreting China’s rise apart from the more conventional threat seen to America’s hegemonic power as interpreted by the neoconservatives?”¹³⁰.

It must be remembered that during 551 and 479 B.C.E¹³¹ China was living in a tumultuous period known as the Warring States, where China was not a unified state. In this period, Confucius spread the word of “allegiance, loyalty, and obedience as a way to end this constant warfare”¹³². As China became more interested in Confucianism, Xi implemented Confucian ideas “not only to counter western criticism of China’s political system but also as a source of pride in China’s ancient culture and the brilliance of its philosophers”¹³³. Therefore, the definition used by Xi Jinping for his project ‘China Dream’ “can contain both Confucianist ideals and contemporary profit-oriented capitalism, but the most significant part is that for the first time since 1949, Chinese are encouraged to dream”¹³⁴.

As Michael A. McDevitt says in the book *China as Twenty-First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, the first objective focuses on: a) “defending China from an attack from the sea by the United States; b) focuses on making certain that China’s

¹²⁹ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 169.

¹³⁰ Winberg Chai and May-lee Chai, “The Meaning of Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream.”, *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 20, no. 2 (2013), 96.

¹³¹ B.C.E means Before the Common Era.

¹³² Winberg Chai and May-lee Chai, “The Meaning of Xi Jinping’s Chinese Dream.”, *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 20, no. 2 (2013), 97.

¹³³ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁴ *Ibidem*.

international trade, much of it conducted by sea and on which the nation is economically dependent, is secure; c) pursuing the global political and security interests that China's global economic interests have created; and d), recovering sovereignty over its claimed maritime territory – especially Taiwan”¹³⁵.

Xi Jinping also submitted and developed, with the endorsement of the Chinese Communist Party, a set of measures that need to be imposed to perform this dream. These measures are primarily designated to innovation and investment in the “shipbuilding industry, a large Chinese-flagged merchant marine, a capable coast guard, and most of all a large navy able to deal effectively with the threat of ‘containment’, defend China’s sovereignty in the maritime domain, and protect China’s maritime trade and overseas interests”¹³⁶. All this expects to be achieved due to the tremendous economic and technological development advocated by China in recent decades, which allows it to have access to all kinds of cutting-edge technologies, as well as invest in all the areas indispensable to accomplish its intents, such as the industries that manufacture “(...) the basic sinews of maritime power – steel, shipyards, ships of every sort, advanced shipboard weapons and combat systems – necessary to make becoming a great maritime power a realistic ambition”¹³⁷. Directly related to this ‘China Dream’ is the Belt and Road Initiative, in which [Xi Jinping’s] has the “objective of making China the equal of the greatest nations”¹³⁸. For sure, the China Dream and the Chinese urge to become a Maritime Power are undistinguishably mostly because for Beijing to reach its national ambition of power and opulence, it needs resources and techniques to reach these purposes, and that is where maritime power enters¹³⁹. Now the Chinese aspiration is to adopt

¹³⁵ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 6.

¹³⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁷ *Ibidem*, 6-7.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*, 15.

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*, 16.

“the noble and romantic posture of the dreamer, just like the U.S. was able to develop the notion of ‘American Dream’ when it was on its way to world domination”¹⁴⁰.

III. 3 Chinese Maritime Rights and Interests

In 1992, Beijing formalised its pretensions of “China’s maritime rights and interest” following the approval of the *PRC Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone Law*¹⁴¹. The Chinese leadership had become very aware of the importance of the country’s coastal zones for its national maritime defence policy. Coming to grips with this reality involved “(...) a process of circular reasoning that permits Beijing to translate Chinese perceptions, opinions, and policy preferences into Chinese laws and regulations that cannot be questioned and are to be strictly enforced”¹⁴². This stance led to the need to highlight China’s commitment and determination in promoting what it perceives as the country’s maritime rights. The so-called “nine-dash line (9DL) in the South China Sea”¹⁴³, follows from this ambition. We will return to this critical issue in more detail later. In this line of acceptance, it is plausible to determine that it is core vital and even indispensable for China to protect its maritime right and interests¹⁴⁴, and to achieve its main goal of becoming a maritime power¹⁴⁵. After claiming sovereignty over the

¹⁴⁰ Bruno Maçães, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of the New World Order*, (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 124. “Maritime Power and the China Dream are inextricably linked. On the one hand, the China Dream encapsulates China’s long-standing national aspiration to become powerful and prosperous; on the other, the steady expansion of China’s comprehensive national power is how the dream eventually to be realized”.

¹⁴¹ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 4.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*.

¹⁴³ *Ibidem*, 5.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibidem*. “China’s promotion of its maritime rights and interests is an important facet of efforts to develop economically, regulate legally, and control effectively ocean areas under its claimed jurisdiction”. “In the fall 2013, an official to the State Oceanic Administration (SOA) wrote, “The most important prerequisite for the building of a maritime power is to... protect the nation’s maritime rights and interests from being violated. If our nation’s core maritime interests and the basic maritime rights and interests cannot be effectively protected, there is no way to talk about building a maritime power.”

¹⁴⁵ *Ibidem*. “necessary condition for becoming a maritime power”.

South China Sea, Beijing decided to start building the infrastructure to support these military forces, such as airfields, “as well as harbours, artillery, and anti-aircraft missiles. Also, they dragged deep channels and harbours for submarines and large warships and built logistics, communications, and intelligence-gathering facilities”¹⁴⁶.

China believes these artificial islands and islets – in the South China Sea and the East China Sea – are vital to implement the *brinkmanship*¹⁴⁷. It is vital to implement a policy of brinkmanship, that is to exert political, economic, and military coercion on the other side that leads it to conclude that a military conflict is likely unless it gives way or negotiates a deescalation of the situation. This “threat that leaves something to chance”¹⁴⁸ was particularly important to China. Thus, in this case, China ends up having territorial victories and “operational latitude without having to resort to military manoeuvres. Briefly, brinkmanship is a form of intimidation”¹⁴⁹. Although it is used chiefly against small territories in the Pacific, it is furthermore used against Japan and the United States of America. The Philippines’ reaction to this method of intimidation was perceived at the 10th Philippines-United States Bilateral Strategic Dialogue (BSD), when it was determined to cooperate with the U.S. on topics such as “Promoting An International Law-Based Maritime Order, reiterating the importance of maintaining and promoting an international law-based maritime in the South China Sea, in accordance with UNCLOS and the 2016 Arbitral Tribunal decision, and recognising the value of an integrated and comprehensive approach to addressing maritime issues, ... The Philippines welcomed the offer of the United States to hold regular consultations with a view to identifying

¹⁴⁶ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 24.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, 25.

¹⁴⁸ Thomas C. Schelling, “The Threat That Leaves Something to Chance”. Santa Monica, (CA: RAND Corporation), 1959. https://www.rand.org/pubs/historical_documents/HDA1631-1.html.

¹⁴⁹ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 25.

joint maritime activities that the two countries can undertake”¹⁵⁰. As “Vietnam’s relations with China are one of the most asymmetric bilateral relationships in the world”¹⁵¹, there are some tensions between both countries, concerning the SCS and the sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands. In 2009, Vietnam bought Russia six *Varshavyanka*-class submarines, leading to an almost automatic development of their military warfare, raising China’s attention consequentially, their assertiveness in claiming its sovereignty over the South China Sea. “By way of response, Vietnam stepped up its efforts at force modernization most notably by acquiring six *Varshavyanka*-class submarines”¹⁵², in order to enforce their maritime capacity, but also because they had known that the PLAN not have intense anti-submarine warfare which would give them an advantage. As Carlyle A. Tayer says in his article *Vietnam’s Strategy of ‘Cooperating and Struggling’ with China over Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea*, “Vietnam seeks to cooperate and struggle with China by acknowledging its primacy in the expectation that China will respect Vietnam’s autonomy”¹⁵³.

China’s continuous military presence in the South China Sea is a way to constrain the ability of the U.S. and its allies to navigate in the area and to prevent Washington from conducting surveillance missions in international water close to its territory. Beijing would like to push the United States away from the first-island chain. The Chinese Government is deeply aware of the measures it should take to achieve its ambitions while maintaining control over its maritime borders. This is what distinguishes China from the other Asian neighbours considering that “Beijing has the capability not only to protect but also to advance its rights

¹⁵⁰ U.S. Embassy Manila, “Philippines, U.S. commit to further elevate alliance and partnership at 10th bilateral strategic dialogue”, January 21, 2023.

¹⁵¹ Carlyle A. Tayer, “Vietnam’s Strategy of ‘Cooperating and Struggling’ with China over Maritime Disputes in the South China Sea.”, *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 3, no. 2 (2016): 200–220. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48601796>.

¹⁵² *Ibidem*.

¹⁵³ *Ibidem*.

and interests coercively, if needed be, while most of its neighbours do not”¹⁵⁴. As Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte once said, sarcastically: *when Xi says I will fish, who can prevent him?*¹⁵⁵. In this sense, Beijing has adopted measures especially concerning to its Coast Guard, through the use of “maritime militias” – “a force of vessels ostensibly engaged in commercial fishing but which in fact operate alongside Chinese law enforcement and military to achieve political objectives in disputed waters”¹⁵⁶ –, in the Philippines and Indonesia. These militias are used as a form of unofficial persuasion by China so that its neighbours will come to its side and recognise Beijing’s sovereignty. However, the Philippines and Indonesia face challenges in dealing with China’s actions. Its military and economic strength puts these countries at a disadvantage, as they rely on support from other international partners to counterbalance Chinese influence.

As we have mentioned, there are crucial historical interests linked to the South China Sea, and they end up being part of the Chinese strategy – these being “Energy, Fishing, and SLOCs”¹⁵⁷ – or as they call it “overseas interests”¹⁵⁸. Over the years, Beijing has used various techniques to pressure its neighbours to accept China’s ‘sovereignty’ in situations where there is a territorial dispute. This pressure has been made mostly by military resources, namely ships, for the areas that are being disputed in the SCS. Therefore, it must be considered that China disputes some territories with neighbouring countries, such as Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, or Brunei, that feel that their sovereignty over their maritime

¹⁵⁴ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020). “Simply having maritime rights and interests is not sufficient; after all, every nation that borders the sea does. For China what is essential is being able to protect them from being violated. This is what sets China apart from many of its Asian neighbors.”

¹⁵⁵ AP, “Duterte: When Xi says I will fish, who can prevent him?”, *The Hindu*, July 22, 2019.

¹⁵⁶ Gregory B. Poling, Harrison Prétat, Tabitha Grace Mallory and, Center of Advanced Studies, “Puling Back the Curtain on China’s Maritime Militia”, *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, November 18, 2021.

¹⁵⁷ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 23.

¹⁵⁸ Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

and territorial space is also being invaded. Thus, some of these countries, namely Japan, have sought to strengthen relations with the United States of America and Australia to reduce dependence on China, or as in the case of the Philippines, which have also sought to reinforce their cooperation with the U.S. for the same reason. On the other hand, some countries have tried to adopt a more cautious position so as not to exalt China's spirits and not to lose the funding they receive from Beijing.

As follows, the negotiation process within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has proved increasingly difficult, mainly because it comprises ten countries – Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia – that have different ways of being before China and before the disputes of the South China Sea, making the process of decision-making and understanding quite complicated.

For this reason, likewise, the role played by People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) in recent years has also been one of trying to influence a way China can achieve results in its goal of once again dominating certain territories, and thus achieving full *de jure sovereignty* over all the islands, islets, reefs. The shoals dispersed through the seas and all the maritime rights to territorial seas and exclusive economic zones (EEZ) that sovereignty yields¹⁵⁹.

III. 4 The Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road

One of the mechanisms that has helped most to meet the needs of Beijing, as well as to develop their economy, has been the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) and the *Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road* (MSR)¹⁶⁰. When President Xi Jinping came to power as the “new

¹⁵⁹ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 120.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, 15.

strongman implementing policies to regain Chinese long-lost strength”¹⁶¹ unveiled his “China’s new map for the world economy – One Belt One Road”¹⁶², which envisioned, essentially, for all intents and purposes, to “tie China to all of ‘Eurasia’ through infrastructure, energy, investment, communications, politics, and culture”¹⁶³. China would thus secure the status of “engine of development, the partner of choice, the lead financier, the promoter, and the grand strategist”¹⁶⁴ of this grand magnitude endeavour. BRI had its early development in the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 BC), when Zhang Qian carried out a maritime expedition to Central Asia, thus beginning the “development of trade routes that ran to the west, first to Central Asia and Persia”¹⁶⁵.

In March 2015, the Chinese Government issued a document entitled ‘Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road’¹⁶⁶. One can say that it settled an essential doctrine as a political diptych. The first component – *Silk Road Economic Belt* – China, Central Asia, Russia, and Europe closely “across the Eurasian landmass as an economic belt or, in other words, as a densely occupied economic corridor for trade, industry and people”¹⁶⁷. The second component – *Maritime Silk Road* – aimed to connect the dominant seaports in a pacific and secure way, and it “was designed to go from China’s coast to Europe through the South China Sea to the South Pacific in the other”¹⁶⁸.

¹⁶¹ Humphrey Hawksley, *Asian Waters: The Struggle over the Indo-Pacific and the Challenge to American Power*,
¹⁶² Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 178.

¹⁶³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶⁶ Bruno Maçães, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of the New World Order*, (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 137.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.



Figure 1: BRI's Strategic Influence.

As Bruno Mações states, land and sea components will strive to connect about sixty-five countries. An important thing to take into consideration about this document, analysed by Wang Wen, Executive Dean of Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies, is that it never mentions a geopolitical dimension “but in some of the most interesting sections it develops a theory of economic integration that strongly relies on political power – Countries among the Belt and Road may fully coordinate their economic development strategies and policies, work out plans and measures for regional cooperation, negotiate to solve cooperation-related issues, and jointly provide policy support for the implementation of practical cooperation and large-scale projects”¹⁶⁹. Afterwards, the essential concern visible in this document “is to improve the division of labour and distribution of industrial chains”¹⁷⁰, but it was also a way for Beijing to address the vulnerabilities of the Chinese territory, especially on its borders, as well as in maritime chokepoints, in an attempt of endow China with greater soft power.

¹⁶⁹ Bruno Mações, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of the New World Order*, (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 138.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, 139.

In 2017, during the World Economic Forum in Davos, Xi Jinping gave an official strategic vision of the BRI, at least his vision – calling it *Community of Common Destiny*¹⁷¹, wanting to show the Chinese government’s willingness to define a strategy publicly. According to Wang Yiwei, a former diplomat and scholar, a ‘community of common destiny’ is achieved through creating both a ‘community of shared interests’ and a ‘community of shared responsibilities. The ‘community of shared interests’ roughly corresponds to a situation of economic interdependence, or ‘completing each other economically’. The ‘community of responsibility’ refers to the political and security realms, or a situation of ‘complete political mutual trust’¹⁷².

Nevertheless, a *Community of Common Destiny* may be understood in several ways. “It may be a vision of an order that converges on an illiberal capitalist system similar to China’s, a Pax Sinica” [A conceptual and updated replica of the ancient Pax Romana and the more contemporary Pax Americana]¹⁷³. According to Geoff Raby, in the book *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, whatever interpretation we take of this concept, this is an “order in which China feels secure, and one in which China aims to replace the U.S. as the ‘dominant commercial player and influencer of the world’”¹⁷⁴. That same year, the BRI global policy was incorporated within the Constitution of the Communist Party, providing “a hierarchy of priorities for decision-making within China”¹⁷⁵.

¹⁷¹ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 27. “The notion of a CCD has been likened to the ancient Confucian governing philosophy of ‘All under Heaven’ with the emperor at the center of a world order, ruling with a mandate from heaven”.

¹⁷² Jacob Mardel, “The ‘Community of Common Destiny’ in Xi Jinping’s New Era”, *The Diplomat*, Oct. 25, 2017.

¹⁷³ *Ibidem*. “Or it may involve the replacement of rivalry with cooperation between states of different forms of political and social organization”.

¹⁷⁴ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 27.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

The Chinese leadership announced, in 2013, the creation of the *Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road* – or as Xi first called it “the New Silk Road”¹⁷⁶ about the *Silk Road* that had already been designated by Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen, in 1877¹⁷⁷ – as a maritime complement to the previously mentioned *Belt and Road Initiative* with the leading purpose of working with the countries of Southeast Asia, and appealing the trips made by Zheng He during the fifteenth century. China’s integrated policy sought to circumvent its crucial geostrategic handicap, pertinent in the face of political and trade tensions experienced with the United States of America, the world’s even most robust economy. Beijing, in 2014, declared *the Silk Road Fund*, which started to foster and finance projects aimed at implementing this strategy internationally, cooperation partnerships and initiatives have been promoted with other states and foreign entities, with the “strategic aim to connect Eurasia, Middle Eastern, and East African nations in a vast global trading network, enabled by Chinese loans, financing or, direct investment for trade-related infrastructure development”¹⁷⁸, namely through Chinese banks and companies – state-owned or participated, subsidised or targeted – such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)¹⁷⁹.

Since the dismantling of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991, China’s most prominent investment, remarkably in Central Asia, has been centred on the energy sector – with the construction of oil and gas transportation pipelines to (and from) the rest of the world¹⁸⁰. Nevertheless, the BRI has several sectors incorporated into its strategy, including energy, infrastructure, and transport, with inherent security, geopolitical concerns, and interests.

¹⁷⁶ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 179.

¹⁷⁷ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 178. “Only in 1877 was dubbed *Die Seidenstrasse* – “the Silk Road” – by Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen ... who had been dispatched to China to scout mining opportunities and a possible route for a railroad to Europe. He chose “Silk Road because one of its trades was driven by the passion for Chinese silk on the part of ancient Romans...”.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, 179.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, 182.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, 179.

In terms of security, the focus of apprehension for China lies in the Xinjiang region – which borders Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan, and which is dominated by the Uighurs, a Muslim Turkic people – and in which the Tarim Basin is located, the largest domestic source of oil and gas¹⁸¹. Regarding investment, China’s strategy is not just about exporting its raw materials and manufactures worldwide. It also intends to *export its economic model*, which over the last decades, has been the biggest driver for the growth of the country’s economy “by influencing and conditioning in other countries’ domestic politics”¹⁸².

Following the political and economic essence, the Chinese government has been financing the building of infrastructures in developing countries, such as its Eurasian neighbours. All these investments are seen by the international community “as a way to create a *Chinacentric* world order based on cooperation rather than competition”¹⁸³. Although the meaning of “cooperation” – and “mutual benefits” – has a broad spectrum of effective significands, not always coincident among all the political player’s hermeneutics.

Regarding the geopolitical standpoint, we have two noteworthy elements of analysis. The first one focuses on the continental geopolitical strategy through the *One Belt*, or as it was formerly called, the *Eurasian Land Bridge*, which allows Beijing to expand *by land* to Central Asia, the Middle East, Russia, and Europe. The second aspect concerns the *One Road*, which focuses on the maritime strategy called String of Pearls – “a series of expanded ports that will promote Chinese trade and provide anchorage for the Chinese navy”¹⁸⁴ – and connects South and Southeast Asia to Africa through the Arabian Peninsula to the Mediterranean¹⁸⁵.

¹⁸¹ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 180.

¹⁸² Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 27.

¹⁸³ *Ibidem*, 124.

¹⁸⁴ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 182.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

Throughout this path, China can acquire the capacity, the ways and means to “bring technology, finance, and capabilities to work at scale, as well as the ability to get things done expeditiously”¹⁸⁶.

Considering China is not only surrounded by the South China Sea, it is crucial to consider which area of action best suits the Chinese objectives and its military and maritime capabilities. Further, East Asia and the Pacific Ocean are out of the question, at least soon, given that it is in this area that the United States of America has its most significant military force installed and the greatest influence. Additionally, the Indian Ocean has direct conflicts and some restraint, and the viability of Chinese dominance is clearly less likely. There are tensions created with Chinese partnerships and interests with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. However, India maintains prevalence, where its demographic and military weight “will continue to dominate militarily, and China will have no choice but to work out various accommodations with it”¹⁸⁷.

Given this, the ideal and expectable place for China to settle seems to be Eurasia – distinguished as the “world’s geopolitical pivot”¹⁸⁸ – as it is the place where “China will encounter the least resistance and where the BRI will be most effective in advancing its goals”¹⁸⁹ mainly because it has established and fomented – in a coherent strategic vision – close relations with various regional powers of this geographical area, notably Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

However, “East Asia has long been the central concern of Asia-Pacific security”¹⁹⁰. Still, since China began to sway a regional and influential power in this area by increasing its

¹⁸⁶ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 182.

¹⁸⁷ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 31.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibidem*, 31.

military activity in the Indian Ocean, “the concept of Indo-Pacific security has become widely adopted”¹⁹¹. As a part of this, the strategy advocated by the United States and Australia is trying to bring India to this vital area to cope with China¹⁹².

This maritime lane is the one which best meets the demands acclaimed by the Chinese leadership, and it is seen by “Washington and Canberra as mainly about the ‘Road’, China’s maritime reach into the Indian Ocean, South-East Asia, and the Pacific”¹⁹³ since this whole maritime strategy is relatively recent on a ground of action that the U.S had exclusively exploited. In this sense, most of Chinese ports are facing the Pacific Ocean – Eastern and South China – being the sources of essential raw materials and export destinations of manufactured goods. The 21st MSR “runs from China through the South China Sea to the Strait of Malacca, then westward across the Indian Ocean, then northward, grazing East Africa, to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, and finally into the Mediterranean”¹⁹⁴. Such geography has hindered commercial fluidity due to the absence of alternative routes, without the obstacle of the Pacific Sea routes that essentially encompass the *Ring of Fire* of that Ocean or the long and costly path via the Panama Canal. It is important to note that all these sea routes pass through the Strait of Taiwan, giving it extraordinary importance for China, as it “makes clear [its] centrality to China’s maritime strategic interests”¹⁹⁵ since Beijing is trapped in maritime terms by what is called the “first island chain, running from the main islands of Japan southward along the Ryukyu Islands to Taiwan and then through the Philippines”¹⁹⁶. From the standpoint of planning for military actions by the People’s Liberation Army, this island chain holds immense strategic significance, embodying China’s critical interests. The Chinese Communist Party

¹⁹¹ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 145.

¹⁹² *Ibidem*.

¹⁹³ *Ibidem*, 31.

¹⁹⁴ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 15.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, 14.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

(CCP) is committed to thwarting any attempts by the United States and its allies to exert dominance over China's maritime communication routes or to undermine its position concerning Taiwan. The construction and fortification of artificial islands in the South China Sea by Beijing serve as a clear indication of the nation's resolute assertion of its claims within the boundaries of its first island-chain¹⁹⁷. Thus, it can be acknowledged that the Chinese strategic assessment is clear: "the island chain is effectively a barrier around the Yellow, East China, and South China Seas, constraining China's access to the Pacific Ocean"¹⁹⁸. What China really strives, in this sense, is to supervise these seas to prevent them from being seen and used as means of attack on Chinese territory, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, so that they can obtain legitimisation of access to the high seas in times of peace or war. As Michael A. McDevitt wrote in the book *China as Twenty-First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, the *Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road* is the maritime component of the *Belt and Road Initiative*. To reach the status of maritime great power, "China has mobilized its political, diplomatic, intellectual, economic, and financial recourses"¹⁹⁹ but also the PLA and the PLAN. Nevertheless, it is entirely different from a strategy written on paper or even thought of by the leaders of a country and what is effectively achieved on the ground. So far, the biggest single project carried out by Beijing has been the "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor"²⁰⁰, which had an investment of \$62 billion. This project is linked with the construction of several infrastructures being the most considerable the seaport – strategically far-reaching for possible stops of the PLA Navy – built in the port city of Gwadar, Pakistan,

¹⁹⁷Andrew S. Erickson and Joel Wuthnow, "Barriers, Springboards and Benchmarks: China Conceptualizes the Pacific 'Island Chains,'" *The China Quarterly* 225 (2016): 1-22.

¹⁹⁸Michael A. McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 14.

¹⁹⁹*Ibidem*, 15-16. "To these ends China has mobilized its political, diplomatic, intellectual, economic, and financial resources, as well as the PLA in general and the navy. As we shall see, the Maritime Silk Road vision, China's intention to become a maritime great power, announced just eleven months before, are closely linked, self-reinforcing ambitions".

²⁰⁰Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 186.

advantageously located “on the way to the Persian Gulf and the Suez Canal”²⁰¹. When it comes to Gwadar, this port is connected to China by sea, but also by road through a modern expanded highway system built to move goods from China to Gwadar and vice-versa – called “‘Gwadar port-and-road system’ – serving as an alternative shipping route to the Malacca Strait, which is frequently patrolled by the United States”²⁰². Globally, the Belt and Road was levered by an initial investment of some trillion dollars and seventy-one countries that were part of the corridors, which comprised fifty percent of the world population, forty per cent of global GDP and seventy-five per cent of the world’s energy resources. This data demonstrates the “scale of China’s ambitions are why participation for many governments is compelling”²⁰³. When it comes to the *21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, it is paramount to give the stage to an omnipresent protagonist with a pivotal position: the United States of America. It is crucial to start by understanding how and what are the reasons for its significant role. China and the U.S. settled a relationship agreement in 2005, albeit informally, entitled the G2 (Group of Two), which began merely as an economic feature that rapidly embraced foreign policy matters. This relationship is entirely meaningful from an international point of view, especially for global balance, peace, and economic thriving.

As global leading powers, these two protagonists’ can fall quickly into the so-called ‘Thucydides Trap’, historically played by the Greek cities of Athens and Sparta, being the U.S. the established *rising power* (Athens) and China (Sparta) the *dominant power* with an exponential growth in their military capability that “has transformed itself from a large but

²⁰¹ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 186.

²⁰² *Ibidem*.

²⁰³ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 33. “magnitude involved some trillion dollars of initial investments and seventy-one countries along the Belt and Road corridors, accounting for fifty percent of the world population, forty percent of global GDP and seventy-five percent of the world’s energy resources”.

antiquated force into a capable modern military, narrowing “the gap with the United States”²⁰⁴. Since these two are competitor countries, although informally, it is easier to control China’s growth, particularly in military terms, by the U.S., and may prevent the use of these resources to provoke armed conflicts or to attack U.S. military bases.

The increasing tension between the G2 is up most perceptible in two arenas: the South China Sea²⁰⁵, and the Belt and Road Initiative, “that represents an effort to redraw the map of the global economy and energy which is deeply intertwined for both countries”²⁰⁶. The leading Chinese objective in the SCS is to (re)establish their geographical maps with a recognition of sovereignty that “constitutes what has been described as the greatest point of tension directly between the U.S. and China”²⁰⁷. Although these tensions between the two main superpowers in the region deepen, one can say that China is the “main influencer and shaper of East Asia”²⁰⁸, having the upper hand over the U.S. However, there is another critical and equally fracturing point of tension in the relationship between these two countries, which is Taiwan, particularly important both for the Chinese Communist Party and, in the current geostrategic circumstances, for the territorial integrity claimed by the People’s Republic of China. Hereof, Xi Jinping stressed in the 19th Party Congress that China would never abide again from a potential tentative of spilt Chinese territory from Beijing at any time or in any form encouraged by any person, organisation, or political party²⁰⁹. Taiwan is not an independent country and does not move toward independence, the oft-repeated core interest of China. Undoubtedly, Taiwan is

²⁰⁴ Daniel, Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, and The Clash of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 133.

²⁰⁵ “Literally, geographic maps”.

²⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, 134.

²⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, 133.

²⁰⁸ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 44.

²⁰⁹ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 13. “We (...) will never tolerate a repeat of the historical tragedy of a divided country. (...) We will never allow any person, any organization, or any political party to split any part of the Chinese territory from China at any time or in any form”.

the critical core of sea routes of the Pacific Ocean and is thus crowned as “the key to the southeast coast area of China and the fence to the seven provinces in the centre of China”²¹⁰. Another potentially risky spot is the “tiny uninhabited but strategically located islands northeast of Taiwan – Daqiu Island – that both China and Japan claim”²¹¹. An additional point of tightness in this geographic region concerns the sea routes that pass here: the East China Sea to the South China Sea, Northeast Asia to Southeast Asia, and the Western Pacific to the Middle East, Europe, and Asia routes. Lastly, and despite the obstacles that started internally, which subsists in fulfilling this approach and, more outstandingly, its injurious reputation throughout the Western world, the economic profits that come from it are more robust than everything else.

²¹⁰ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 13-14.

²¹¹ Daniel, Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, and The Clash of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 135.

IV. Modernisation of the Chinese Navy

IV.1 The Chinese Maritime Strategy in the South China Sea.

Anders Corr wrote that a grand strategy must go through a “set of plans to achieve a set of important state goals through the utilization of all its resources, including economic, diplomatic, and military means and interactions”²¹². China’s grand strategy was and is carried out to build relations with other states and even organisations of various political and social orientations in pursuance to create an environment of international stability “minimises threats and challenges the CPC’s claim to be the sole government and source of power in China”²¹³.

But why is the SCS of such great, almost existential, importance to Beijing? Firstly, the People’s Republic of China is the second-largest economy in the world –, that “comprises 60 percent of maritime trade which passes through Asia, with the South China Sea carrying an estimated one-third of global shipping. Its waters are particularly critical for China, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea, all of which rely on the Strait of Malacca, which connects the South China Sea and, by extension, the Pacific Ocean with the Indian Ocean”²¹⁴. Secondly, it is critical to note that the South China Sea is disputed “through international law by seven claimant countries: the People’s Republic of China (China), the Republic of China (Taiwan), Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia”²¹⁵. It is essential to realise that the

²¹² Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 2.

²¹³ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 42-43.

²¹⁴ China Power Team, “How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?”, *China Power*, August 2, 2017. “As the second-largest economy in the world with over 60 percent of its trade in value traveling by sea, China’s economic security is closely tied to the South China Sea”.

²¹⁵ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 1.

SCS is equally significant, albeit in several aspects, for each of the countries that claim it, but it is also, “home to potentially vast supplies of critical energy, fishing, and other natural resources”²¹⁶. Furthermore, “it is strategically sensitive for military forces, intelligence gathering, and coastal defence, a major transit area for international trade and communications, and a source of developing international law”²¹⁷. In this sense, these countries are looking at each other’s economic, diplomatic, military, and political choices to establish their strategic and tactical choices in the SCS.

The strategy regarding the maritime arena which China established in the South China Sea is very convoluted. The main reason is its position of weakness, fear, and insecurity, which has its roots in time. China’s defeat in the First Opium War (1839-1842), with the British’s occupation of the port of Guangzhou, was the key point that emphasised the disadvantage of the Chinese troops, especially on the Southeast and East fronts²¹⁸. However, Mao Zedong’s victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 “resulted in the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and the transformation of the East Asian international relations”²¹⁹.

This Civil War completely changed the political and strategic geography of China’s communist elites concerning its security. From this resulted a motto that is in mind to this day – no longer could the nation turn its back on its seaward frontier. It was in 1955 that the Chinese Communist Party launched its drive to claim the SCS, which they said was inherited from the former Republic of China and “the claims to the South China Sea features became its own

²¹⁶ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 1.

²¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

²¹⁸ Humphrey Hawksley, *Asian Waters: The Struggle over the Indo-Pacific and the Challenge to American Power*,

²¹⁹ Chi-Kwan Mark, *China and the World Since 1945: An International History*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), 44.

when in 1949 Nationalist Party leader and ROC president Chiang Kai-shek decamped to the island of Taiwan with much of what was left on his arm”²²⁰.

It must be considered that the SCS geographical area has several constraints which may hinder or even call into question the strategy considered by the Chinese regime. These restrictions relate mainly to the point that there is a “mix of sovereignty, international law, and conflicting strategic interests”²²¹ that connote this place as a point of increased tension. On the one hand, we have the circumstance that China shares its land border with fourteen countries; more than 22,000 kilometres. On the other hand, China still has unresolved “maritime sovereignty, maritime entitlement, and demarcation disputes with all of its maritime neighbours”²²². The most important one is these asserting *de facto* sovereignty over Taiwan and ending the existence of the Republic of China, with the purpose to reach the idea of “one country (China), two systems (communist China and democratic Taiwan)”²²³. However, Taiwan is not the only neighbour with which China has unresolved sovereignty problems. Japan is, likewise, one of the countries, but there are also problems in the “East China Sea over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and in the South China Sea with Vietnam, Brunei, the Philippines, and Malaysia about overlapping claims in the Paracels and Spratly Islands chains”²²⁴.

As we have mentioned *supra*, historical interests linked to the South China Sea have developed as part of the Chinese strategy. China, from an early age, disputes some territories with neighbouring countries. An example is the Philippines – the major potential military threat, with its substantial and sophisticated forces, its policies of strategic alliances (namely

²²⁰ “(...) the PRC asserts that ROC claims to the South China Sea features became its own when in 1949 Nationalist Party leader and ROC president Chiang Kai-shek decamped to the island of Taiwan with much of what was left on his army...”. Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 125.

²²¹ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 118.

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²²³ *Ibidem*, 11-12.

²²⁴ *Ibidem*, 112-113.

with de USA after WWII), and its geographic location. For this reason, the role played by PLAN in recent years has had a very much influence on People’s Republic of China (PRC) ability to achieve results in its goal of once again dominating certain *lost territories* and subsequently achieving “complete de jure sovereignty over all the islands, islets, felts, and the shoals scattered through the seas, as well as all the maritime rights to territorial seas and exclusive economic zones (EEZ) that sovereignty yields”²²⁵.

It was a result of a Chinese map from 1947 where the nine-dash line (9DL) was first inscribed – an area of the South China Sea, represented by a U-shaped curve that holds about



Figure 2: Nine-Dash Line Map. *The Economist*, “China v the rest”. *The Economist*. Accessed on May 10th, 2022.

²²⁵ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 125.

²²⁵ *Ibidem*, 118, 120.

eighty per cent of the SCS, over which China has, at least says it has, historical rights – and that since 1949 has appeared on maps as an area owned by the PRC (see figure 1).

In these maps, China claimed to be entitled to the “Paracel Islands in the west, Scarborough Shoal in the east, and the Spratlys in the south – along with part of the exclusive economic zone drawn from Indonesia’s Natuna Islands in the southwest”²²⁶. However, this attempt to control and achieve undisputed sovereignty (*de facto* and *de jure*) over this area has brought many problems afterwards because it violates the exclusive economic zones claimed by numerous countries contiguous to China, especially the Philippines.

“Some of these waters were within the EEZ of the Philippines since those areas are not overlapped by any possible entitlement of China”²²⁷. Under this legal umbrella, in 2013, the Philippines filed a case to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), in Hague – created by the United Nations (UN) to resolve disputes in the UNCLOS – regarding China’s trespassing Manila’s EEZ, creating disputes mainly over the Scarborough Shoal²²⁸. The Tribunal supported the Philippines’ position in this case, “ruling that rocky outcrops claimed by China cannot be used as the basis of territorial claims”²²⁹.

The crucial issues on the table that the Philippines wanted to see dealt with were regarding the role of historic rights and the source of maritime entitlements in the South China Sea. This rights and entitlements concerned mainly the “nine-dash line”, the status of certain maritime features – such as the proper characterisation of this as islands, rocks, low-tide elevations, or submerged banks –, the maritime entitlements they are capable of generating, and the lawfulness of certain actions by China that were alleged by the Philippines to violate

²²⁶ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 14.

²²⁷ Tom Phillips, Oliver Holmes, Owen Bowcott, “Beijing rejects tribunal’s ruling in South China Sea case”, *The Guardian*, 12 July 2016.

²²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²²⁹ Hannah Beech, “Just Where Exactly Did China Get the South China Sea Nine-Dash Line From?”, *Time*, July 19, 2016.

the Convention, in particular its large-scale land reclamation and construction of artificial islands in the Spratly Islands since this arbitration was commenced, have unlawfully aggravated and extended the Parties' dispute"²³⁰. As a result, a specific Tribunal has been assembled to decide on this matter. The Tribunal's decision was undoubtedly in favour of the Philippines' arguments, and its decisions emanated from the lack of legal basis of Beijing's historical rights and resources within its "nine-dash line", from the fact that "none of China's claimed land features in Spratly Islands are an island capable of generating a 200-nm exclusive economic zone"²³¹. Besides that, this decision was also because China had "violated the Philippines' fishing vessels from operating, failing to prevent Chinese fishing vessels from operating, and conducting land reclamation in areas where the Philippines enjoys sovereign rights to explore for and exploit natural resources (...) and also violated its marine environmental protection obligations under UNCLOS by causing 'severe harm to the coral reef environment' with its land reclamation activities and harvesting of endangered species"²³². According to the Annex VII, "the Award, with its findings, as contributed greatly to developing the international law of the sea and advanced the legal debate on the South China Sea issues in many ways. It has served as a legal basis for all the relevant states to review their positions and policies in the South China Sea"²³³. This verdict of the ITLOS ultimately benefits the Philippines and all other maritime states bordering the South China Sea, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, in a sense that if the nine-dash line is invalidated for the Philippines, it is also for the other countries. Unsurprisingly, the Chinese government thinks otherwise. For Beijing, the historical precedent has all the validity since this line has been included in all maps

²³⁰ Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Press Release: The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People's Republic of China)*, 12 July 2016.

²³¹ *Ibidem*.

²³² U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "South China Sea arbitration Ruling: What Happened and What's Next?", July 12, 2016.

²³³ Nguyen Hong Thao, Nguyen Thi Lan Huong. "The South China Sea Arbitration Award: 5 Years and Beyond". *The Diplomat*. July 12, 2021.

that were made under communist jurisdiction after the surrender of Japan during World War II. For Xi Jinping, “China’s territorial sovereignty and marine rights in the seas would not be affected by the ruling and they were still committed to resolving disputes with its neighbours”²³⁴ by facilitating passage through these waters without hindrance as this is a right established in the International Maritime Law. Aiming a greater control over their territories within what is covered in the U-shaped line, two military strategies were executed by PRC – “incrementalism and brinkmanship. Incrementalism involves the phased accumulation of small fractions of territory through multiple relatively small aggressive actions rather than a large effort that could provoke retaliation”²³⁵. Another one of the strategies China adopted was the construction of artificial islands and islets in the South China Sea and East China Sea, in the Spratly Islands, from December 2013 to October 2015. As these constructions were more prominent and extensive than the ones detained by the other appellants, China built infrastructures such as maritime ports, airstrips, and buildings to make the islands “habitable”. They aimed to send “a clear message to the other claimant, and the International Community at large, that it was very serious about its claims to sovereignty over the Spratly Islands and that the other claimants had to adjust to a new *status quo* concerning China’s physical presence in the Spratly Islands”²³⁶. To make this intelligible, China has been militarising the islands “in order to change the balance of power in the South China Sea”²³⁷. For the construction of these artificial islands and islets, it is necessary to implement a policy of *brinkmanship*²³⁸, that is,

²³⁴ Hannah Beech, “Just Where Exactly Did China Get the South China Sea Nine-Dash Line From?”, *Time*, July 19, 2016.

²³⁵ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 24.

²³⁶ Robert Beckman, “China’s ‘Island-Building’ in the South China Sea: Implications for Regional Security”, Edited by Ron Huisken, Elke Larsen, Ric Smith, Anthony Milner, Philips Vermonte, and Jusuf Wanandi. *Cscap regional security outlook 2017*. Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific, 2017.

²³⁷ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 24.

²³⁸ *Ibidem*, 25.

according to Thomas Schelling, “manipulating the shared risk of war”²³⁹ “(...) is thus the deliberate creation of recognisable risk of war, a risk that one does not completely control. It is the tactic of deliberately letting the situation get somewhat out of hand, just because its being out of hand may be intolerable to the other party and force his accommodation”²⁴⁰. This method pursues to push until an imminent military conflict, exerting pressure on the parties involved, who eventually give in and surrender some territories to halt this possible conflict. Thus, in this case, China ends up having territorial victories and “operational latitude without having to resort to military manoeuvres. Briefly, brinkmanship is a form of intimidation”²⁴¹. Although it is used mainly against small territories in the Pacific because it is very effective, it is also used against Japan, Taiwan, and the United States of America, through the passage of aircraft in areas guarded by the U.S, mainly in the *no-man’s land of in the South China Sea* (neutral international waters), where the artificial islands built by China are located. Even though the USA has conducted some maritime activities concerning its security, named Freedom of Navigation (FON) operations, in the waters adjacent to the Spratly Islands, to try to maintain a maritime equilibrium “as China believes these operations are both a security threat and illegal”²⁴² that can be a threat. Even though China’s artificial islands do not necessarily pose a menace to freedom of navigation or freedom of overflight, especially for commercial vessels and aircraft, it can be if the U.S. concludes that the artificial islands are part of an effort by China to challenge the military dominance of the U.S. in the region²⁴³.

China’s goal is to gradually get “control of the islands and regions it claims within the U-shaped line, so that *de facto* control will lead to *de jure* sovereignty, despite competing

²³⁹ Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966.

²⁴⁰ *Idem*, *The Threat That Leaves Something to Chance*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1959, https://www.rand.org/pubs/historical_documents/HDA1631-1.html.

²⁴¹ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 25.

²⁴² *Ibidem*.

²⁴³ *Ibidem*.

claims of other countries under UNCLOS²⁴⁴. One can say: it is a policy of *fait-accompl*. In June 2017, China created thirteen square kilometres of artificial islands in the disputed, valuable, and strategic Spratly archipelago in the South China Sea, north of Malaysia and roughly halfway between Vietnam and the Philippines. Despite, none of them were declared legitimate in 2016 by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in The Hague, in a paramount decision unanimous, heavily contested by Beijing²⁴⁵ the Arbitral Tribunal – which was explicitly constituted to this case on 21 June 2013, under Annex VII of the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) – issued a final award²⁴⁶ of significant importance on the South China Sea arbitration case (the Award). The PCA served in this case as a mere Registry for the proceedings, meaning that the PCA “shall maintain an archive of the arbitral proceedings and provide appropriate registry services as directed by the Arbitral Tribunal”²⁴⁷. Ever since, this landmark decision has inspired numerous discussions on legal issues. It has been considered as providing a legal background for the maritime activities taken by various countries in the South China Sea²⁴⁸.

The turning point came when, in December 2019, Malaysia proposed “a new partial submission on the extended continental shelf”²⁴⁹. As it happened between 2009 and 2011, with the Malaysian-Vietnam Joint Submission and Vietnam’s partial submission to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS), which started the first legal battle

²⁴⁴ Robert Beckman, “China’s ‘Island-Building’ in the South China Sea: Implications for Regional Security”, Edited by Ron Huiskens, Elke Larsen, Ric Smith, Anthony Milner, Philips Vermonte, and Jusuf Wanandi. *Cscap regional security outlook 2017*. Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific, 2017.

UNCLOS means United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

²⁴⁵ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 25.

²⁴⁶ Permanent Court of Arbitration, *Press Release: The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of the Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China)*, 12 July 2016.

²⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁴⁸ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 24.

²⁴⁹ Nguyen Hong Tao, “South China Sea: The Battle of the Diplomatic Notes Continues”, *The Diplomat*, August 4, 2020.

in the SCS, “if you will, the diplomatic note exchange 1.0”²⁵⁰, between December 2019 and 2020 several countries also submitted *new* diplomatic notes, as a “consequence of the 2016 arbitral Award in favour of the Philippines plus a new partial submission on an extended continental shelf by Malaysia in December 2019”²⁵¹, which led to the “Battle of Diplomatic Notes”²⁵². As some call it, the Diplomatic Note Exchange 2.0 had the participation of several other impacted and non-impacted countries outside the region, such as China, Malaysia, Philippines, Vietnam, Australia, Indonesia, and the United States, respectively. That led to the conclusion that any maritime claim inconsistent with UNCLOS is unacceptable, all the claims made by Beijing included, making it impossible to comply with the *Award* of the Hague Tribunal in this matter, is final and not subject to any legal appeal. The compliance of the Award brings with it difficulties given the fact that “China continues to mix the historic right claim with full maritime entitlement for features in the South China Sea, while most states – whether claimant or non-claimant — take UNCLOS as the sole legal basis for defining and resolving maritime claims”²⁵³. As Nguyen Hong Tao says in his article *South China Sea: The Battle of the Diplomatic Notes Continue*, “the diplomatic note exchange 2.0 has significant implications in that it has encouraged claimant states to clearly demonstrate their stance on UNCLOS’s application, the limits of maritime claims, compliance with the 2016 tribunal award, and a possible acceptable final solution”²⁵⁴.

During Deng Xiaoping’s leadership – 1980 until the early 1990s – China adopted the *good neighbour policy*, believed to be an asset, especially economically, if relations with its neighbours were peaceful. What was intended was to adopt a diplomatic position in order to

²⁵⁰ Nguyen Hong Tao, “South China Sea: The Battle of the Diplomatic Notes Continues”, *The Diplomat*, August 4, 2020.

²⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

²⁵² *Idem*, “South China Sea: The US joins the Battle of Diplomatic Notes”, *The Diplomat*, (June 10, 2020).

²⁵³ *Ibidem*.

²⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

promote stability, which would only be called into question if any of Beijing's fundamental interests were called into question²⁵⁵. When Hu Jintao came to power in from 2002, China's foreign policy changed its tone and content. China went "from a policy of peaceful rise to peaceful development"²⁵⁶.

This, in turn, opened the door to a much more ambitious policy in the South China Sea, Beijing realised its maritime borders would only be protected if it "expanded its eastern and southern strategic perimeters into the East and South China Seas"²⁵⁷.

IV.2 The PLA and PLA Navy

The 18th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which took place on November 17, 2012, became known as a milestone in Chinese maritime history, more precisely, in the claims and objectives outlined in its naval scope. The then Secretary-General of the CCP – Hu Jintao – presented his ambition to make China "a *haiyang qiangguo*: a maritime great power"²⁵⁸. In a sentence, the former Secretary-General said, "that China should enhance [its] capacity for exploiting marine resources, develop the marine economy, protect the marine ecological environment, resolutely safeguard China's maritime rights and interests, and *build China into a maritime great power*"²⁵⁹. This has had a significant impact inside the Party and Chinese society. Perhaps for reasons that concern the country's history, which, for

²⁵⁵ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 75.

²⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁵⁸ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020),1.

²⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

centuries, portrayed the sea as a mere border and not as a system that could be used to develop the country in economic and cultural terms²⁶⁰.

Nowadays, Hu Jintao's statement supports a Chinese ambition of finding new ways of thriving internationally, encouraged by the current President of the People's Republic of China – Xi Jinping –, as his primary political objective, essentially as a result of “China's growing dependence on the high seas of defence, trade-driven economic growth, raw materials, food security, and the recovery of ‘lost’ island territories”²⁶¹. As an outcome, it was established an army that was solely and exclusively responsible for implementing all the means required to achieve this goal, being one of the most important, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), responsible for all sectors that concerned the sea and the maritime militarisation to accomplish those purposes but also strategic ones. Jinping, who is also “the current party general secretary, chair of the Central Military Commission (CMC)”²⁶², defined the creation of a “world-class military”²⁶³ by 2049, the year in which it intends to gain the title of “Great Maritime Power”²⁶⁴. China has the resources, the government steadfastness, the peoples' will, and knowhows to be, at sea, what is on land, given its vast continental territory and its massive, comprehensive coastal and maritime zone. It is, therefore, a gigantic responsibility for the PLA Navy to be able to do an engaged and assertive role regarding the “national development strategy exploit, utilize and protect the seas and oceans, and build China into a maritime power”²⁶⁵.

Still, China's interests and ambitions go far beyond what is geographically close to them, implying they are not exclusively consonant with the Western Pacific. Even so, all the

²⁶⁰ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 1. “for the first time in China's long history, its leader had asserted that China, a traditional continental power, aspired to become a leading, perhaps the leading, maritime power”.

²⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

²⁶² *Ibidem*, 2.

²⁶³ *Ibidem*.

²⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁶⁵ *Ibidem*, 3.

objectives designed by Beijing have not yet been accomplished and emerge in achieving “self-sufficiency in sea trade”²⁶⁶, on the one hand, and the other in “a world-class PLA”²⁶⁷. Both purposes focus on China’s willingness to compete with its most prominent opponents, especially the U.S. In this sense, “Beijing intends to catapult the PLA into the top tier of military powers”²⁶⁸, not only by developing new infrastructures and building high-end military equipment like vessels – through its shipbuilding program, the world’s biggest one – but also through the investment in new forms of warfare, such as, “intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and precision strike”²⁶⁹.

China has shown escalating steadfastness and eagerness to make its small navy, which had only the duty of patrolling the coast, become a “world-class navy”²⁷⁰, and “self-sufficiency in sea trade”²⁷¹. Firstly, this process has been executed in the sector related to shipbuilding and warships, making them notable from a technological point of view but also in terms of the design used in construction that makes them very functional. On the other hand, it is essential to note that the People’s Liberation Army needed a tremendous reform, mostly in its “operational capabilities, by putting in place a command-and-control framework that can train the PLA to prevail in ‘information intensive joint operations in the maritime-aerospace domain’, to become a joint war-fighting force in practice, not only in name”²⁷².

As it is today, the prospect is that by 2035 the PLA Navy will be larger than the United States Navy, especially in waters adjacent to China. However, it is important to consider that all variables must continue to grow at a steady pace, essentially the economic one, otherwise China will hardly be able to achieve the military modernisation that expects within the time

²⁶⁶ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 176.

²⁶⁷ *Ibidem*, 177.

²⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁷⁰ *Ibidem* 178.

²⁷¹ *Ibidem*, 176.

²⁷² *Ibidem*, 179.

limit that has been set. Regardless, patience and perseverance are virtues historically embodied in the Chinese soul and its leadership's actions.

It is likewise necessary to note that the advantage held by the U.S. over China has been falling, meaning that Chinese technological development, especially regarding maritime, air and missile power, has put China in a noticeable position, apparently well prepared to stand up to the U.S. Still, "the PLAN is the largest navy in the Indo-Pacific featuring at least 300 ships, along with numerous submarines, amphibious ships, patrol craft, and specialized ship"²⁷³, according with recent data. If we think of "all the elements that comprise the concept of maritime power"²⁷⁴, China, now, is already the second or third maritime most considerable power in the world. In this sense, "the PLAN is speeding up the transition of its tasks from defence in the near seas to protection missions on the far seas"²⁷⁵.

On this matter, it is important to look at this Chinese military approach called "Blue-water operations"²⁷⁶ or *yuanhain*²⁷⁷. This strategy's path took a different turn in 2004 when a maritime fleet capable of sailing and staying in blue waters was introduced. These ships have been endowed with all the necessary equipment for a greater projection of Chinese military power, such as "land-attack cruise missiles, modest-scale amphibious assaults, or limited carrier-based aircraft strikes"²⁷⁸.

²⁷³ Derek Grossman, "Military Build Up in the South China Sea", *Rand Corporation*, (January 22, 2022), 4.

²⁷⁴ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 174.

²⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 45.

²⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, 44.

²⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, 45.

IV.4.1 Blue-Water Operations

Previously to 2004, the role of the PLA Navy was exclusively to patrol and defend its “offshore waters”²⁷⁹. However, PLA Navy has, over time, “shift its focus from ‘offshore waters defence’ to a holistic mixture of an ‘offshore water defence’ with ‘open seas protection’ developing a combined multifunctional and efficient marine combat force structure”²⁸⁰. The task of the navy is no longer merely an offensive and defensive one in a kinetic military action²⁸¹ in peaceful times as well as in wartimes²⁸² –, as it is also no longer able to prevent, by deterrence, a military escalation in this region, underlining a visible and robust Chinese presence. Thus, it echoes a new function and mission to this People’s Liberation Army Navy – “protection missions in far seas which mean defending Chinese interests and citizens overseas²⁸³ as ‘imminent concern’”²⁸⁴.

Still, these missions are merely defensive – “military operations other than war (MOOTW)”²⁸⁵ – and do not give China a willingness to influence or provoke certain types of military events in furtherance of maintaining its national interests, and “the need to protect ships travelling on strategic *Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs)* in wartime”²⁸⁶. They have

²⁷⁹ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 41

²⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

²⁸¹ Mark G. Czelusta, “Business as Usual: An Assessment of Donald Rumsfeld’s Transformation Vision and Transformation’s prospects for the Future”, *George C. Marshall: European Center for Security Studies*, June 2008.

²⁸² Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 44. “(...) after all, Xi Jinping frequently reminds the PLA that its *raison d’être* is to win wars”.

²⁸³ *Ibidem*, 44.

²⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 46.

²⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

only a power projection character but may eventually have a willingness to achieve “expeditionary missions”²⁸⁷.

This whole environment has become even more critical and has taken a prominent place in maritime policy after introducing the *21st Century Maritime Silk Road* was officially enshrined in the Constitution by the Chinese Communist Party. These circumstances ultimately gave China the legitimacy, strength, and security necessary to challenge the territories in this area and, most importantly, compete with the omnipresent United States of America and its closest neighbours.

Hereupon, Beijing has invested not only at a financial level but also in military improvement research to achieve a “multi-pronged sea control strategy comprised of upgrading or building new military facilities on its outposts in the Paracel and Spratly Islands as well as conducting exercises and sovereignty patrols of the disputed region”²⁸⁸. It will be through its presence on these military bases that PLA and PLAN will be able to promote their relationship with the U.S., but it will also be through it that China will be able to contain the possible attempts posed by other countries²⁸⁹. Still, this is not stagnant since their activities in the South China Sea “take the form of periodic joint exercises, Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), or both to uphold international law and rules of behaviour”²⁹⁰. This is the case of Australia, India, and Japan, also known as the “Quadrilateral Security Dialogue”²⁹¹ or “Quad”²⁹² and later, the Quad Plus, with New Zealand, South Korea, and Vietnam as members.

²⁸⁷ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 45.

²⁸⁸ Derek Grossman, “Military Build Up in the South China Sea”, *Rand Corporation*, (January 22, 2022), 2.

²⁸⁹ *Ibidem*. “China will be able to extend its influence thousands of miles to the south and project power deep into Oceania, threatening traditionally secure US sea-lines of communication”.

²⁹⁰ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 44.

²⁹¹ Derek Grossman, “Military Build Up in the South China Sea”, *Rand Corporation*, (January 22, 2022), 11. “The Quad is an informal dialogue to quietly coordinate security and military policy, with China in mind, the existence of which simultaneously signal that the group plans to balance against Chinese claims in the SCS and elsewhere throughout the Indo-Pacific region”.

²⁹² Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 44.

As Leszek Buszynski presents us in the chapter “ASEAN, Grand Strategy, and the South China Sea” of the book *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, the Chinese military presence in the SCS must be augmented together with military exercises to prove disregards of the Tribunal’s verdict²⁹³.

We can identify three points that must be highlighted from now on. Firstly, there is a possibility that China will land its fighter aircraft on the infrastructures they already have on the Spratly Islands and store these aircraft in particular new hangars they have built there. This “would be the clearest sign yet of Chinese militarization on the SCS – in clear contravention of Chinese president Xi Jinping’s pledge to the U.S. in 2015 not to militarize the Spratly archipelago”²⁹⁴. Secondly, South China Sea “ASEAN counter claimant states have not developed the Anti-Access and Area Denial Weapons (A2AD)²⁹⁵ capabilities one might hope for a difficult future Chinese land grabs or expanding its *de facto* control in the region as it did at Scarborough Shoal in 2012. Countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines should consider acquiring these capabilities and reduce its large handicap by developing closer relations with the US and other major powers that might supply them with arms” and, conceivably, other kind of assistance, namely communications intelligence”²⁹⁶.

Finally, the Quad and its major allied powers should organise Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and joint exercises to heighten deterrence and to stress out international

²⁹³ “China may increase its military presence in the South China Sea and may conduct military exercises there to demonstrate defiance of the tribunal’s ruling, but aggressive behaviour will not alter the fact that its activities and position in the Spratly area of the South China Sea have lost any legal justification”. Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 139.

²⁹⁴ “China will eventually land fighter aircraft on Spratly Island possessions and potentially store them in newly built hangars now available there. It would be the clearest sign yet of Chinese militarization on the SCS – in clear contravention of Chinese president Xi Jinping’s pledge to the US in 2015 not to militarize the Spratly archipelago. (...) However, the SCS is a considerably larger geographical area than the East China Sea and therefore would probably require continuous coverage in greater numbers of resources, such as small ships, recurring to the militia than China has available now”. Derek Grossman, “Military Build Up in the South China Sea”, *Rand Corporation*, (January 22, 2022), 14.

²⁹⁵ System used to prevent an adversary from occupying an area of land, sea, or air.

²⁹⁶For instance, SIGINT (*signals intelligence*), ELINT (*electronic intelligence*), or FISINT (*foreign instrumentation intelligence*).

law and patterns of conduct. Still, for this to have a greater effect, the connection between the Quad and the ASEAN members needs to be deepened and more articulated, so there is no wrong idea “that major powers are working in concert to ‘contain’ China and pursue great power rivalry rather than enforce international law and norms of behaviour”²⁹⁷.

To conclude, until recently, China has not been able to adapt to the changes that have been taking place in this region, nor the U.S., as many analysts said regarding the region and Southeast Asia. Therefore, this has led to key changes implemented by Barack Obama, particularly with regard “to tactics-strategy – by not bear in mind the national politics of its adversaries and only looks at its strengths, current and projected, as guidelines for regional security policies”²⁹⁸. Dissimilarities between China and the U.S. eventually accentuate the dissension from neighbouring countries²⁹⁹. Despite China’s growing economic and military power, which can help maintain the support of Laos and Cambodia, it lacks strategic effectiveness in the SCS and the countries in the region, especially Vietnam, without considering its variables. “For any future resistance from its neighbours, China will only have itself to blame”³⁰⁰.

An example of China’s inability to adapt *graciously* is Taiwan. The Republic of China has some of the world’s biggest high-tech enterprises, mostly developers of the “golden” chips, makes it an industrial target for China, as the country wants. Most of all, it needs to have control over this technology for its own companies and its worldwide sold products, such as for the assemble of cars, but also for the manufacture of mobile phones such as the ubiquitous iPhone,

²⁹⁷ Derek Grossman, “Military Build Up in the South China Sea”, *Rand Corporation*, (January 22, 2022), 14.

²⁹⁸ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 98.

²⁹⁹ *Ibidem*. “This mismatch guarantees increasing alienation against China from surrounding countries”.

³⁰⁰ *Ibidem*, 99.

which were, until recently, exclusively *assembled in China* (although *designed in California*, by the Silicon Valley sweetheart, Apple!), has gradually relocated some of its production elsewhere (ex. India or Brazil). However, the leading contract manufacturer that assembles this product is Hon Hai Precision Industry Co., Ltd., also known as Foxconn, ironically, a Taiwanese multinational! In fact, Foxconn founder and CEO Terry Gou announced he is running for the 2024 Taiwanese presidential elections as an independent candidate under the pretensions of improving the economy and the relations between Taiwan and its neighbours.

V. The 21st Century Thucydides Trap

V. 1 The United States of America and the South China Sea: An outlook.

Since the end of World War II in 1949, the United States has adopted a China strategy based on three key points – “containment, cooperative engagement, and competition”³⁰¹–, which likewise contained the idea adopted for the U.S. that in the eminence of an armed conflict, they should prevail³⁰². This concluding idea abounds due to the circumstances in which China is currently inserted. Its rapid economic growth, great capacity, and effectiveness of using diplomacy, and modernisation of military forces indicate that Beijing is on a path of progress in which the goal is “toward a state of equality with or even superiority to the United States”³⁰³.

Still, while rivalries are increasingly noticeable, there are two elements of cooperation between the two powers, such as Sean Liedman expresses in the book *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*, and that serves through the cooperation of the United States in abstaining on the sovereignty problems that China has with other countries, while competing with China to ensure that it does not establish total dominance over the SCS³⁰⁴. In this sense, the U.S. have three hypothetical answers that can be assumed to be related to Chinese activity in this region. The first would be to grant China’s sovereignty of all the land features in the South China Sea, even if some of these are occupied by the United States of America allies and sympathizers, such as the Philippines, Singapore, and Malaysia. The second

³⁰¹ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 147.

³⁰² *Ibidem*.

³⁰³ *Ibidem*, 300.

³⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

would pass through ‘freeze the *status quo*’. The last one would go through ‘roll back’, Beijing claims³⁰⁵. Any of these different responses would have suggestive consequences for Washington, once even many of the investments made in China due to its economic development have been entitled to the still hegemonic presence of the U.S. in the SCS, making, as Tongfi Kim said that “this emphasizes the U.S. problem of not provoking China while maintaining a convincing role “as the protector of the status quo in the South China Sea”³⁰⁶. For the United States to maintain this position, it is fundamental to focus on compliance with bilateral agreements formulated post-WWII. Thus, if, and when, “Beijing believes its navy is capable of neutralizing and perhaps defeating the U.S. naval forces, even in a limited scenario such as one centering on Taiwan, the Asian security environment will be dramatically changed”³⁰⁷. Hereupon, this rivalry between these two great powers – U.S. and China – in the South China Sea is already “structural, strategic, and irreconcilable”³⁰⁸.

The SCS has been essential to China since Deng Xiaoping’s leadership. Considered to be the “south gate of China’s national defence and security”³⁰⁹. From Singapore to Shanghai”³¹⁰, it has become a geographical region of disputed waters and resources of the greatest uniqueness and relevance in commercial and economic terms and political and military standings. Given this, China’s interests in this geographical area stem from several integration factors. One of these factors is nationalism, using historical arguments, for example, the *Century of Humiliation*, which is “produced, mirrored, and remanufactured”³¹¹ to the population through

³⁰⁵ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 300.

³⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, 301.

³⁰⁷ *Ibidem*, 300.

³⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, 294.

³⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, 17.

³¹⁰ “With an extension of 2,200 nm”. Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 123.

³¹¹ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 13.

their leader, resulting in greater support for the Chinese Communist Party and to the dictatorial *persona* of Xi Jinping. The purpose of this performance is to legitimise the means used by the government and its interest groups in the large-scale military, oil industry, and fishing operations and, on the other hand, to boost and encourage the population in long-lasting sustenance “for centralization of power under Xi and the government’s expanding budget, since Chinese citizens perceive such centralization and power to be necessary to achieve something significant as overcoming U.S. efforts in Asia”³¹². Taking this into account, the SCS has come to be a high-tension zone for China, making it more than enough for there to be a demand for this region and for the Chinese determination to be legitimised “to achieve control of the SCS and the airspace above it”³¹³. Chinese control of this geostrategic zone “would eliminate the possibility that Southern China could once again be attacked from across SCS”³¹⁴.

Presently, two main arenas of strategic contest in the world are conducive to competition. The first area is East Asia, as it contains a “potential for conflict around the Peninsula of Korea, the Taiwan Strait, the South China Sea, and the Sea of Japan, along with civil upheaval in Hong Kong, which may draw in the international community. The other is Eurasia, namely Central Asia, where China and Russia are competing and where Russia is threatening Europe’s eastern edges”³¹⁵. Beijing “is constrained by its geography, its history, and most of all by its resource endowments”³¹⁶. Due to this, China is very dependent on international markets and foreign suppliers – “mainly on ships carrying oil, gas, and other raw

³¹² Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 14.

³¹³ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 123.

³¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

³¹⁵ In a conspicuous way on the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 152.

³¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 8.

supplies and vital resources for its fast-growing industries”³¹⁷ (growing fast, growing big, growing global). In such matter, this an area that connects China to the Indian Ocean and Europe, forming its main trade route “for all the energy and resources it needs for its continued prosperity. All these vital inputs travel by strategic chokepoints, especially the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea”³¹⁸. The Chinese strategy in the Indian Ocean mainly intends to “protect and defend its vital shipping lanes, especially to keep supplies and crude oil flowing”³¹⁹ and is not based in the unrealistic and unrealisable strategy of challenging Indian primacy.

We can envision that the “combination of claims to land features and historic resource rights makes the South China Sea, as the Chinese put it, *a core* national interest”³²⁰. Moreover, this sea route is part of the great project headed by Xi Jinping – the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road – and consequently, it must be protected and defended, in a systematic and determined manner, at all costs so that the Chinese aims in economic and commercial standings (but also military, often disguised), can be dispatched. In this sense, PLAN must work in a way that circumvents and improves Beijing’s position in the South China Sea area, if for some motive, it becomes controlled by other powers, and the Chinese government finds itself in a situation of great defencelessness, something that would not be prudent at all. Thus, what China has been preventatively doing over the last few years is using its influence and menace to control all the territories with its maritime border in the South China Sea toward a more easily accomplishment of full control over this maritime area. Furthermore, Beijing wants to defend

³¹⁷ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 34.

³¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 8.

³¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 151.

³²⁰ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 120.

the SCS namely, “within the First Island Chain formed by the Philippines”³²¹ because it is the main ground of “ingress and egress”³²² of the Chinese merchant marine and a focal point in the crossing blockade in the event of an armed conflict.

To achieve this objectives and concerning effective employment of these objectives, the Chinese government has been building several infrastructures along the entire SCS maritime line – *The Great Wall of the Sea*, which dates to the 7th century when the Great Wall of China was built as a form of protection and not of association, and which culminated in the construction of a series of disseminated military bases ³²³ to secure an effective and regular presence in that regions.

People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) is locally structured and resourced in the South China Sea but answers to the very top of China’s military bureaucracy, the commander in chief, Xi Jinping. “While the PAFMM has been part of China’s militia system for decades (much before the Chinese Communist Power came to power), it is receiving greater emphasis today because of its value in furthering China’s near seas ‘rights and interests’”³²⁴. It is mostly embodied through a *disguised network* of some three thousand recreational and commercial fishing vessels that indeed work for the Chinese government to ensure greater effectiveness and speed in achieving Chinese political objectives in the disputed waters. This network is distributed over ten ports in the Chinese provinces of Guangdong and Hainan³²⁵— and PLA warships have a permanent presence in the SCS to be able to control all U.S.

³²¹ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 16.

³²² *Ibidem*.

³²³ Humphrey Hawksley, *Asian Waters: The Struggle over the Indo-Pacific and the Challenge to American Power*,

³²⁴ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 207.

³²⁵ Gregory B. Poling, Harrison Prétat, “Pulling Back the Curtain of China’s Maritime Militia”, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, November 18, 2021. “a force of vessels ostensibly engaged in commercial fishing but which in fact operate alongside Chinese law enforcement and military to achieve Chinese political objectives in disputed waters³²⁵ and it operates from a string of 10 ports in China’s Guangdong and Hainan Provinces. Remote sensing data indicates that roughly 300 militia vessels are operating in the Spratly Islands on any given day”.

movement, as well as any other ship of a maritime power that is using this sea as a trade route, or for carrying out military exercises³²⁶. This is, therefore, a “crucial feature of the Chinese approach”³²⁷.

Hence, in order to achieve a realistic *blue-water* navy, the PAFMM aims to establish itself, by 2022-2023, in the western part of the Indian Ocean, including the Arabian Sea, thereby attaining effective naval weight and a reputation of great global prestige, through the opening “more pipelines and direct land transport routes across Eurasia, and as it seeks energy and resource security along the Belt, so it will seek to secure its suppliers and access to markets along the maritime road”³²⁸. Given this, and since relations between the United States of America and China are increasingly fragile due to trade and economic issues, “within the context of a sustained geostrategic competition for global leadership and tendential hegemony, power, and influence, especially in Asia”³²⁹, it shows us that the U.S.’ hypothesis of implementing comprehensive policies towards diminishing Chinese influence in this region should never be put sideways.

The element that leads to this strategic urging is the Chinese craving to become *the* chief regional power and reinforce its dominion. In fact, “the loss in reputation and soft power from threatening naval and air activity in the South China Sea may be worth the economic gain from oil alone, especially since it is a relative gain at the loss of strategic competitors”³³⁰.

³²⁶ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 134-135. “Across the South China Sea, China’s air force, navy, coast guard, and maritime militia all maintain robust presence. Routine patrols and exercises ensure Chinese forces are in and around all the features, not just the ones they occupy. China routinely challenges the presence of non-Chinese forces, including other claimant nations, and especially the U.S., often overstating its authority and insisting foreign force either stay away or obtain Chinese permission to operate”.

³²⁷ *Ibidem*.

³²⁸ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 29.

³²⁹ Michael A McDevitt, *China as Twenty First Century Naval Power: Theory, Practice, and Implications*, (Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2020), 49.

³³⁰ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 16.

However, “yielding control of this strategic resource to the Philippines or Vietnam, for example, could strengthen them military and economically, to the point where dominating Asia would simply be too costly for China to consider”³³¹.

However, “China’s strategy is constrained by some factors, such as its geography, history, and resource endowments”³³². The primary one has been mentioned earlier and focuses on the geography characterising the Chinese territory. In this way, the People’s Republic of China sought to invest in engineering technologies and methods that allowed the construction of artificial islands throughout the South China Sea to become military bases³³³ and spots that define and affirm their *de facto* sovereignty and intend to guarantee it undisputed in the future. There are already several islands assembled to date where various maritime and military infrastructures have already been built. The biggest and most populated one is called Woody Island (or in Chinese *Yongxing*)³³⁴, located in the Paracel Islands, it is “China’s best equipped base, with twenty-seven-hundred-meter runway in operation since the 1990’s”³³⁵.

In mid-2015, Beijing built artificial islands in the Spratlys archipelago, destroying the existing reefs – that are not considered land according to UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas) – serving exclusively as foundations for its construction by “covering the artificial islands with concrete”³³⁶. The main intention was to claim and establish its

³³¹ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 16.

³³² Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 8.

³³³ Johnson Reef, 27 acres, a port and supply base; Hughes Reef, 19 acres, a long jetty and a wide docking bay; Gaven Reefs, 34 acres, 2 outstretched jetties, a tower, and dark shapes that make it look like a small container terminal; Fiery Cross Reef, 677 acres, resembling the front half of a warship, with a runway right along one side and rows of buildings just like on a military base; Humphrey Hawksley, *Asian Waters: The Struggle over the Indo-Pacific and the Challenge to American Power*, (New York: Abrams Press, 2020), 40.

³³⁴ *Ibidem*, 39. “Woody Island, which the Chinese call Yongxing or Eternal Prosperity Land”.

³³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³³⁶ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 24.

dominance in this area. From here came seven new islets, which were within the international law status as a territory after this process of land reclamation.

China has moreover invested in constructing various military infrastructures in the Amphitrite group of the Paracel Islands³³⁷. Still, this investment goes back to the 1990s and is the “culmination of a regional policy based on economic, military, and diplomacy capabilities in the region that China calls *Comprehensive National Power*”³³⁸. Even so, China was not the only country that began to invest in the edifice of these islets. Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Taiwan have also built small islands in the Spratlys area, although they are nowhere near the same size and scale as the Chinese³³⁹. All these artificial islands are part of an archipelago called *Spratly Islands Reef* that is “isolated and jostle together cheek by jowl with rival occupants”³⁴⁰.

The second factor relates to China’s difficulty extending its soft power³⁴¹. Nonetheless, the only advantage is the economic capacity gained by China, which is attained through the *sharp power* that China has, using “political interference; overseas investments; the acquisition of technology, whether legitimately or illegitimately; cyberwarfare and its grand strategy of the BRI”³⁴². However, it brings excellent difficulties for the country to acquire and establish legitimacy overseas. China’s authoritarian political system performs poorly in the sensitive and spotlighted ground of human rights due to the little (or no) freedom given to non-governmental organisations, including religious organisations, and the suppression of individual rights to the

³³⁷ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 74-75.

³³⁸ *Ibidem*, 75.

³³⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, 24.

³⁴¹ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 103. “China’s struggle with projecting soft power”.

³⁴² *Ibidem*, 9-10.

detriment of the State, which consequently leads to the absence of the rule of law, the absence of free and open media, and an obsession with peripheral security in Xinjiang and Tibet³⁴³.

Meanwhile, China “has developed substantial force-denial capabilities that will dissuade U.S. adventures closer to China’s shores”³⁴⁴. Since Beijing does not have either hard or soft power capabilities, it uses what is called *geo-economics*, a form of *sharp power*, in which the economy is used as means to achieve its national interests – or as they call it, *core interests* – through initiatives such as the Belt and Road, in which trade is implied. In this case, “China badly needs to build substantially its soft power to complement its economic power, thereby sustaining and extending its global influence”³⁴⁵, and needs it for its security goals.

This insistence and willingness to assert itself in the East and South China Sea – which constitute the *First Island Chain* – lead Beijing to a severe security dilemma, which focuses on a change in the *status quo* that leads to other regional and international powers an “increase their own military capabilities, form closer alliances and security partnerships, and engage in counter-brinkmanship with their naval and air forces”³⁴⁶. Nevertheless, China’s ambitions do not just stand by this first set of islands leading, in this case, to an increase in military operations and political influence on the areas of “Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia – being these countries part of the Second and Third Island Chains”³⁴⁷– but besides in the area comprised of ASEAN members.

China undertakes its territorial ambitions and expansionist claims with the diffuse and nebulous term *core interest*, which comprise all territories by which China would be and is

³⁴³Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020),102. “the stifling of non-government organizations, in including religious organizations, the suppression of individual rights in favour of the state, the absence of rule of law, a tightly controlled and scripted media, and an obsession with peripheral security in Xinjiang and Tibet”.

³⁴⁴*Ibidem*, 10.

³⁴⁵*Ibidem*, 126.

³⁴⁶ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 17.

³⁴⁷*Ibidem*, 19.

willing to go to war, if necessary, and which was for a long time exclusive to signal Taiwan's territory³⁴⁸. Directly related to the BRI, China established, in 2015, its "first-ever military strategy white paper"³⁴⁹ – China's Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), a policy of active defence³⁵⁰ – established in a government report that "offers high-level principles that China claims to ascribe to in its approach to foreign aid and forward-looking development priorities"³⁵¹ and that aimed to modernise "its military to become first-class naval power and having a larger global military presence"³⁵².

In January 2021, China presented a new white paper with new principles added to the previous eight³⁵³ that already existed. The foremost purpose of this strategy is to "call for a new phase in Chinese development assistance focused on security the country professed desire

³⁴⁸ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 19.

³⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, 23.

³⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

³⁵¹ Kristen A. Cordell, "Chinese Development Assistance: A New Approach or More of the Same?", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (March 23, 2021).

³⁵² Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 23.

³⁵³ "The Chinese Government's Eight Principles for Economic Aid and Technical Assistance to Other Countries", January 15, 1964, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Zhonghua renmin gongheguo waijiaobu and Zhonggong zhongyang wenxian yanjiushi, eds., Zhou Enlai waijiao wenxuan (Selected Diplomatic Papers of Zhou Enlai) (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1990), 388. <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121560>.

When providing economic aid and technical assistance to other countries, the Chinese Government shall act in strict compliance with the following eight principles: 1. The Chinese Government always bases itself on the principle of equality and mutual benefit in providing aid to other countries. It never regards such aid as a kind of unilateral alms but as something mutual. 2. In providing aid to other countries, the Chinese Government strictly respects the sovereignty of the recipient countries, and never attaches any conditions or asks for any privileges. 3. China provides economic aid in the form of interest-free or low-interest loans and extends the time limit for the repayment when necessary, so as to lighten the burden of the recipient countries as far as possible. 4. In providing aid to other countries, the purpose of the Chinese Government is not to make the recipient countries dependent on China but to help them embark step by step on the road of self-reliance and independent economic development. 5. The Chinese Government tries its best to help the recipient countries build projects which require less investment while yielding quicker results, so that the recipient governments may increase their income and accumulate capital. 6. The Chinese Government provides the best-quality equipment and material of its own manufacture at international market prices. If the equipment and material provided by the Chinese Government are not up to the agreed specifications and quality, the Chinese Government undertakes to replace them. 7. In giving any particular technical assistance, the Chinese Government will see to it that the personnel of the recipient country fully master such technique. 8. The experts dispatched by China to help in construction in the recipient countries will have the same standard of living as the experts of the recipient country. The Chinese experts are not allowed to make any special demands or enjoy any special amenities.

to uphold the international order and usher in peace”³⁵⁴. Therefore, this new paper has encapsulated three notable features. Initially, in 2018, China set up a new aid agency – “China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) – that is intended to be an initial step for China’s efforts to reform its foreign aid”³⁵⁵. This foreign aid has begun to come to an early line since 2013 with the announcement of the start of the Belt and Road Initiative, “with China gradually growing into a major donor country, focusing more on the sharing of development ideas, experiences, and values rather than purely pecuniary and material aid”³⁵⁶.

The paper also focuses on bringing China closer to countries and multilateral organisations that already have a key role in the Belt and Road Initiative to be an asset to Chinese development. Thus, this new white paper introduces principles such as “mutual learning, sustainability, lasting impact and breaking new ground”³⁵⁷. As described to us by Kristen A. Cordell in the article published in the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, these four improved principles are Beijing’s way of avoiding confrontation with the negative criticisms of its intervention in the economies of developing countries in which the BRI operates and, at the same time, trying to show that it is already one step ahead and focused on the future.

This interconnected strategy to the BRI should be seen as proof of China's potential and intends to have, increasingly, in “the implementation of large-scale projects overseas”³⁵⁸. More importantly, Western countries must pay increased attention because this may be the key to understanding how China *intends to assist* developing countries and how this *will influence its matrixial role* in the world.

³⁵⁴ Kristen A. Cordell, “Chinese Development Assistance: A New Approach or More of the Same?”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (March 23, 2021).

³⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁵⁶ Zhang Haibing, “The Development and Transformation of China’s Foreign Aid”, *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, Chapter 8, September 22, 2017, 1-2.

³⁵⁷ Kristen A. Cordell, “Chinese Development Assistance: A New Approach or More of the Same?”, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (March 23, 2021).

³⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

The challenge in the South China Sea today concerns a growing struggle over its sovereignty. Who controls the Spratlys and the Paracels and, therefore, effectively controls this sea? “It is a battle over a host of critical matters – oil and gas resources, both known and purported; a substantial part of the world’s fishing resources; control of the world’s most important sea lanes and, potentially, the trade that goes through it”³⁵⁹.

At present (2022-23), the primordial question of the South China Sea is Taiwan – and the implication of Biden and the American corporations’ interests – and only then the sea’s resources, however significant they may be. Even more critical for China, further reinforcing its willingness to detain sovereign power over this area, is the fact that this is an area that has a great deal of “national identity, a shifting strategic balance, and the changing relationships of China both with its neighbours and with the United States”³⁶⁰. It is also relevant to assume that this dispute over the SCS, the small islands and islets in it, is related to the fact that it is not yet known to what extent the SCS is characterised as an area of international waters or whether, on the other hand, it is part of Chinese national territory³⁶¹. We also must take into consideration the pivotal matter, stated loudly by China, that the SCS is part of its Exclusive Economic Zone.

However, this fact – according to the Convention on the Law of the Sea – does not allow control over foreign ships passing through these waters, contrary to what China tends to say, but instead allows there to be a “freedom of military activities in open seas”³⁶² which is the case. Nevertheless, China has been occupying “shoals and reefs that belong to other nations, and to intimidate, with militarized coast guard and fishing militia, the commercial boats of other countries in their own EEZ”³⁶³.

³⁵⁹ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 137.

³⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

³⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 142-143.

³⁶² *Ibidem*, 145.

³⁶³ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 23.

Since the Biden Administration took office in January 2021, China's perception of the U.S. has worsened chiefly due to the inherited sentiment of lack of confidence in the U.S. and vice versa. Several factors led to this change. Firstly, China has surpassed the United States of America regarding *trade* volume. Moreover, China "has also risen in relative importance, and risen quite rapidly and dramatically, albeit from a low base"³⁶⁴ and "Beijing's massive propaganda machinery has advanced a multipoint narrative that the U.S. table and China's influence over the region is a return to a historical norm"³⁶⁵. Finally, this lack of confidence also originated from the "unwillingness of the Obama's Administration to confront China and Trump's Administration capriciousness and arrogant "America-first" mindset"³⁶⁶.

The South China Sea has almost always inherent itself in competition between the countries bordering it as an area with immense potential for technological developments and economic growth – "it is a confrontation vexed by history"³⁶⁷. In this sense, China was the country that stood out in this 'mission', which gave the name of "peaceful rise"³⁶⁸, and that allowed this country to gain a place in the world economy.

Given this, Southeast Asia does not want to continue to be seen as a mere theatre of operations and competition with China, nor does the South China Sea want to continue with a reputation as an ordinary sea route to reach the Middle East and Western Europe. Through this finding, we can ask ourselves, then, "what Southeast Asia wants from the Biden Administration"³⁶⁹? For the United States of America to build a strategic cooperation

³⁶⁴ Drew Thompson, "US-China Decoupling and its Regional Security Implications", International Institute for Strategic Studies, June 2021, 23.

³⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁶⁷ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 152.

³⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, 147.

³⁶⁹ Drew Thompson, "US-China Decoupling and its Regional Security Implications", International Institute for Strategic Studies, June 2021, 24.

relationship, we need to understand the main needs of this region. Japan is a good starting point for analysis as it has its interests aligned with those of the United States of America, regarding the willingness they both share to stop China's steady advance and preserve the general order in this geographical area, as well as the possibility of accessing the Indo-Pacific without any constraints.

Essentially, and agreeing with Drew Thompson, the author of the article *US-China Decoupling and its Regional Security Implications*, Southeast Asia wants four things from the United States: “predictability and political presence; the embrace of ASEAN centrality; greater U.S. economic engagement; and a more tempered US-China relationship”³⁷⁰.

In the process of reaching an adequate and results-in understanding, the states of Southeast Asia must behave accordingly with what is effectively ASEAN interests, as an all. These countries – although intrinsically distinct – may collect benefits by continuing to jointly support the U.S. military presence in this region and cement their willingness to cooperate and coexist with other military alliances, such as QUAD. They profit with a balance of powers.

The emerging tensions between China and the U.S. have an impact on the decisions and positions taken by the countries that are part of ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations – firstly because this association is “caught between the grand strategies of the major powers that converge over the SCS”³⁷¹, but also bearing in mind they identify with the U.S. in terms of security, but with China in economic terms³⁷². On the one hand, the grand strategy being put in place by China aspires to enhance its position as Asia's leader and downgrade the role of Japan and the United States in the Western Pacific. Likewise, it aims to find the defence

³⁷⁰ Drew Thompson, “US-China Decoupling and its Regional Security Implications”, International Institute for Strategic Studies, June 2021, 24.

³⁷¹ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 122.

³⁷² *Ibidem*, 169. “We are a geographical reality. The U.S. alliance is a geopolitical concept”.

of its Asian neighbours and re-establish its status as *Empire*, hoping to demand “the U.S. alliance system in the region as its replacement with the Chinese-centered regional order”³⁷³.

The United States, on the other hand, maintained its position in the Western Pacific, defending its freedom of navigation and preventing the domination of a single country in the region in a way that would disregard it and contain trade and commerce. This way, the U.S. is resisting China’s effort to “dominate the South China Sea which could undermine the U.S. presence in the Western Pacific and weaken its credibility with its allies Japan, the Philippines, and Australia”³⁷⁴. As a way of trying to get around this, the U.S. has guaranteed security ties with Vietnam and improved its relations “with the Philippines to ensure rotational military presence there”³⁷⁵, making it increasingly noticeable the United States presence in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, China has only succeeded in moving towards economic development like the one it has lived through due to a *peaceful geopolitical environment*, such as the one that has lived so far, which would not have been possible without the policies of *global economic openness* and *free trade* in the oceans. Having said that the primary purpose of this strategy conducted by the People’s Republic of China is the “defence of the territorial integrity and protection of the CPC as China’s legitimate ruling party”³⁷⁶ – particularly after what happened in Tiananmen Square in the ‘80s, but also recently in Hong-Kong S.A.R – the Chinese leaders have realised that both internal and external security are more connected than it seems.

³⁷³ “Elevate its position as leader of Asia and to reduce the role of Japan and the United States in the Western Pacific. It seeks defence from its Asian neighbours and the restoration of its status as the ‘middle kingdom’, aspirations that demand the removal from the U.S. alliance system in the region as its replacement with Chinese-centered regional order”. Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 122.

³⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, 123.

³⁷⁶ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 25.

V. 2 21st Century Thucydides Trap

Because this is a highly claimed zone, there are growing tensions between China and the United States of America, expressly regarding maritime disputes and strategies, often referred to as the 21st Century example of the Thucydides Trap³⁷⁷. This relationship has, over the years, “become more complex as the balance shifts between the two countries and as the economies of the rest of Asia become increasingly integrated with China’s”³⁷⁸, as well as the West has increased ties and economic correlations, and even well-known dependences on East Asia. As Humphrey Hawksley pointed out, “no region is more vulnerable to China’s rise than Southeast Asia, which cannot challenge it militarily, needs its trade for its economies, and is uncertain how much it can rely on the United States or even if that would be a wise path to pursue”³⁷⁹.

During this entire process initiated by constructing artificial islands and using military manoeuvres to gain ground in the SCS, China also used two diplomatic strategies in the same geographical area to “maintain the hope of peaceful dispute resolution for Southeast Asian claimants”³⁸⁰. The first is called ‘The Take and Talk Strategy’ and intends to organise “joint talks, operations, and exercises to ensure that neither military conflict nor economic sanctions impede its rise. Its agreements on their issues, including the environment, piracy, and terrorism, normalize its diplomacy”³⁸¹. As Anders Corr discloses “while China’s foreign ministry and business interests are busy making friends and talking about peace, the PLA is expanding its

³⁷⁷ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 154.

³⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, 165.

³⁷⁹ Humphrey Hawksley, *Asian Waters: The Struggle over the Indo-Pacific and the Challenge to American Power*, (New York: Abrams Press, 2020), 41.

³⁸⁰ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 27.

³⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

land, sea, and air claims and attempting to intimidate military forces of any other country operating in the region”³⁸².

The second diplomatic strategy, extensively used in the SCS, and named by Xi Jinping, is the ‘Win-Win solution’. The purpose of this strategy is to create a joint development between China and its neighbours in fields where everyone has common interests – the most important ones in the SCS, the extraction of gas and oil – in a way that, together, they can join forces, synergies, and resources to develop this area.

They would put their rivalries aside and work together for the greater good that would be advantageous to all stakeholders, “increasing the GDP for participating nations and, according to some analysts, “the bank accounts for well-connected politicians and businessman involved in the deals”³⁸³. These strategies, however, reiterate the idea that China prefers to act in bilateral negotiations since these allow China to use their intimidating capacity in the face of weaker powers, “stating that multilateral efforts can only play a supporting role”³⁸⁴. However, some think China prefers these tactics aiming to delay the starting of the conflict, while “solidifies control of more territory”³⁸⁵.

Still, some measures can be taken by China and ASEAN to try to reduce the tensions and consequences that come from them in the SCS, which will go through the negotiation of a “code of conduct to reduce tensions in the region”³⁸⁶. The first measure would pass through the energy resources potential, with the “recognition that the offshore waters of the SCS are unlikely to be another Persian Gulf in terms of supply and that the most important contribution

³⁸² Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 27.

³⁸³ *Ibidem*.

³⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, 29.

³⁸⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁸⁶ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 169.

to energy security is the secure passage of tankers through its waters”³⁸⁷. Nonetheless, an obstacle went through the “Chinese proposal that would give it a veto over other countries conducting military exercises with the USA”³⁸⁸.

For Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, the state of alert is high, as it is perilous and a threat to both “China’s unilateral ambition to monopolize the whole South China Sea”³⁸⁹, being that this is where these countries have “sea lanes of communication”³⁹⁰. Nevertheless, and although this is a will of China, “Beijing cannot replicate the Monroe Doctrine in East Asia to become the local hegemon, as the U.S. did in the western hemisphere. Japan is too big and powerful to allow it, and China needs the U.S. presence to help manage Japan and the Korean Peninsula”³⁹¹. Yet, this is the view that China’s partners share among them of what may be, effectively, Chinese desire, which may mean building a sphere of influence over the three island chains on ASEAN and, consequently, on Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands³⁹².

For China, the geopolitical and geostrategic confrontations with the United States of America are due to the misconduct “growing hegemonism, power politics, unilateralism, and the pursuit of an absolute military superiority”³⁹³. In this context, China implemented a large-scale approach – Made in China 2025 strategy³⁹⁴ – that aspires to put the country “as leader in ten high-tech technologies, in order to move up the value chain to avoid the stagnation of the middle-income trap”³⁹⁵. This strategy aims to achieve the same development and technological power that the United States has.

³⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, 170.

³⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁹⁰ *Ibidem*.

³⁹¹ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 43.

³⁹² Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 19.

³⁹³ Daniel Yergin, *The New Map: Energy, Climate, And the Clash Of Nations*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 173.

³⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, 174.

³⁹⁵ *Ibidem*.

Therefore, it wants to overtake and, ultimately, replace the U.S., and this is the point of the issue and the conflicting interests between both countries. In this sense, it is indispensable to define possible cooperation between the U.S. and China – G2 – it is predictable that there will be interdependence between the two and, therefore, it will be necessary to “application of practical solutions, combined with prudence, can help mitigate the risks”³⁹⁶.

Succinctly, Beijing’s overall goals “have not changed over the past half-century”³⁹⁷. These go through the maintenance of the “security for its borders; respect for its territorial integrity; and to protect at every point the party [Chinese Communist Party: CCP] that gathered the shards of a broken empire and imposed a modern nation-state of them”³⁹⁸. That said, China is the dominant regional power in this area, “a status derived from its massive economic weight, BRI activities, and statecraft in all its dimensions. It is deeply integrated at every level in East Asia due to its absolute size, economic power, openness, and its cultural ties and relationships across the arena”³⁹⁹. As Geoff Raby underlines in his book “Beijing’s grand strategy is in reality a limited strategy, it is more likely about non-interference, about states with different forms of political and social organisation getting along with each other”⁴⁰⁰.

Lastly, we can conclude that China does not have a strong power in line with its economic and military development and growth. This indicates that Beijing remains heavily reliant on international markets, with all the related virtues and weaknesses, because in furtherance of meeting new challenges, including greater allocation of resources to protect its land and sea borders, thus having a massive increase in their strategic vulnerabilities directly

³⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, 176.

³⁹⁷ Geoff Raby, *China’s Grand Strategy and Australia’s Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 45.

³⁹⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹⁹ *Ibidem*, 44.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibidem*.

interrelated to the “successful economic growth and rising military power”⁴⁰¹. What supports the assertion – and *vox populi* – is that success often drags dilemmas and increased challenges.

⁴⁰¹ Geoff Raby, *China's Grand Strategy and Australia's Future in The New Global Order*, (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2020), 26.

Conclusion

The strategy the People's Republic of China put in place, notably in the South China Sea, aiming to undermine the U.S. military presence in the area so far has had the opposite effect, causing United States involvement to grow deeper. There has been an intensification of the anti-China sentiment across the SCS region, which leads us to wonder why Beijing is "to risk its interests and not be more accommodating"⁴⁰². Over the years, China's changing strategy in the region has predominantly enabled it to acquire an unprecedented regional and global position, even retaining the status of a global power in the eyes of the international community. Deng Xiaoping achieved this position through a paradigm and maxim shift, which until then had always been associated with him. The shift focused on "hide your light and bide your time"⁴⁰³, moving to a maximum for external performance that was based on the wish to act militarily and diplomatically following its increased economic power"⁴⁰⁴.

However, despite making significant advances in recent years, not only in territorial terms but also in *influence*, China's strategy has somewhat declined to anticipate expectations. If China won the fear of its neighbours, it has not won their sympathy or hearts. Furthermore, this must always be weighed in geopolitical terms as well. Usually, acrimony brings with it hard-to-calculate wear and tear. According to Ian Forsyth, China does not consider the national policies of its opposing neighbours and focuses only on its interests and procedures but also on its current and projected strengths as guidelines for regional security policies. This mismatch guarantees increasing alienation against China from surrounding countries. Due to this, China has not been able to uniformly transfer its strategy to all neighbouring countries, given the

⁴⁰² Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 98.

⁴⁰³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

robust presence of the United States of America in the same region, which means that countries such as Vietnam tend more towards the American side, unlike Cambodia, which will tend to support China.

Suppose China succeeds in achieving full power over the South China Sea. In that case, it can protect its political regime and aggregate its national territory – Taiwan being the prominent example – and, more importantly, its trade routes, leading to control over all existing maritime resources in this area. Nevertheless, all these reasons are precisely those which have caused regional conflicts and tensions over the past few years. According to the justifications given by Beijing, all its claims in the South China Sea are valid, justified through a historic narrative heading back to the twentieth century, in some cases much earlier and are indispensable for the requirement of the so-called *lost territories*. Therefore, any country acting in these territories actively obstructs the recovery of national territory – an intrinsic national purpose or *designium* – and requires active opposition. Although this territory has never been a part of China, an attitude that Edward Luttwak called “great power autism”⁴⁰⁵.

The historical narrative truth adopted by China, which reinforces Chinese policymaking⁴⁰⁶, has quite different contours from that adopted by the West, leading, over the years, to increased tensions and conflicts. In this sense, the motivations endorsed by China in the South China Sea will not, in any way, be destroyed by the West, nor with the use of “confidence building measures nor physical confrontation”⁴⁰⁷ and can only be effectively resolved if the West is willing to face-off its absolute truth – almost a *dogma* that the Chinese invoke and assume as a historical right over the South China Sea, by an engagement with

⁴⁰⁵ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 67.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

Chinese experts and policymakers about this narrative, to eventually undermining this whole illusion.

China continues to have a strategic and robust presence in the South China Sea, mainly “the defence of its coast, sea lanes, and nuclear deterrent-will endure”⁴⁰⁸. However, this does not justify the Chinese’s determination to control maritime resources, nor does it give them the right and legitimacy to regulate the navigation of this region. On the contrary, it provides reasons to the West to support and sustain – plausibly in alliance with other regional powers in the Pacific – and to increase the tensions in the South China Sea.

What we can observe from the global approach taken by the PRC, which we intended to explain and evaluate throughout this dissertation, is that “China’s local strategy toward the SCS has undermined its grand strategy of removing the U.S. military presence from the Western Pacific and its own actions have deepened American involvement in the issue”⁴⁰⁹.

The truth is, when Joe Biden arrived at the White House, he acquired an extremely competitive U.S.-China relationship, resulting in a high tension. When the 2008 economic crisis began, the prognostics were that relations between these two Great Powers would become more substantial, and their dependence and economic interests were compatible. However, this was not the case. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, these relations became more hostile and obstinate. We can expect to see the Biden Administration confrontation in white fire, meaning it will be particularly intense, and will remain so until the Russo-Ukrainian War ends, by reasons of the global economy.

The United States of America, China’s neighbouring countries and U.S. allies are witnessing a regional paradigm shift over the past three years and are motivated by China’s

⁴⁰⁸ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 66.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, 140.

construction of artificial islands in the Spratly Island chain. This will make it exceedingly difficult for the strategy decision-making process, as China refuses to adopt the “arbitral rulings”⁴¹⁰. In the diplomatic realm, the way the United States of America will act with China will depend on its level of presence or not from regional organisations and meetings, but likewise depend on if it is or is not necessary to use military and non-military sanctions – such as economic – in a tentative to coerce China to comply with international law and the conduct of peaceful resolution of conflicts⁴¹¹.

In the military domain, the primary focus will be on sustaining China’s presence in multilateral exercises – RIMPAC [Rim of the Pacific Exercise] – and comprehending whether the U.S. and its allies excessively challenge the Chinese maritime features, such as “the twelve-nautical-mile territorial sea claims around maritime features that were formerly LTEs”⁴¹² through their military operations. The maritime and territorial disputes that, over the years, have become increasingly frequent in the South China Sea, putting this area in a fragile situation and under a closer look at all the surrounding territories, have motivated the U.S. to concentrate much of its military force and diplomatic efforts in this region, to accomplish the commitment to which they have proposed with their Asian allies.

This rebalancing of the U.S. presence in the Indo-Pacific region has more clearly based on the power of history, particularly foreign policy traditions and geography, “which seems to have a systematic influence: namely, countries that are closer to China and mainland Asia are

⁴¹⁰ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 168.

⁴¹¹ *Ibidem*. “... inclusion or exclusion of China from regional institutions and consultations and the threat of using military and non-military tools of statecraft – such as economic sanctions – to attempt to compel the Chinese to adhere to international law and the principle of the peaceful resolution of disputes”.

⁴¹² *Ibidem*. “The key observables in the military realm will be the continued inclusion of China in multilateral security exercises such as RIMPAC [Rim of the Pacific Exercise] and whether or not U.S. and allied military operations challenge excessive Chinese maritime features such as the twelve-nautical-mile territorial sea claims around maritime features that were formerly LTEs”.

more cautious of embracing the U.S. strategy”⁴¹³. On the other hand, countries with more links to the sea tend to support the United States of America due to the danger they feel by PRC’s advances in the SCS, but also because they feel protected by the U.S. military and naval strength dominance⁴¹⁴. However, this feeling of protection may change if China established naval dominance in the South China Sea⁴¹⁵. Furthermore, the USA should be vigilant and actively ensure its ascendancy in this region; otherwise, a regional conflict may arise.

As we can observe, the South China Sea and the Indo-Pacific region disputes are not only the United States and China. Other regional actors, such as Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia, and Indonesia, are already involved since the U.S. cannot directly feel these threats and resolve the disputes alone. Even though Indonesia is not a formal claimant, its Natuna Islands Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) overlaps with China’s “nine-dash line”⁴¹⁶, making it a significant focus of tension in the region in 2022.

Amongst, there is a crucial factor, Japan, that is not only to help the U.S. maintain a distinctive hegemony over this geographical area but also to help maintain order. Japan has two main objectives to ensure it remains a strategic and essential interest in the South China Sea. On the one hand, the security evolution posture taken by Japan over the years and the fact that it has always agreed with the U.S. changes in terms of security in the Asia-Pacific region made Japan more interested in the SCS. Moreover, Japan will avoid agreements with ASEAN states and even with states hostile to China, namely the Philippines and Vietnam, mainly to remain a ‘neutral’ state⁴¹⁷. On the other hand, Japan identifies China as its *main security hazard*

⁴¹³ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 190.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 191. “they are not too threatened by China’s land forces and are not yet vulnerable to China’s naval forces as a result of U.S. naval dominance”.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 289.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 215. “Japan’s evolving security posture and ongoing shifts in how Tokyo perceives the U.S’ long-term approach to the Asia-Pacific region led it to take a greater interest in the SCS. Therefore, it will continue to build

and a *strategic contender*, and a *strategic contender*, not in terms of sovereignty or maritime delimitation, but as an economic competitor and a challenger of Tokyo's role to preserve the "contemporary order in the region through the participation in regional forums for the resolution of ongoing disputes through peaceful means, and seeing the universality of international law upheld, including the freedom of navigation and overflight"⁴¹⁸.

As identified by the former (and recently assassinated) Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe⁴¹⁹, when the "Confluence of the Two Seas" – the Pacific and the Indian Oceans⁴²⁰ – became more evident, it also became indisputable the threat sworn in by China in this region, especially with Taiwan. However, the former Prime Minister, in the article *Realizing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, linked the rising tensions between Taiwan and China "to a situation half a world away, in Ukraine"⁴²¹ since the outburst of the Russia-Ukraine war brought to daylight several similarities with the PRC-Taiwan tensions. First, "Russia and China are nuclear powers and permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. Second, Ukraine and Taiwan have no military allies. But there is a crucial difference between Ukraine and Taiwan: Ukraine is internationally recognized as an independent state and is a member of the UN. That is why Russia's invasion has been condemned worldwide as a violation of international law"⁴²². Moreover, Taiwan is not a member of the United Nations and is therefore recognised as a sovereign state by a minority of countries, making it difficult for international mobilisation to help the Republic of China (Taiwan) if China advances militarily over it⁴²³. In

ties with ASEAN states, including claimant states that have experienced difficult episodes with China in recent years".

⁴¹⁸ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 216.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴²⁰ Abe Shinzō, "Realizing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific", *Project Syndicate*, Sep. 26, 2022, 2.

⁴²¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴²² *Ibidem*.

⁴²³ *Ibidem*. "Taiwan, on the other hand, is not a UN member, and few countries recognize it as a sovereign state. If China advances on Taiwan, its leaders will claim that Taiwan is part of China, and that their actions are an internal matter intended to ensure China's territorial integrity. It remains to be seen whether countries will unite to assist Taiwan and impose economic sanctions on China, as has been the case in Ukraine."

any case, the Biden Administration has already made clear that it “would engage militarily to defend Taiwan, as the United States of America has previously adhered to a “policy of strategic ambiguity, deliberately not clarifying the extent of its commitment to the defence of Taiwan”⁴²⁴.

Therefore, Shinzō Abe left in the air the idea that Japan has the enormous responsibility to “strengthen its defence capabilities, further deepen its alliance with the US, and realize the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific”⁴²⁵.

Above all, the U.S., and its allies – circumstantial or those that share common economic or political values – expect to unequivocally demonstrate to China its willpower to safeguard freedom of navigation in maritime, civil, and commercial terms. Accordingly, China is being cautious in what concerns “strengthening U.S. relations with Vietnam, Singapore, and India”⁴²⁶, since the U.S. has the title of being China’s supreme “threat to national security and that the relations with it is at the top of its foreign policy concerns which may temper future actions in the South China Sea”⁴²⁷.

China and its contenders or opponents are not willing to cooperate. However, if a *common interest* ought to prevail, and which is, through quite distinct ideological and political paths, the well-being of the citizens of each country, with greater or lesser geostrategic weight, that honours the principles of the United Nations Charter of which these countries are subscribers, and of its much harassed and increasingly uncertain Chapter I, Article 1: “To be a centre for harmonising the actions of nations in the pursuit of these common ends”.

⁴²⁴ Abe Shinzō, “Realizing a Free and Open Indo-Pacific”, *Project Syndicate*, Sep. 26, 2022, 2.

⁴²⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴²⁶ Anders Corr, Bill Hayton, Ian Forsyth, James E. Fanell, Leszek Buszynski, Sean R. Liedman, Tongfi Kim, et al. *Great Powers, Grand Strategies: The New Game in the South China Sea*. Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2018, 305.

⁴²⁷ *Ibidem*, 215.

In that case, there will be a need to promote arrangements and balances, even when they appear to be in a large desert of wills. Just as war is a drive, according to psychoanalytic understandings, and the *ultima ratio*, according to the law (even with all its unreasonableness), peace is intrinsically the final and prevalent human desire. Although we, with all our swagger, often dismiss this notion as naive. Furthermore, perhaps it is, but it remains a remarkable argument.

Some authors and political analysts defend the best outcome of structuring a multilateral maritime-security partnership with East Asia and inviting China to join; otherwise, they propose isolating and excluding it from the group. In the end, we can draw some conclusions from this. Firstly, history has shown over the years that this type of dispute “between established and rising sea powers”⁴²⁸ does not always end well. Secondly, the tensions between these two powers only aggravate China’s relationships with its neighbours because of issues like the Nine-dash Line and maritime borders. The point that China could face here would be the possibility of becoming isolated again because of its exacerbated obstinacy in obtaining power and control.

The recent development of a naval base by China in Cambodia has captured the attention of regional and international observers, prompting assessments and debates regarding its strategic implications. Satellite imagery, “captured by BlackSky, a US commercial imagery company that has been monitoring the construction at Ream Naval Base”⁴²⁹, reveals noteworthy progress, with a nearly completed pier that has sparked discussions about its potential to berth an aircraft carrier. As the U.S. Pentagon raises concerns about China’s military intentions, a former U.S. intelligence official notes, “There has been a debate inside

⁴²⁸ David C. Gompert, *Sea Power and American Interests in the Western Pacific*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR151.html

⁴²⁹ Demitri Sevastopulo, “Chinese base in Cambodia nears completion in challenge to US naval power”, *Financial Times*, July 24, 2023.

the [U.S.] government about what exactly China would do with the base and why it would be better than a base in the South China Sea or Hainan Island”⁴³⁰. Despite official denials, the base’s construction is viewed as a move to enhance China’s naval power projection, prompting further analysis of its strategic value.

This development has geopolitical implications, and analysts argue that “a naval base [in Cambodia] increases China’s regional influence in south-east Asia, suggesting the developing world is rapidly becoming an arena for US-China military competition”⁴³¹. Establishing a naval base in Cambodia could offer China a strategic advantage, facilitating access to the Gulf of Thailand and extending its naval operating reach towards the crucial shipping lanes of the Malacca Strait.

In conclusion, the strategy the People's Republic of China implemented in the South China Sea to undermine the U.S. military presence in the region has caused unintentional consequences. Rather than achieving its goal of reducing American involvement, China’s actions have resulted in deeper U.S. engagement in the area. The Chinese aggressive approach in the South China Sea has intensified anti-China sentiment among its neighbours and beyond, raising questions about Beijing’s unwillingness to accommodate the interests of others. Considering geopolitical tensions, pursuing peace and multilateral cooperation is essential. However, China’s uncompromising approach may isolate it and pose challenges in its quest for power and control. To prevent escalation and achieve stability, peaceful resolution and multilateral cooperation are essential. The question is how.

⁴³⁰ Demitri Sevastopulo, “Chinese base in Cambodia nears completion in challenge to US naval power”, Financial Times, July 24, 2023.

⁴³¹ *Ibidem*. Said Evan Medeiros, China expert at Georgetown University.

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