Chinese Maritime Strategy and the US-China relations: Thucydidean Trap or Chinese historical legacy?

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Abstract

The growing Chinese military power, especially manifested in its PLAN, represents one of the most relevant issues of the transformation of international politics. The present paper, by looking briefly at the last twenty years of US-China relations, will highlight this peculiar dual relationship in terms of strategic interaction and how it intertwines with the overall Chinese military modernization, specifically its maritime strategy. In other words, the present paper tries to answer the following questions: to what extent did the US involvement in the region affect Chinese maritime strategic planning? To what extent does Chinese military modernization, with its subsequent strategic formulation, simply constitute an independent development directly connected to its economic growth and therefore its historical legacy? According to the contemporary realist IR theory, are we witnessing a clear manifestation of the Thucydidean trap which characterized the confrontation between a rising and a consolidated power in history? Or are we witnessing the outcome of the intersection between reciprocal misperception and Chinese strategic culture?

This paper, by challenging existing realist theories on states' strategic calculation, will highlight how in reality American strategic misperception towards Chinese strategic culture helped shape today's Chinese maritime strategy which in turn also responds to Chinese strategic culture and its historical legacies. In other words, the objective is to demonstrate that China responded to American military posture by implementing its strategic culture paradigm and that the United States in turn failed to clearly interpret Chinese historical legacies in strategic issues. The direct outcome, then, is represented by the Chinese adoption of the active defense strategy in the near seas, also labeled as A2/AD, due to the continuous threatening presence of the US in the region, which is perceived as progressively encircling Chinese regional and global role in world politics, through the so-called first and second island chains and the newly established agreements with India.

Keywords: Chinese maritime strategy, US-China relations, A2/AD, active defense, Thucydidean trap, strategic culture.
“if there is one central theme in American strategic culture as it has applied to the Far East over time, it is that the United States will not tolerate any other power establishing exclusive hegemonic control over Asia or the Pacific.”

“The navy is the armed force [with which the nation can] resist threats from the sea.”

Introduction

“Without Mohammed Charlemagne would have been impossible.” This is the essence of what would have been later on recognized as the “Pirenne Thesis.” This famous passage, often cited by many historians and political scientists, had been elaborated by the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne. Representing one of the “most fascinating and enduring of all academic controversies,” this thesis argued that the European political transformation that had led to the establishment of the “self-sufficient rural economy of a servile peasantry dominated by feudal lords,” did not occur between the fifth and the sixth century A.D., that is, after the collapse of the Roman Empire, due to the invasions of the Germanic tribes. Instead, it occurred “only after the Arab caliphate wrested control of the Mediterranean from the Byzantines, separating the eastern and the western halves of the former Roman Empire.” Therefore, it was the “subsequent cessation of trade and other overseas links that caused Western Europe to revert to a more primitive self-sufficient economic basis under the rule of the Carolingian dynasty. Thus no Mohammed, no Charlemagne.”

Of course, it is not the objective of this paper to investigate whether this thesis is historically valid. However, it serves the purpose of stimulating our historical inquiry, especially when it comes to the evaluation of specific and delicate politico-strategic transformations. To a certain extent, therefore, by adopting the same methodology, we can also enquire whether the current Sino-US strategic interactions could be explained more or less in those terms, that is, demonstrating that, by paraphrasing Pirenne, without the US presence in the region, the present Chinese maritime strategy would have been impossible.

At first glance, this might sound quite tautological, since strategy, to be defined as such, is entirely reliant on the interdependence between the actions of two or more actors. However, at a closer scrutiny, it should be evident how complex such as a subject could be. In fact, the objective of this analysis is not only to ascertain what might be clear since the beginning, that is, that two actors influence each other’s strategic design, but also to illustrate the mechanisms through which the US – due to misperception, lack of Asia expertise, sound strategy, and even its own strategic tradition – contributed, through a self-fulfilling prophecy, to form what it had sought, in the first instance, to contain: the present form of Chinese maritime strategy which, in turn, built itself onto its own strategic tradition – that is, strategic culture – creating, at the present, a delicate situation, which could turn against itself, paving the way for a spiral model between the two great superpowers. This type of approach has also been motivated by the “need for further research on how strategic concepts such as containment and encirclement are defined in China and applied to interpret U.S. strategy.”

China has started, since the opening and reform era, a significant political, economic, and military transformation. Along the well-known reforms, one in particular attracted the attention of policy-makers and strategists: the modernization process of the PLA (including its Navy and Air Force) and how it related to the overall Chinese national security strategy.

Because of the rising importance of the sea for the region, this paper, therefore, focuses on the major elements characterizing the PLAN modernization in relation with the US involvement in the region, in order to understand to what extent today’s China’s maritime strategy represents more a clear response to the US geopolitical “rebalancing” policies and to what extent it builds itself, at the same time, on the Chinese historical legacy in maritime issues. By looking briefly at the last twenty years, this paper will answer the following questions: to what extent did the US involvement in the region affect Chinese maritime strategic planning? And to what extent does Chinese military modernization, with its subsequent strategic formulation, simply constitute an independent development directly connected to its economic growth and therefore its historical legacy?

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5 By following the same methodological approach, but for the inverted object of research, Michael Green, scholar and previously government advisor, highlights in his very recently published book, how important it is to change the research question in order to understand today’s US involvement in the Asia-Pacific. He, in fact, explains that: “Americans are engaging in a lively debate about America’s grand strategy toward Asia. Some evoke containment of the Soviet Union or the logic of Carl von Clausewitz to propose new competitive strategies toward Beijing. Others draw on the analogies of the First World War or the ‘Thucydidean trap’ of the Peloponnesian Wars to argue for greater accommodation of a rising China. These European models of strategy offer important insights, but entirely missing from the debate is the more important consideration of America’s own history of statecraft towards Asia and the Pacific. How did the United States become a Pacific power? What are the roots of our strategy today? And why do we have a stake in Asia’s future? These are the questions that must be answered if we are to construct an enduring American grand strategy for the Asian Century and the rise of China.” Michael J Green, *By More Than Providence*, 1st ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 1
China has historically represented a land power with specific continental, geopolitical concerns, such as China’s central Asian extension, whose borders “bedeviled China’s security through its dynastic history.” However, Chinese naval history has scored astonishing results, like for example, the fifteenth century’s Zheng He’s maritime expeditions which reached the Indian Ocean and the coasts of Africa. Therefore, China seems to have “rested on a mix of both land power and sea power, the balance between the two shifting from one dynasty to another.” However, China’s naval modernization process started only recently, that is, from the late 1980s onwards. Part of this process has been affected by the century of humiliation, which erupted due to the threats coming from the sea, and also by the importance of commerce for the country’s growth, since “China’s leadership … sees economic development as a matter of regime survival.”

Additional reasons behind Chinese modernization process are also related to the presence of the US in the region and the emerging problems of the contested territories. In this context, naval nationalism has also played a relevant role in encouraging naval modernization. Liu Huaqing, the founder of this progressive transformation, led China, around the ‘90s, to develop the first naval modern capabilities, with a specific emphasis on building an aircraft carrier, in order to increase the level of territorial security.

In the following sections, I will briefly explore, first of all, the historical tradition of Chinese maritime engagement. The second section will deal, in turn, with the US “pivot to Asia” in order to understand how it contributed to shape today’s Chinese maritime strategy, to the point of getting bogged down into the so-called Thucydidean trap. Finally, the third, concluding section, on the other hand, besides taking into account the tactical assets China has acquired in the last twenty years, analyzes the connection between the Chinese naval military capabilities with the overall national security strategy and their fundamental relationship with the American strategic policies in the Asia-Pacific.

My general argument is to demonstrate that the US involvement in the region, due to the lack of a coherent knowledge of Chinese affairs, has clearly affected, historically, Chinese strategic calculation, which, in turn, to effectively answer to the US presence in the region, has widely relied on its own overall strategic culture and the final inability of the US to perceive this specific aspect has helped increase the level of misperception and miscalculation in the region.

Chinese Maritime Strategy: a Continuation of Policy by Other Means

In order to understand how China has been responding to the US Pivot to Asia, it is very important to focus, at the moment, on the real nature of Chinese maritime strategy in the region, which deeply responds to

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10 Robert S. Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, And The U.S. Response", p. 46
the Chinese historical legacies and its overall strategic culture. In fact, while it is true that strategy, in order to be formulated, requires the existence of a dialectical approach, it is also true, on the other hand, that strategic culture shapes the final design of a specific military doctrine.

One crucial factor in shaping one state’s overall strategic approach is represented by geography and, specifically, by its geostrategy. China has tried to investigate what the nature of its overall strategic position really is, constantly shifting, in its history, between land and maritime posture. However, since the late ‘70s, China has started to wonder how deeply relevant the maritime potential would have been for its overall national development. In order to do that, scholars have been highlighting the theoretical contribution of the American naval strategist Mahan (1840-1914), who advocated that the “geographical position, naturally good natural ports, territorial area, population numbers, national qualities, and government system” represent the “six key elements that are indicative of a great maritime power.”

Chinese Senior Captain Xu Qi, in fact, has highlighted the peculiar issue of the importance of geography, especially when referring to the Chinese case. Unlike other countries, like the US, Great Britain or even the Soviet Union, in the case of China, things do not look that simple, due to the particularly relevant limitations that its geography has. For instance, while the Soviet Union “used Eastern Europe as a protective screen in order to expand its security space,” China, on the other hand, found it very difficult to establish any strategic depth or buffer zones, since the ancient times. And this is quite clear even by looking at the historical fact that “each dynasty invariably expended much of its manpower and material resources in repairing the Great Wall, in order to resist the harassing attacks from its close neighbors.” This, in turn, explains why China has heavily emphasized the importance of the land power “at the expense of sea power.”

Therefore, through the constant analysis of the conformation of its coastline and the fundamental role of geography, China seems to have embraced, at least in the last 45 years, the counter-intervention strategy as a policy for the regional theatre of operations (especially after the introduction of an aircraft carrier), which represents in reality an updated version of the “commerce-raiding/guerre de course” strategy which had shaped, in history, the continental powers’ naval doctrines.

The so-called counter-intervention can be traced back to the late ‘80s, when China adopted the Near Seas defense strategy” in order to protect Chinese interests in the Near Seas. Specifically, in 1985, after the Enlarged Meeting of the Party Central Military Commission, China witnessed a significant strategic transformation, to the extent that not only the army and the military organization went through radical changes, but also the strategic doctrine witnessed some important modifications, which reflected the new

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12 Ibid., pp. 50, 54
changing pattern, that is, the transformation of people’s war doctrine which now “truly began to fit the so-called ‘modern conditions.’”

This is mainly reflected by the fact that China, because of its continental nature, has to operate “along interior lines,” where a potential adversary must rely, by default, on exterior lines. Such a strategic asset, therefore, could allow China to act militarily “from a fortified central position, concentrating forces, acting rapidly, and engaging multiple simultaneous actions.” Strategic doubts related to a clear formulation of a counter-intervention strategy still remain, leading some scholars to argue that “counter-intervention is not a military strategy, much less a broader grand strategic goal.” In the 2013 edition of The Science of Military Strategy scholars of the Academy of Military Science (AMS) “outline[d] four kinds of wars that China might face in the future, including the scope, intensity, risk, and probability that each might occur.” The four war scenarios are the following:

1) a large-scale, high-intensity defensive war on the Chinese mainland (low probability and high risk); 2) a relatively large-scale and relatively high intensity “anti secessionist war” over Taiwan (relatively high probability and high risk); 3) medium- and small-scale wars over disputed territories and waters (medium probability and risk); and 4) small-scale and low-intensity counterterror, stability maintenance, and rights defense actions (no probability or risk assigned to these actions).

China, strategically speaking, has been influenced by the Mahan’s writings (especially after Mao’s era); however, it is also true that “China’s long, rich history and martial and philosophical traditions supply bountiful guidance.” Therefore, in order to understand what Chinese naval strategy, in relation with the overall national security strategy, looks like, it is necessary to keep in mind that Chinese government “will clearly consult far more sources than Mahan, and some of these indigenous sources may carry more weight than any Western theorist.” Hence, while “Beijing accepts the Mahanian logic of sea power,” it will also look “to indigenous traditions for guidance on the grammar of maritime strategy and warfare.” The reference, of course, is to Mao Zedong’s strategic thought and its influence on Chinese national security strategy.

The fundamental historical legacy shaping Chinese naval strategy at sea seems to encourage China to focus on the pursuit of a regional approach to maritime engagements. And the overall PLA strategy is still part of this important equation, since there has been wide consensus over the idea that China would pursue a

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15 Andrew S. Erickson, "Rising Tide, Dispersing Waves: Opportunities And Challenges For Chinese Seapower Development", *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 3 (2014): 374
18 Ibid.
“people’s war at sea,” where the PLAN would “adopt the ‘attrition concept’ of wearing and tearing down the enemy vessels from the source of resupply, and employing its overwhelmingly large number of conventional combat ships and fishing boats to ‘drown the enemy.’”

Part of this approach can also be explained by looking at Chinese geography and how it has been interpreted within the comprehensive national maritime strategy. For example, among Chinese scholars it is believed that coastal powers (among which China is included) can adopt only those geostrategies which, besides reflecting inevitably “China’s naval geostrategic conception,” have the following characteristics:

First, having a contiguous border with the vast ocean [such that] geostrategy must take [both] land and sea into account; second having some space on land in which to operate, as well as maritime barriers and transport corridors that can be utilized. When engaged in war with maritime powers, [coastal nations] have been able to bring their strength to bear on land and limit the opportunities of their adversaries to occupy territory. When engaged in war with neighboring land powers, they have had to concentrate forces on their land flanks, especially to avoid being attacked from the front and rear on land and sea [and in this manner fall into the trap of being encircled by an alliance of sea and land powers].

Following this line of reasoning, which emphasized the importance of avoiding to fall into encirclement operations, one contemporary manifestation of the people’s war at sea is represented by the Chinese Maritime Militia Policy. In fact, in 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping “advised the maritime militia members to ‘not only lead fishing activities, but also collect oceanic information and support the construction of islands and reefs.’” This policy represents the Chinese approach to the maritime militia which is conceived as “China’s first line of defense in disputed waters, particularly in the South China Sea.” This policy, in turn, paved the way for the establishment, in the past few years, of several fishing militia forces in several coastal cities.

In such a context, therefore, “one of China’s strategic objectives is to develop a regional navy,” by implementing, potentially, a “green water” navy. This would allow China to achieve its “current regional aspirations (e.g., blockade of Taiwan, seizure of one or more islands in the Spratlys, sustainment of a naval force in the South China Sea, and the ability to inflict damage upon an intervening foreign navy).” However, besides the delicate issue of Taiwan, China relies more heavily on the importance of the Luzon Strait which represents “one prominent passageway in and out of the South China Sea that catches the eye of Chinese analysts.” Moreover, Beijing, at the moment, is trying to secure its access to the Yellow and East China seas through key seaports located along the coast: “Jainggezhuang and Lushun are two bases that

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21 Xu Qi, "Maritime Geostrategy And The Development Of The Chinese Navy In The Early Twenty First Century", pp. 55-56
provide the North Sea Fleet access to the Yellow and East China seas,” while the bases of Ningbo, Zhoushan, and the “forward base at Sanya” provide sea access to the East Sea Fleet and the South Sea Fleet. The presence of these key bases made some analysts suggest that China could be willing to adopt a “bastion strategy,” which also characterized the Soviet maritime model during the Cold War.

This peculiar strategy, in addition to the others, envisages the creation of “sanctuaries within which high-value SSBNs could operate.” In this case China could, for example, “concentrate its SSBNs within the protective confines of the Bohai and Yellow seas.”24 China has also managed, in 2010, to secure its control over the Rajin Port, located in North Korea which, given its large capacity, “could provide China with an access point to the Arctic via the La Perouse Strait.”25

Therefore, in terms of naval strategy, it is quite clear that the PLAN is implementing previously consolidated PLA’s strategies, like for example the “active defense” one, which was historically recognized as the expression of people’s war doctrine. Lui Huaqing, however, wanted to avoid applying Mao’s traditional doctrine “which called for land warfighting concepts to be applied uniformly to all battlefields and services.” Such a doctrine, in fact, “subordinated naval warfare to ground/army operations,” when his major idea actually was to create instead an independent navy.26

Theorized mainly by Mao during the ‘30s, people’s war doctrine relied on the application of guerrilla warfare techniques in the interior of the country, thanks to the tactical advantages of the vast Chinese mainland. Despite the difficulties of a guerrilla warfare at sea, PLAN has, however, found a way: “during the 1950s and early 1960s, as China fought Taiwan over the ‘offshore islands,’ the Chinese proved adept at the art of naval ambush, concealing their torpedo craft behind reefs or fishing vessels. Today, Chinese strategists advocate more technological means of hit-and-run combat at sea.”27

At the doctrinal level, moreover, “the 2006 White Paper stated [that] ‘The Navy is … exploring the strategy and tactics of maritime people’s war under modern conditions.””28 In another strategic context, Major General Wang Pufeng, clearly confirmed this strategic trend:

“We will continue to adhere to the strategy to ‘people's war', but high-tech weapons will only reinforce our 'people's war' strategy, like adding wings to tigers. Under the current circumstances, we must ponder over two questions: How to fight a people's war in light of high-tech weapons, and how to develop high-tech weapons to facilitate our people's war. These questions concern the security and survival of our nation, as well as China's position and role in the world’s future strategic pattern.”29

24 Ibid., pp. 20, 52-53, 68, 141  
26 Toshi Yoshihara, Chinese Naval Strategy In The 21St Century, p. 30  
28 Dannis Blasko, "Chinese Strategic Thinking: People's War In The 21St Century", China Brief X (2010), p. 6  
However, it should also be highlighted that people’s war has represented not only a tactic to be employed in warfare, but also “a form of organization of war, and its role has nothing to do with the level of military technology.”

Because of its specific nature, people’s war also requires the mobilization of the Chinese population which, in turn, represents a core element in supporting the country’s war effort “by political, economic, technical, cultural and moral means.”

Additional editions of China’s Defense White Papers further confirmed this trend by stating two major ideas: the necessity to acquire 制海权 (zhihaiquan), that is, the “command of the sea,” by concentrating on the acquisition of more military capabilities; and the Navy’s “gradual extension of the strategic depth for offshore defensive operations [by] enhancing its capabilities in integrated maritime operations and nuclear counterattacks.” Offshore operations which are intimately connected to the jinhai (近海); “near seas.”

The PLAN has, moreover, officially defined offshore defense operations as comprising four major objectives: “the Chinese navy will (1) hold fast to defensive naval strategic objectives; (2) increase its maritime defensive power; (3) carry out battlefield preparations; and (4) implement active defense.” For what concerns the last element (active defense), China seems quite confident in the deployment of “mobile combat capabilities to search and destroy the enemy, gradually shift the power balance, change the strategic situation, and thereby appropriately time the transition to the strategic counter offensive and attack.”

A strategic setting which reminds Mao’s three stages of protracted warfare, through which the revolutionary army moved from defense to stalemate, culminating into the offense. In fact, it is not a coincidence that the PLAN has also defined this strategic posture as “offshore active defense;” clear manifestation of the wider influence of “Mao’s doctrine of active defense.”

This Chinese approach can also be defined as “calculative strategy,” which refers to the idea that “China has reached a point at which it will be difficult for it to ‘replicate its traditional goal of controlling … new periphery regions beyond the expanded heartland,’ particularly without economic development.” The “calculative strategy,” therefore,

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31 Dannis Blasko, “Chinese Strategic Thinking: People’s War In The 21St Century”, p.6
32 Quangqian Peng and Youzhi Yao, *The Science Of Military Strategy* [战略学 - Zhanlue Xue], p. 455
34 Ibid., p. 25
35 Zedong Mao, “On Protracted Warfare”, in *Selected Military Writings Of Mao Tse-Tung*, Zedong Maoed. , 1st ed. (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1963), pp. 187-266; it should be also pointed out that only through the Jiang Zemin’s promulgation of active defense guidelines in 1993 the navy could finally implement the strategic logic of the offshore active defense in order to fulfill the requirement of winning “local war under high-technology conditions” and, with the advent of cyber warfare, winning “local war under informatized conditions.” Cortez Cooper, “The PLA Navy’s "New Historic Missions." Expanding Capabilities For A Re-Emergent Maritime Power”, Testimony Before the U.S. China Economic and Security Review Commission, RAND Corporation, 2009.
36 Toshi Yoshihara and James R Holmes, *Red Star Over The Pacific*, p. 27; Michael McDevitt and Frederic Vellucci, "The Evolution Of The People's Liberation Army Navy", pp. 81-82
37 Thomas M Kane, *Chinese Grand Strategy And Maritime Power*, p. 9
“is defined in substantive terms as a pragmatic approach that emphasizes the primacy of internal economic growth and stability, the nurturing of amicable international relations, the relative restraint in the use of force combined with increasing efforts to create a more modern military … The reasons for this … are ultimately rooted in the fact that China today requires high levels of undistracted growth in economic and technological terms … to both ensure domestic order and well-being and to effectively protect its security interests along the periphery and beyond.”

China’s naval power does not seem, for now, to have sensitively changed its overall strategic posture in East Asia and worldwide. For example, even if China seems to have become more assertive from 2009 onwards, it is undeniable that it still plays in the region in accordance to the postulates of the UNCLOS (agreement also signed by China). In this context, even if territorial disputes play an important role in understanding East Asian relations, it is also clear that most of the states involved, including China, prefer to maintain a regional maritime stability.

Going back to the major strategic thinking of the offshore active defense – also defined as A2/AD (anti-access/area denial) doctrine by the US – it is important to highlight that it mainly refers to the “ability to hold US and allied ships, planes, and bases at risk and thereby deter foreign interference in disputes deemed central to Beijing’s interests.” The anti-access/area denial operations can, therefore, be broken down into two elements: the anti-access strategy, on one hand, which “combines military and nonmilitary measures” (a strategic asset which resembles Sun Tzu’s teaching of combining cheng – normal – and qi – special – forces), is “defined as actions taken to deny U.S. forces from deploying to a position in theater from which they can conduct effective operations against Chinese forces;” while on the other, the area-denial operations, while implicitly admitting inferiority, refers to “actions taken within the Pacific theater of operations to deny successfully deployed U.S. forces an ability to conduct effective operations in the vicinity of Taiwan and the Chinese mainland.”

However, the “offshore defense strategy,” because of the lack of official definitions “often overlapped with discussions of protecting China’s EEZ out to 200 nautical miles.” This, in turn, created and still creates relevant juridical and, as a consequence, geopolitical frictions. However, strategically speaking, this “forward-leaning defense posture [at sea] is consistent with the lessons of Chinese history,” because when compared “with the long-term old-fashioned land concept,” it simply pushes “the line of defense a bit outward,” keeping “the nature of strategic defense … unchanged.” Reason that explains why China’s claimed defensive maritime space (the first island chain) “is where most of the recent maritime incidents between the United States and China have taken place, including the 2001 EP-3 incident, the 2009 USNS

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40 Toshi Yoshihara and James R Holmes, Red Star Over The Pacific, pp. 6, 30, 47, 60; see also Samuel Griffith, Sun Tzu. The Art Of War, 1st ed. (London: Oxford University, 1971).
41 Dannis Blasko, “Chinese Strategic Thinking: People's War In The 21St Century”, p. 5-6
Impeccable incident and China’s 2010 protests over the participation of the George Washington CSG in military exercises in the Yellow Sea.  

Since A2/AD strategy envisages a weaker military asset, China has in fact, emphasized a large scale implementation of missiles against possible threats. China considers itself to be inevitably the weaker side, therefore the implementation of missiles should allow it to employ indirect approach through asymmetric means. In fact, “in recent years, some Chinese analysts have taken to depict guided missiles as an ‘assassin’s mace’ (杀手锏), a term similar to the Western concept of the ‘silver bullet.’ Missiles, then, dovetail with China’s strategic traditions.” This strategic asset has been translated into a high production of ASBMs, to be employed along the electromagnetic pulse (EMP). This technological acquisition really represents an innovation that is not even present in the US. This tactical asset allows the PLA to exploit “the mainland’s vast strategic depth [which] can compel enemy forces to enter the combat range of its weaponry.” This type of strategy constitutes “the core of Chinese fleet tactics.”

Fleet tactics that Beijing has also employed for its nuclear capabilities, expressed through the SSBNs. China still advocates a defensive posture – by committing itself on the execution of “minimum deterrence” capability – with a particular emphasis on flexibility, since most of its nuclear arsenal is incorporated into its submarine forces. However, the high number of submarines China possesses makes its nuclear undersea capability evidently strong, therefore undermining the exploitation of the weaker position. However, it has been suggested that China should simply develop asymmetric maritime capabilities expressed through an advanced submarine program.

But for China a naval development is also necessary for securing specific trading routes, because of its constant import of oil vital for its economic development. In this context, even due to nationalist drives, China feels compelled to build a blue water navy in order to have a direct control of specific routes which assure a constant supply of oil for such an expanding economy. In accordance to this clear commerce interests, necessary for the development of the Chinese economy, PLAN also serves the scope of safeguarding the Malacca Straits which constitute the naval corridor which ensures the “free passage through the sea lines of communication linking the Persian Gulf region and Africa with Chinese seaports.”

This peculiar economic situation has apparently influenced Chinese naval perspectives which also try to extend beyond the regional sphere of influence by embarking on anti-piracy operations in the gulf of Aden and the Chinese citizens rescue operations in Libya. Most of the operations carried out in far distant places,

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43 Michael McDevitt and Frederic Vellucci, "The Evolution Of The People's Liberation Army Navy", in Sea Power And The Asia-Pacific, p. 80
44 Toshi Yoshihara and James R Holmes, Red Star Over The Pacific, p. 102
45 Ibid., p. 75, 91
47 Toshi Yoshihara and James R Holmes, Red Star Over The Pacific, pp. 130, 133
48 Robert S. Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, And The U.S. Response", p. 72
49 Ibid., p. 69
50 Toshi Yoshihara and James R Holmes, Red Star Over The Pacific, p. 88
51 James Manicom, "Assessing China's Posture Towards Maritime Order In East Asia: Challenging, Shaping And Complying", p. 35
however, resemble more the HA/DR or concerted operations, such as it happened for the Tsunami in 2004, the Gulf of Aden in 2009 and Libya in 2011.\textsuperscript{52} All these new types of military actions, as it seems clear, do not have a belligerent logic. Following the Western adaptation to this specific “military operations rather than war,” China has coined its own term (非战争军事行动) which has been translated as “non-war military operations.” The capacity to overtake such missions further increased Chinese naval status as a responsible global power.\textsuperscript{53}

**US “Pivot to Asia” and its Major Strategic Consequences**

The American new strategy for Asia, specifically since 2011, has been labeled “Pivot to Asia,” which, in general terms, refers to the implementation of a strategic posture aimed at balancing the exponential military and economic growth of China in the Asian continent. And this directly responds to the American strategic culture which, for over two centuries, has been based on the assumption that “the Pacific Ocean remains a conduit for American ideas and goods to flow westward, and not for threats to flow eastward toward the homeland.”\textsuperscript{54}

This statement is quite reveling, since it has often highlighted how the US perceives its overall regional commitment. That is, Washington has achieved substantial foreign policy successes “when applying all the instruments of national power, since these reflect foundational American interests and values.” As it has been stated in 1955 by Reischauer, in fact:

The military and economic arms of policy are in a sense purely subsidiary to the ideological. Through the military arm we can defend some selected spots, but this does us more harm than good if the people in those areas do not elect to use the time bought by our blood to work toward development of a healthy democracy. Through economic aid we can give the people of an Asian country a better fighting chance to develop democratic institutions, but our economic aid, if they so decide, could be used with equal effectiveness to lay the foundations of a totalitarian regime. Without the support of the military and economic arms, our ideological efforts might prove entirely ineffective, but without the ideological side the other two become almost meaningless.\textsuperscript{55}

Therefore, while being, apparently, a “new” strategy, in reality, according to the major features of American strategic culture and the principle of continuity that has characterized American presidencies, it is

\begin{itemize}
  \item Andrew S. Erickson, "Rising Tide, Dispersing Waves: Opportunities And Challenges For Chinese Seapower Development", p. 389
  \item Toshi Yoshihara and James R Holmes, *Red Star Over The Pacific*, p. 169
  \item Michael J Green, *By More Than Providence*, p. 5. As the author briefly reports: “early examples of this strategic impulse include Thomas Jefferson’s and John Quincy Adams’s assertion o American primacy in the Pacific Northwest as America’s gateway to the Pacific; President John Tyler’s subsequent extension of the Monroe Doctrine to include Hawaii; and William McKinley’s decisions to annex Hawaii and to remain in the Philippines after the European powers sought to exploit the vacuum left by Spain’s defeat.”
  \item Ibid., pp. 11-12
\end{itemize}
not a wrong assumption to assert that actually the pivot has definitely existed even before the 2011 pivot took place. And, besides that, the centrality of China in shaping the content and direction of this strategy has been widely attested by the fact that the aim of the American overall commitment to the region, also labeled “reoriantation strategy,” has been to “dissuade China from making a bid for hegemony and thereby preserve the existing power of balance in the region, in which the United States held the superior position.”

Through this mechanism, then, the US has been committed to engage itself with the overall continent in order to impede a country like China to gain the upper hand in Asia. And this is further confirmed by the fact that at the beginning of the post-Cold War period, “American policymakers had recognized that the rise of China constituted the greatest challenge to an open Asia-Pacific order.” Therefore, since then, there had been a broad consensus on the fact that “the United States could manage this new challenge with a combination of ‘engaging’ and ‘balancing’ China as Beijing’s power accrued.”

But it is exactly this situation that creates the first strategic problems, positing a fundamental question such as: how to achieve such a strategic superiority in Asia in order to contain possible competitors? The US is acting in Asia more as a maritime power, when actually the “regional order has been centered on China and the continent.” By considering these basic assumptions, another more specific question comes to mind: “how then does a maritime power shape strategic events on the continent from offshore?” Instead of acting from offshore with disastrous consequences, another option consists of pursuing “a geostrategic condominium with continental China” which, however, “risks undercutting the offshore island bastion offered by Japan, since China would seek to subvert Japan and the island chain under its historic hegemony.”

Another important element which the US has long strategized on has been the definition and the setting of the forward defense line in the Asia-Pacific. This approach has been mainly justified on the premise that over the American historical involvement in the region, the Pacific Ocean has not provided “sanctuary against threats emanating from the Eurasian heartland if the United States itself is not holding the line at the Western Pacific,” whose definition, in terms of location, has always raised “costs and risks.”

During the nineteenth century the line was often drawn around Hawaii and then, after the annexation of the island along with the Philippines and Guam, the line moved westward to the point of facing the direct challenge of the Japanese imperialism, which inevitably increased American involvement in the region.

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57 Michael J Green, *By More Than Providence*, p. 425. This aspect, however, is widely debated, since the world coming out of the Cold War manifested its entire fragmentation and unpredictability. The dramatic changes that were under progress, pushed many states into a chaotic thinking to the extent that, as Jeremi Suri pointed out, “strategists … [were] trying to make a cake from crumbs – to find some coherent unity in a fragmented, incoherent, post-Cold War world.” Jeremi Suri, "American Grand Strategy From The Cold War's End To 9/11", *Orbis* 53, no. 4 (2009): 611-627. This also intertwines with the overall approach to warfare and strategy that usually characterizes the way states and policymakers think of strategy in changed environments. In fact, in these particular contexts, it often happens to witness a theoretical reliance on what are perceived as “old but still relevant” strategic methods, since relying on previously successful models represents an easy approach, reducing the material and immaterial costs associated with a change of strategic design. Robert Dorff, "A Primer In Strategy Development", in *U.S. Army War College Guide To Strategy*, Joseph Cerami and James Holcomb ed., (Carlisle, PA: Army War College, 2001).

58 Michael J Green, *By More Than Providence*, p. 7
the end of the Second World War, “the Truman administration drew the American defensive line very deliberately between the offshore island chain and the continent, including Japan but excluding South Korea,” which had been included after the outbreak of the Korean war. The forward defense line, however, was, later on, retreated after that the war in Vietnam “prompted Nixon to announce a new ‘Guam Doctrine.’” During the Reagan presidency the line was pushed forward back again, due mainly to the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union. At the present stage, finally, the line does not have a clear setting, since the American strategic design has not yet decided whether or not including the South China Sea within its overall strategic calculation, especially after the rising of China.\textsuperscript{59}

There have been previous attempts at containing the Asian tiger, as attested by the US engagement in East Asia since 1949, in order to help Taiwan gain its international security and “independence” against a threatening communist China.\textsuperscript{60} However, unlike the Cold War era – where the international structure was quite different (communist world on one side, free world on the other) – today’s politics is moving towards a different direction, that is, the progressive establishment of a multipolar world where, since the post-Cold War era, “economics and security have begun to be linked.”\textsuperscript{61}

Since the end of the Cold War, in fact, the US had to rethink critically its military strategy in the Asian region. The presidency of Bush senior and Clinton had to go through the hard task to reformulate US engagement in the region. When it comes to Bush’s presidency, the then Secretary of State, Jim Baker, highlighted, since day one, that China represented “the centerpiece of U.S. strategy in Asia.” This strategic approach received further confirmation when in 1990-1991 China adopted new military means in the increasing destabilization over the cross-Strait relations with Taiwan. The US – which was really concerned “about a shifting military balance against Taiwan” – reacted immediately by selling weapons to Taipei, an action that “was considered a violation of the Third Communiqué,” signed between China and the US in 1982.\textsuperscript{62} While addressing the new changed circumstances, however, the Cold War mentality still affected US strategic calculation; “in May 1992, the Bush administration completed its new Regional Defense Strategy as part of its 1994-1999 Defense Planning Guidance (DPG). The Strategy focused on one overriding goal: preventing any hostile power from dominating the European and Asian-Pacific regions.”\textsuperscript{63} In other words,

\textsuperscript{59} Michael J Green, \textit{By More Than Providence}, p. 8. The reflection over the importance of the forward line of defense of the US highlights one fundamental aspect about American strategic culture: its commitment to the Asia-Pacific for historical as well as geographical reasons. For example, “the postwar order in Asia has rested on the presence and predictability of U.S. power, anchored in a network of military alliances and partnerships This was welcomed in most regional capitals, first to prevent the reemergence of Japanese militarism, then as a strategic counterweight to the Soviet Union, and then as a security guarantee to Tokyo and Seoul. In recent years, China’s rise and the United States’ fiscal and economic difficulties had begun to call the durability of this framework into question. A sense of strategic uncertainty and some degree of strategic hedging had begun to emerge in various capitals. The Obama administration’s ‘rebalance’ has served as a necessary corrective reestablishing strategic fundamentals.” Kevin Rudd, "Beyond The Pivot", \textit{Foreign Affairs} 92, no. 2 (2013), p. 10.


\textsuperscript{62} Michael J Green, \textit{By More Than Providence}, pp. 431, 449

\textsuperscript{63} Douglas T Stuart and William T Tow, \textit{A US Strategy For The Asia-Pacific}, p. 7
the administration “was focused more on preserving the old and relevant [strategic thought] than on embracing the new and yet untested.”

In order to reach military supremacy in the region, JCS Chairman Colin Powell “began work on a ‘base force concept’ that would keep the United States ready to deter or defeat regional rogue powers.” Moreover, the same document also targeted “the rise of any regional rivals – including particularly India, China, and Japan.” However, the pressing concerns related to the necessity to reduce military expenditures abroad, specifically in the East Asian theater, did not guarantee the fulfillment of this general strategic concept.

With the establishment of the Clinton presidency, the US started to adopt a new strategic posture, which, nevertheless, relied on the same strategic logic which saw China as the major obstacle to US presence and influence in the region. William Perry, the successor of Les Aspin as secretary of defense, who had undertaken extensive “military-to-military cooperation” with China, advanced the evaluation that the rise of China represented “the most important geostrategic development of the coming decades.” According to this theoretical framework, he developed an interest for the logic of “preventive defense” which “led him to combine confidence-building with Beijing and greater security cooperation with America’s Asian allies as a hedge – the central construct that would guide U.S. Asia strategy in the years to come.”

The Clinton doctrine, elaborated in 1993, relied on the idea to spread and therefore “enlarge” the community of “market democracies” in Asia; strategic design that “generated particular concern among Asia-Pacific states.” This major political consequence led Clinton to change his overall strategic formulation, by shifting the doctrine from “enlargement” to “engagement” which simply “comprised the prevention of major threats to regional stability and partnership with friends and allies to help take greater responsibility for peace and stability in their own regions.” This strategic design found its military application through the creation of the Bottom-Up Review, which “de-emphasised forward presence and sea control and placed more importance on rapid-force deployment and mobile amphibious combat capabilities to quell regional crises and conflicts.” The underpinning idea behind this approach advocated a strategic asset which could guarantee the US military quality to fight and win two regional conflicts “nearly simultaneously as part of an overall strategy of prevention and partnership.”

This strategy never found its real application, even if its consequences were quite evident. On one hand, its strategic principles, even if well conceived on paper, lacked a coherent articulation into a comprehensive national strategy. The National Security Council, after a long process, reached, in July 1994, a National Security Strategy (NSS) draft, titled “A Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement.” However, “rather than setting priorities, the new NSS simply combined all the contradictory impulses of Clinton’s

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64 Michael J Green, By More Than Providence, p. 451
65 Ibid., pp. 432-433. The importance of this document for the analysis of US strategy in the Asia-Pacific is attested by the fact that it “revealed deeper conceptual undercurrents in the national security bureaucracy that contradicted the administration’s public expression of confidence in a more multipolar international system.”
66 Ibid., pp. 457
67 A concept that has been reapplied by Hilary Clinton in 2011. Hilary Clinton, ‘America’s Pacific Century’, Foreign Policy, November 2011.
campaign.” In so doing, the major issues affecting US involvement in the region were left unaddressed. For example, its constant focus on Chinese internal affairs, such as the human rights issue, still affected how Beijing and the Asian actors perceived the American involvement – i.e. interference – in the region.\(^{69}\) In fact, after two years of Clinton’s presidency, “the State Department’s top Asia hand [had] warned … that U.S.-Asia relations [were] being infected by a ‘malaise’ of disputes over human rights, trade, and other concerns” which were destined to destabilize the region, as attested by the US-China destabilization and the eruption of the North Korean first nuclear crisis in 1994.\(^{70}\)

According to these pressing concerns, and “recognizing that U.S. troop drawdowns were driving allies in the region to hedge,” Joe Nye managed to issue the new East Asia Strategic Report (EASR) in 1995, which emphasized the commitment “to maintain 100,000 troops.” Nye’s plan was also conceived with the assumption that geoconomics had not replaced geopolitics and that the US could not substitute forward presence for multilateralism or “an offshore balancing strategy from the Western Hemisphere.”\(^{71}\)

With the election of George W. Bush as the forty-fourth president of the US, American Asia policy became more realist-oriented with the “need to return to the disciplined management of great-power relations that had characterized the Reagan and Bush foreign policies.” China, therefore, once again, according to Bush’s approach to foreign policy, had to be considered more as a “strategic competitor” rather than a “strategic partner.”

This new theoretical approach became the centerpiece of the American Asia policy. In fact, it became quite evident that “China’s rise would be shaped through a mix of engagement and shoring up favorable strategic equilibrium centered on the maritime democracies.” Therefore, the US activated one of the central paradigms of its containment policy, which would have had important and direct consequences for the future US-China relations: the establishment of strategic agreements with India. As Condoleezza Rice stated quite clearly during the electoral campaign: “India is an element in China’s calculation, and it should yet be in America’s, too.”\(^{72}\)

This had brought to light a fundamental aspect of the pivot, that is, the external balancing, which had represented and still represents a crucial characteristic of the American Asia strategy. In fact, besides strengthening its ties with the historical allies, such as Japan and Republic of Korea, the US also started to elaborate a diplomatic plan to get closer with three other important actors of the region, specifically with:

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69 One case in point that reflected this changing perspective had been offered by the Japanese government which, right during the Korean nuclear crisis in 1994 and notwithstanding the diplomatic ties with the American government, issued the “Higuchi Report,” which emphasized the importance of multilateralism, rather than the US-Japan alliance, as the central pillar for the resolution of the controversies in the region. The Japanese approach, moreover, represented more a response to the Clinton’s Asia policy, which, at the beginning of his presidency, advocated the idea of disengaging from the region, leaving a key player, such as Japan, alone. Therefore, in the winter 1993-1994 the Japanese journalist Funabashi Yoichi articulated the idea of the “Asianization of Asia,” by stating that: “Asia will no longer put up being treated simply as a card; it will now demand respect as a player. Its success stories are likely to inspire and provide voice for original, distinctly Asian ideas on a host of issues … the question facing the United States is whether it will be able to understand these ideas dispassionately and coexist in harmony with Asian nations.” Yoichi Funabashi, "The Asianization Of Asia", Foreign Affairs, 1993.

70 Michael J Green, By More Than Providence, p. 465

71 Ibid., p. 468

Nepal, Vietnam, and Burma. All of them, in fact, share a border with China and, especially with the first two, there were (and partly there still are) some political frictions: the Maoist insurgency, in fact, affected the first country, while the progressive institutional confrontation with Vietnam, due to their historical ties, increased the confrontation between Hanoi and Beijing.\textsuperscript{73}

The fundamental ideas surrounding the external balancing were: “(1) increasing the military capabilities of, and building stronger bilateral interoperability with, allies and partners; and (2) encouraging allies and partners to develop stronger military relationships and greater interoperability with one another.” By setting these fundamental assets, the US activated important multilateral exercises with key regional actors. For example, the United States, Japan, and India “conducted their first trilateral naval exercises in the Western Pacific in April 2007. Later in the same year, the annual U.S.-India Malabar exercise was expanded to include Japan, Australia, and Singapore, which was the first time that such multilateral exercises had been conducted on India’s east coast.”\textsuperscript{74}

At the operational level, Bush’s presidency had been influenced by Andrew Marshall, the then director of the Office of Net Assessment (ONA) at the Department of Defense, whose writings were emphasizing the importance of technological evolution for the twenty-first century, specifically the role of precision warfare, conducted through “long-range precision-strike capabilities and advances in information and communications technology.” At the center of the logic of this technological transformation was China and its military modernization, considered to be the major “threat to U.S. power projection capabilities in the Asia Pacific.” This was related, at the time, to the assumption that American military preponderance was about to be challenged by the development of anti-access capabilities “that could inhibit the United States’ advantage in global power projection.”\textsuperscript{75}

We had to wait for the 9/11 event, which, paradoxically, eased relations between China and the US, since the terrorist attacks “redirected the American national security debate away from the question of whether China was a friend or enemy and allowed room for a more nuanced and consistent policy of engagement toward Beijing.” However, this good rapprochement was only partially salutary for the US-China relations, since Bush’s policy towards Asia actually emphasized even more the strategic support for Taiwan, increasing inevitably China’s concerns.\textsuperscript{76}

Washington’s overall approach started to be better planned in 2004, after the issue of the Global Posture Review (GPR), which took into consideration the importance of Asia and, above all, the necessity “to dissuade China from challenging the existing power balance by revising the U.S. force posture in the

\textsuperscript{73} Michael J Green, \textit{By More Than Providence}, p. 514-517  
\textsuperscript{74} Nina Silove, "The Pivot Before The Pivot: U.S. Strategy To Preserve The Power Balance In Asia", pp. 74-79  
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., pp. 53-55. The Defense Strategy Review, written in 2001 through which the American strategy to Asia was being shaped, along the already mentioned features, was mainly characterized by four additional defense policy goals, such as “dissuade by actively discouraging the generation of threatening forces and ambitions;” “reassure the American people, allies, and other countries; “deter the use of force;” and finally “decisively defeat adversaries in the event of war.”  
\textsuperscript{76} Michael J Green, \textit{By More Than Providence}, p. 496
region.” Therefore, the so-called “pivot to Asia,” besides the historical legacies of the American involvement in region, found its first present manifestation back in 2004.\textsuperscript{77}

This shift in the strategic design paved the way for the establishment of an internal balancing which culminated in an overall military reorganization in Asia in order to confront China’s rise. One of the first maneuvers concerned the expansion of the Anderson Air Force Base in Guam. In this island, several submarines and bombers were located for strengthening American military presence in the region.\textsuperscript{78}

This, inevitably, brings us to the Obama’s years and what it meant for the US-China relations and the increasing involvement of the US in the region. The military component of the interaction did play a significant role, due to the legacies of the previous presidencies, especially Bush’s. American involvement in Asia never ceased during the Obama presidency. It would, instead, be further conceptualized after 2009, the year in which China, it is believed, became more assertive.\textsuperscript{79}

The events of 2010 increased the geopolitical uncertainties in the region, raising tensions between US and China. The first case was the North Korean sinking of the South Korean corvette Cheonan in April 2010, coupled with the North Korean firing of the Yeongpyeong Island in November of the same year. The American response – which was mainly characterized by the sending of warships in the area, also justified by China’s refusal to respond to the event – was about to set up a trilateral agreement with South Korea and Japan, however, it was watered down by South Korea “because of domestic pressures against the pro-U.S. Lee Myung-bak administration and concerns about China’s response.”

The other event, erupted a couple of months after the North Korean attack of the Cheonan, concerned the maritime incident between a Chinese fishing boat and a Japanese Coast Guard cutter in September 2010. During that circumstance, Clinton “was the first to reiterate clearly that Article V of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty applied to the defense of the Senkaku Islands that both [China and Japan] claimed.” This had inevitable consequences in the US-China relations and especially the menacing perception that China had built towards the US.\textsuperscript{80}

As a major consequence, since 2010, the Obama administration has started to readjust the balancing approach towards China by implementing new measures whose effectiveness does not seem to have occurred. Washington, in fact:

has put together a comprehensive ‘containment’ package in Asia that includes a new military doctrine of air-sea battle; launched a game-changing economic project called the Trans-Pacific Partnership; initiated the ‘rotation’ of US marines in Australia; and stationed coastal battleships in Singapore. More alarmingly, the United States is making clear attempts to re-establish a naval presence in Subic Bay in the Philippines, and in the coveted Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam. Both were key US naval bases during the Cold War.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{77} Nina Silove, "The Pivot Before The Pivot: U.S. Strategy To Preserve The Power Balance In Asia", pp. 59-61
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., pp. 67-68.
\textsuperscript{80} Michael J Green, By More Than Providence, p. 525
\textsuperscript{81} Lanxin Xiang, "China And The ‘Pivot’", Survival 54, no. 5 (2012): 113
This led, at last, to the creation of the famous “Pivot to Asia,” first mentioned by Hillary Clinton in her article for *Foreign Policy*, in which she argued for the possibility for the US to undertake a “pivot” toward Asia. The pivot, as expressed at the time, initially referred to the political turn that the US should have embraced in its overall foreign policy posture. The idea, in fact, was that Asia now represented the region of the future, where the biggest geopolitical transformations would have taken place. As she emphasized, in fact, the United States would “lock in a substantially increased investment – diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise – in the Asia-Pacific region.”

Inevitably, the pivot to Asia soon became also a military project, as attested by the explanation that Obama himself offered at the Australian parliament on November 16, 2011. He stated, in fact, that “after a decade in which we fought two wars that cost us dearly, in blood and treasure, the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region.” The result of this statement was the deployment of 3,000 US Marines on a rotational basis and the development of those capabilities necessary for power projection against the anti-access/area denial strategy adopted by China and Iran. Specifically, the 2012 White House document clearly stated how important it is to “credibly deter potential adversaries and to prevent them from achieving their objectives,” and that “the United States must maintain its ability to project power in areas in which our access and freedom to operate are challenged.”

In order to counter the new Chinese military potential, the Pentagon adopted the Air-Sea Battle (ASB) concept. Besides its mere operational aspects, which necessarily involved the navy and the air force, the ASB was conceived under the strategic logic of preventive warfare, since its objective was to destroy “the enemy’s ‘kill chain’ before they could destroy U.S. carriers and bases with ballistic missiles. The concept was then expanded in January 2012 to include all the services under the Joint Operational Access Concept (JOAC).”

The AirSea Battle concept, however, proved to be insufficient for the overall American strategy in Asia. And it also proved to be counterproductive, because it further antagonized China, since the objective of this concept was to “counter the A2/AD challenge to the U.S. power projection capabilities.” And China, it was assumed, possessed “the most advanced A2/AD strategy.” However, since January 2015, the AirSea Battle concept was later renamed as “Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons (JAM-GC),” due to its inner inconsistencies. The new name did not immediately translate into effective

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82 Hilary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century”. In 2013, in a speech to the Asia Society, the then National Security Advisor Tom Donilon argued that the pivot – also defined rebalance – was based on five pillars: “closer coordination with the five U.S. treaty allies in Asia (Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines); deepening cooperation and capacity building with emerging powers such as India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Myanmar; forming a ‘constructive relationship’ with China; increasing engagement with the region’s multilateral institutions such as the ASEAN and the East Asia Summit (EAS); and concluding negotiations on new trade and investment initiatives, most notably the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) agreement.” Scott W. Harold, “Is The Pivot Doomed? The Resilience Of America’s Strategic ‘Rebalance’”, *The Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2014): 86.

83 Michael J Green, *By More Than Providence*, p. 521; in the 2012 document, issued by the White House, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities For 21St Century Defense* (Washington: Department of Defense, 2012), it is stated, quite clearly, the need to rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific and the need to invest energies to “assure access to and use of the global commons,” a clear connection to the military operations China is conducting in the South China Sea, pp. 2, 4.

84 Michael J Green, *By More Than Providence*, p. 529
military strategy, to the extent that the likely “successor to AirSea Battle may not be JAM-GC, but rather the Defense Innovation Initiative, commonly known as the search for a ‘Third Offset Strategy,’ announced by Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel in November 2014.”

The administration, however, was against this plan lest antagonizing even more China, due to its explicitly provocative nature. While there were some uncertainties about the plan, the successive publications of the operational details, that clearly stated how ASB was also meant to target PLA bases within China, further exacerbated Chinese response. In order to mitigate the situation, retired marine colonel T.X. Hammes “offered an alternative approach that would better suit U.S. capabilities, budgets, and strategy – ‘offshore control’ – reminiscent of War Plan Orange’s aim to interdict imperial Japan’s sea lanes and blockade its home islands.” However, this type of plan, if applied, would have encouraged the execution of exactly those operations the plan was trying to prevent, that is, the planning of possible surprise attacks in order to disrupt American blockade.

In order to extend the American involvement in the region by also adopting new diplomatic tools, the US and the Philippines signed in 2014 an Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) “giving the United States greater access to facilities in the Philippines.” At the same time, the US “eased the forty-year-old arms ban on Vietnam to provide nonlethal surveillance and patrol equipment to Hanoi.”

At the technological level, moreover, “the navy decided to deploy an additional attack sub to Guam and began to work on plans to develop technologies to counter A2/AD under a new ‘Advanced Capabilities and Deterrence Panel’ (ACDP),” leading to the foundation of the program known as the “Third Offset.”

The Obama administration, then, in the last years of his second term in office, struggled to find the right strategic ingredient. However, one element remained constant: “the United States responded not by retreating but by expanding its areas of responsibilities as it had so often in the past,” especially after the rising concerns over the disputed islands in the South China Sea. In fact, according to this overall approach Andrew Krepinevich of the Center of Strategic and Budgetary Assessment suggested the implementation of the “Archipelagic Defense” as a forward line of defense that the US should have embraced in its overall plan to contain China. The overall idea is to militarily fortify the entire first island chain in order to apply the doctrine of deterrence through denial, which aims at denying China “the ability to control the air and the sea around the fist island chain.” This had been conceived mainly because, according to the author, China would not try to expand its reach through overt aggression. Instead, “consistent with its strategic culture, it wants to

slowly but inexorably shift the regional military balance in its favor, leaving the rest of the region with little choice but to submit to Chinese coercion.”

This approach has been consistent with the execution of the so-called Freedom of Navigations Operations, started since October 2015, whose intent is to challenge China’s claims over the contested islands in the South China Sea. These operations, notwithstanding their clear message, are symptomatic of a lack of a coherent strategic vision which further undermines the American approach to the region, showing, actually, a form of weakness by the US in the Asia-Pacific, which seems impotent to face the new regional shifting through other means, such as diplomatic engagement, relying, instead, on the old hard power mechanisms.

At the operational level, the US pivot had been also translated into the implementation of the Thermal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) in South Korea, first agreed upon in 2016 under the Obama presidency and then finally activated in April 2017 under Trump’s leadership. This missile defense system relies on the YP-2 radar which allows the US and South Korea to increase the interception of hostile missiles coming from other parts of the region. It is undeniable that the THAAD mainly serves the scope to check North Korean military operations, however, the power and the structure of this new type of radar sensitively reduces Chinese deterrence capabilities.

All these diplomatic, and especially operational, measures would lead inevitably to the “classic vicious cycle, in which each side continuously misreads the other’s strategic mind,” contributing to the manifestation of the Thucydidean Trap, which explains that a state, conducting a rearmament program in order to deter or contain the ascendant adversary, will inevitably contribute, through a process of self-fulfilling prophecy, to the outbreak of hostilities that both actors planned to avoid in the first place. In fact, when it comes to the evaluation of the overall American strategy, misperception, supported by the lack of knowledge of the adversary’s strategy, would inevitably lead to greater conflicts. Therefore, “if policymakers believe that the United States pursued an anemic strategy in Asia, for example, China’s actions may appear more bellicose than if they are understood to be a reaction to a more substantial reorientation strategy.”

87 Andrew Krepinevich, "How To Deter China. The Case For Archipelagic Defense", Foreign Affairs 94, no. 2 (2015), pp. 80-81. Moreover, the author underlines two fundamental aspects related to his strategic design. First of all, he highlights the importance of this doctrine, mainly because “Beijing’s actions cannot be explained away as a response to a U.S. arms buildup.” Therefore the military plan that the US should build along the first island chain would be entirely justified because of the revisionist and assertive Chinese behavior. The second aspect is related to the strategy per se. according to the author, investing in the Archipelagic Defense “could yield future returns beyond the western Pacific,” exactly like the concept of the AirLand Battle, which, besides its direct application in central Europe in order to deter the Soviet Union, it helped conduct the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War.


90 Lanxin Xiang, "China And The ‘Pivot’", Survival 54, no. 5 (2012): 117

Another fundamental reason that explains this specific outcome is the presence of clear and historically defined military doctrinal differences that in turn “worsen misperceptions [between states], which can lead to escalation.” For example, in the ’50s, both the US and China misinterpreted each other’s military doctrine as attested by the US nuclear strategy on one hand, and the Chinese “threats of intervention based on its strategy of ‘People’s War’” on the other. The difference in military doctrine plays a relevant role in understanding how both actors engage with the other’s strategic calculation. In fact, it is important to highlight the key reasons behind the US commitment to the establishment of a containment policy towards China; that is, the “discourse on ‘rise and fall’” of great powers in history which represents “an Anglo-American proclivity with a Eurocentric bias,” when in reality China’s “current trajectory” can best be described as “restoration” rather than a “rise.”

In fact, the pivot, finally, rested on the same wrong assumptions about China’s leadership, especially after 2009: “Beijing’s tough diplomacy stemmed not from confidence in its might … but from a deep sense of insecurity born of several nerve-racking years of financial crisis and social unrest.” Therefore, this wrong analysis would inevitably compound “Beijing’s insecurities and will only feed China’s aggressiveness.” In fact, since 2010 China has conducted several operations in the South and East China Seas (especially against Vietnam, Philippines and Japan) in order to reaffirm its geopolitical centrality. And this had to do with the American activities which started to resemble a containment-type of approach. So, Washington has encouraged Chinese leaders to believe that only the belligerent policies would guarantee to China its own security. At last, one final element of the pivot stands out: “a strategy that was meant to check a rising China has sparked its combativeness and damaged its faith in cooperation.”

This therefore represents an important cultural asset which helps us understand the different types of engagements states put in place, because of their specific reading of history. On the contrary “the Chinese have never had the missionary urge, and model-building is not part of their culture.” Therefore, the next challenge that would further undermine the US-China relations will be the establishment of the American forward defense line in the Pacific. And this mainly because, any US attempt to extend its own line will inevitably collide with the Chinese attempt to draw its own line, which would include the First and the Second Island Chains. Because of these fundamental misperceptions that have altered the relationship between the US and China, next section, by relying on what has been described in the first section, explains how China reacted to the American strategic policy in accordance to its own historical legacy.

**Chinese Maritime Strategy between Tradition and Confrontation**

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94 Robert Ross, "The Problem With The Pivot: Obama's New Asia Policy Is Unnecessary And Counterproductive", *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 6 (2012), pp. 72, 81
95 Lanxin Xiang, "China And The ‘Pivot’", pp. 121-122
96 Michael J Green, *By More Than Providence*, p. 545
Chinese strategy as a reaction to the US regional posture

Chinese response to the American balancing can be traced back from the late ‘90s onwards, especially in relations to two major events, such as “America’s fireworks show in Iraq in 1991 and threatening display of force against China during the 1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis.” They widely encouraged the Chinese government to fully engage with a program of rapid military modernization. The US balancing approach has nevertheless resulted “in three new elements of competition: increasing polarization – e.g., other states in the region are increasingly forced to choose between America or China – arms races, and deepening rivalry.”

This new international situation intertwined with the newly established maritime doctrine espoused by the Admiral Liu Huaqing, defined as the Chinese Mahan, who argued in favor of the maritime transformation and development of the Chinese national strategy by investing on the building of aircraft carrier and a new type of “revolution in military affairs.” This transformation has steadily developed to the extent that, in the last edition of the China’s Military Strategy, issued in 2015, it is clearly reported that “the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned … and great importance had to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests.”

Therefore the aircraft carrier became the central assumption of the Chinese maritime transformation, especially as a regional means in order to check US regional influence, which, according to Chinese policymakers, opposes Chinese fulfillment of its own core national interests. Specifically, in opposition to what the American policymakers have been thinking about Chinese military development, “it is in the South...
China Sea that one should expect first to see the PLAN employ aircraft carriers.\(^\text{101}\) For example, in April 2009, right during the so-called Chinese new assertiveness, Rear Admiral Zhang Zhaozhang stated that

The Chinese navy does not need to fight in the Atlantic Ocean, the Indian Ocean or at the center of the Pacific Ocean. The Chinese navy follows a proactive defense strategy. However, in order to defend the security of the national territory, marine territories, and the waters within the First Island Chain, this proactive defense strategy does not mean that our navy only stays within the First Island Chain. Only when the Chinese navy goes beyond the First Island Chain, will China be able to expand its strategic depth of security for its marine territories.\(^\text{102}\)

Moreover, in the prestigious military publication of the *Science of Campaigns* 战役学, it is also reported how important the aircraft is in providing “air cover to amphibious invasions against islands and reefs beyond the range of land-based aircraft.” At the same time, the work states that “three-dimensional attacks are essential to executing the PLA’s ‘coral-island-assault campaign’ (对珊瑚岛礁进攻) against islands and reefs in the South China Sea during a regional conflict.” The subsequent edition, the 2006 version, highlighted even further these elements, arguing about the importance of “effective seaborne command and control, three-dimensional encirclement, and the complex logistics support required for assaults on coral islands and reefs far from the mainland.”\(^\text{103}\)

In order to fulfill this strategic design, Chinese military modernization started to rely on submarines, not only because they represent the weapons of the weak in a naval buildup confrontation, but also because Beijing started to feel the pressure of a growing presence, almost interference, of US into the Asian affairs, therefore increasing the Chinese fear that US strategic posture would undermine its top priority goal: “economic construction.” Fear that finally reified itself in 1994, when a confrontation “in the Yellow Sea between the US carrier *Kitty Hawk* and a Chinese submarine” occurred. Erupted in the middle of the North Korean nuclear crisis, the US pursued “demonstrative deterrence” actions against Chinese submarines which were patrolling the crisis.\(^\text{104}\)

\(^{101}\) Daniel Kostecka, "From The Sea: PLA Doctrine And The Employment Of Sea-Based Airpower", *Naval War College Review* 64, no. 3 (2011).

\(^{102}\) Cai Wei, "Dream Of The Military For Aircraft Carrier", *Sanlian Life Weekly* (2009) cited in Daniel Kostecka, "From The Sea: PLA Doctrine And The Employment Of Sea-Based Airpower." It should also be pointed out that there are several reasons that explain why Chinese maritime strategy would be confined to the regional spectrum. First of all, the simple reason refers to the hugely minor carrier potential it has with respect to other state actors, like the US, for example. The second reason, more technical, refers to the type of aircraft carrier that China is currently undertaking. The new carrier, for example, is quite similar to the Liaoning, which means that both have a STOBAR (short takeoff but arrested recovery) system, which, in itself, is much weaker than the CATOBAR (catapult-assisted takeoff but arrested recovery), which allows for long-distant operations. Another fundamental reason concerns the types of jet-fighters it could be possible to employ on these types of carriers. At the present China possesses the J-15, which are necessarily limited in fuel and weapons. Finally, another important element refers to the Chinese lack of a vertical assault capability, which means having the necessary means to easily deploy helicopters through deck-based aviation. In 2006 China has introduced something that should narrow the gap, such as the LPD 998, however, there is still a long way to go. *Ibid.*, 17-18


Another major element that illustrates the transformation of the geopolitical asset of the Asia-Pacific and the inevitable reactions of the actors involved, which include also, and above all, China, had been the drafting of the new EASR, issued in 1995, briefly mentioned above. The document irritated the Japanese government that advanced the perspective of the creation of a culturally independent Asia, which would have been free to shape its own destiny. And while it is true that the initial objective of the EASR was not based on balancing China’s rise, “but rather on restoring the tools of American influence and engagement necessary to realize the cooperative international dynamics envisioned in the strategy of enlargement and engagement,”\textsuperscript{105} it nevertheless contributed to shape what it actually tried to prevent: Chinese militarization process. This was the direct consequence of the self-fulfilling prophecy that usually characterizes poor strategizing. In fact, as Joe Nye himself pointed out when discussing the engagement issue of the overall American plan: “if you treat China as an enemy, China will become an enemy.”\textsuperscript{106}

However, the new strategic document could not have played such a radical role in the regional equilibrium had it not coupled with another major event which happened at Cornell University. The school, in fact, invited its distinguished alumnus, the President of the Republic of China, Lee Teng-hui to attend the 1995 alumni reunion, inevitably increasing the fury of China, which not only interpreted this gesture as a symbol of provocation by the United States which agreed many times before to normalize relations with Beijing by refusing closer ties with Taiwan, but also as a challenge posed directly by the Taiwanese leader who had expressed the willingness to not comply with the “one China policy.”

Therefore, since then, especially after the winter of 1995 in which Beijing conducted naval exercises around Taiwan, showing also its missile capability, China had widely increased its defense budget, while the PLA Air Force and Navy were being modernized by the supply of advanced equipment from “former Soviet production lines.” Moreover, Beijing also started to build military facilities on Mischief Island in the South China Sea, an operation that would have widely influenced, up to today, Chinese engagement to the region.\textsuperscript{107}

The situation became even more problematic when, a couple of years afterwards, in 1999, the US “accidently” bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. Recent publications on China’s doctrine of cyber

\textsuperscript{105} Michael J Green, \textit{By More Than Providence}, p. 469

\textsuperscript{106} James Mann, ”U.S. Starting To View China As Potential Enemy”, \textit{Latimes}, last modified 1995, accessed June 1, 2017, http://articles.latimes.com/1995-04-16/news/mn-55355_1_china-today. Nye’s concern is quite relevant, since the year after, with the eruption of the Asian economic crisis in 1997, which exacerbated the existing tensions between the US and the other actors of the system, the American administration itself realized how its own policy “had become on balance too provocative toward China.” Michael J Green, \textit{By More Than Providence}, p. 477. Another important issue, raised in the article, is that “when U.S. strategic planners comb through history in search of precedents for the growing economic and military strength in China today, they are coming up with some ominous examples: Germany in the 1880s and Japan in the 1920s. Their search for historical comparisons demonstrates an important shift during the past two years in American policy and attitudes toward China.” James Mann, ”U.S. Starting To View China As Potential Enemy.”

\textsuperscript{107} Michael J Green, \textit{By More Than Providence}, p. 469-470. This situation was, then, destined to escalate after the approval, in 1996, of the US-Japan Joint Security Declaration which, coupled with the 1996 Clinton-Jiang summit “had put in place the twin pillars of a new strategy to ‘engage and balance’ a rising China.” \textit{Ibid.}, p. 473.
warfare has actually demonstrated that in that embassy, China was operating a cyber unit which was supporting the military struggle of the Serbian army.\(^\text{108}\)

This, in fact, influenced Chinese domestic politics which strengthened its nationalism, increasing the hatred against the US. This event, which culminated with the end of the Clinton’s presidency, demonstrated all the ambiguities of his Asia policy, which represented more a “short-term crisis management over long-term strategizing.” Moreover, Clinton’s “lack of attention to great-power diplomacy, meant that ‘China oscillated from being portrayed as a human rights outcast to a would-be strategic partner.’\(^\text{109}\)

After the election of the new American president, the American position did not significantly change. Pushing too hard towards the same position did not lead to positive outcomes, as attested during the first year of Bush’s presidency, when a PLA fighter jet collided with an American EP-3 surveillance aircraft. The incident culminated with the death of the Chinese pilot and the emergency landing of the American one. Instead of wondering where this thing came from, the American administration even increased its relationship with Taiwan, by selling it “submarines, destroyers, and antisubmarine aircraft.”\(^\text{110}\)

The outbreak of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, while improving US-China relations, at the same time worsened them. In fact, president Bush increased the sale of weapons to Taiwan, enraging Beijing, which, in turn, firmly reacted first of all at the legislative level. The People’s Political Consultative Congress, in fact, ratified the “Anti-secession Law” in March 2005, which authorized the use of force in the eventuality Taiwan declares independence.\(^\text{111}\)

Another important measure adopted by China in this period, specifically in 2004, referred to the “new set of strategic missions and objectives of the Chinese armed forces.” These objectives represented the fundamental principles that the PLA was asked to perform in relation to Chinese politico-military traditions as well as the external relations. The first two tasks – “the PLA should guarantee the rule of the Party” and “the PLA should safeguard national economic development and territorial sovereignty” – represented the two historic missions that the PLA had been asked to perform since the Maoist era. However, the other two – “safeguarding China’s expanding national interests” and “helping to ensure world peace” – represent an innovation in the overall Chinese strategic calculation, since “for the first time, the PLA (and therefore the PLAN) was being assigned responsibilities well beyond China and its immediate periphery,” in relation to the changing geopolitical perspectives.\(^\text{112}\)

This mainly referred to the impact of globalization on China and the need to look at all the different geopolitical perspectives. In order to illustrate this shift in the overall China’s strategic calculation, two professors from the PLA’s Dalian Naval Academy noted:


\(^{109}\) Michael J Green, *By More Than Providence*, p. 481

\(^{110}\) Ibíd., p. 489

\(^{111}\) Ibíd., p. 496

\(^{112}\) Michael McDevitt and Frederic Vellucci, “The Evolution Of The People's Liberation Army Navy”, p. 83; for an overview of the PLA Navy new historic missions, see: Cortez Cooper, "The PLA Navy's "New Historic Missions." Expanding Capabilities For A Re-Emergent Maritime Power".
In the past, the military’s *Historic Missions* emphasized the need to respond to external security threats, [and] protect the country’s territorial land, seas, and airspace, and the scope of military vision was restricted geographically and physically to three-dimensional space. [Now however,] the military’s *New Historic Missions* have been expanded to include not only defense of the nation’s survival interests but also defense of the nation’s [economic] development interests. This means not only protecting the security of territorial land, sea, and airspace; it also means protecting maritime security, space security, and electromagnetic security as well as other aspects of national security. These new requirements reflect major changes to [China’s] security situation, and have affected a major expansion of the military’s missions, tasks, and strategic field of vision.\(^{113}\)

This overall strategic approach translated into two distinct but complementary strategic designs: the implementation of the “offshore active defense,” which mainly involves the application of the Chinese traditional maritime strategy, and the “distant seas” concept, which involves the progressive expansion, and projection, of the Chinese naval capabilities due to the changed international circumstances.\(^{114}\)

All these measures clearly alimented a deeper Chinese military modernization, which now seemed more inclined to rely on its military capabilities against a possible US attack. This scenario, in fact, pushed for some additional Chinese strategic reformulation in its engagement with the US. One of the clearest transformation of the Chinese military modernization process occurred at the domestic level, where the PLA, because of the perceived heightened US military threat, managed to gain a higher political leverage inside the Communist Party’s Politburo Standing Committee, starting from the 18th Party Congress. Something that had not happened since 1997, “when the party decided to push for the professionalization of the military to reduce its political power,” even if, it should be pointed out, the PLA, since the advent of Xi Jinping, has again reduced its political power within the Chinese institutions.

On the other hand, at the doctrinal level, the new US engagement in the region pushed Beijing to adopt a new strategic perspective which has been defined as 管控分歧 (*guankan fenqi*), which has been translated as “control and manage the differences.” This new approach, in fact, starts from the assumption that “a conflict with the United States can no longer be avoided within the current framework of engagement,” therefore increasing the possibility that China “will now shift towards maintaining a true strategic balance, as if during a cold-war stalemate, for the single purpose of avoiding a full-fledged confrontation.” However, in the worst case scenario, it is quite likely that China will adjust to a conflict situation by employing “offensive

\(^{113}\) Fang Yonggang and Xu Mingshan, “Focusing on Implementing the Military’s Historic Missions and Strengthening Navy Grassroots Development, p. 84 cited in Michael McDevitt and Frederic Vellucci, "The Evolution Of The People's Liberation Army Navy", p. 84

\(^{114}\) The relationship between these two concepts is close but not interrelated, since the two strategic perspectives are still distinctly defined. The first one, the offshore active defense, represents more a joint military effort, and it clearly responds to Chinese military tradition. The second, instead, refers to a “more Navy-centric” approach, therefore, it implies the development of a sophisticated maritime potential for overseas operations. According to this distinction, “some Chinese security analysts argue that the PLAN will continue to focus on building an offshore defense but will develop capabilities for occasional long distance missions as contingencies arise.” Michael McDevitt and Frederic Vellucci, "The Evolution Of The People's Liberation Army Navy", pp. 85-86
defense doctrine,” which has characterized Chinese strategic posture during the Civil War and for the most part of the Cold War.\(^{115}\)

According to this analysis is easy to understand how the US actions in the region can exacerbate the overall military balance, bringing the international system even to a progressive military escalation, partly already symbolized by the Chinese military modernization. Moreover, by keeping in mind the fundamental historical elements of Chinese strategic culture, it becomes quite clear how specific maneuvers in the region increase Chinese historical fear of encirclement as, for example, the geopolitical significance of the so-called first island chain, “which runs southward from the Japanese home islands through the Indonesian archipelago.” This geographical feature has been interpreted as a “barricade thrown up by an America intent on containing Chinese sea power.”\(^{116}\) Interpretation that found confirmation in strategic circles, such as the idea of a C-shape encirclement (C-形包围) around China.\(^{117}\) The C-xingbaowei not only clearly states geographically the risks China would face, but it also deeply alimented a nationalist turn at the domestic level.

The fear of encirclement, since 2009, has acquired greater leverage on the Chinese strategic formulation, especially after the progressive Indian naval modernization and its military ties with the US. According to a recently published article by three researchers at the Beijing Naval Research Center, China should take a serious concern over the future Sino-Indian relations, due to the progressive transformation of the overall Indian maritime strategy, which seems to rely on a sea-based nuclear deterrent in order to pursue military power projection “军力投送.”

The three authors, after briefly describing Indian maritime transformation, also point out to the real threat posed by a possible combination of India’s ‘Look East’ strategy with Japan’s Down South Strategy “南下战略” and America’s “Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific,” which would significantly place China in a very risky position, since such a possibility would clearly resemble an encircling maneuver in East Asia, which would threaten China’s political survival.\(^{118}\)

China, therefore, responded quickly to this new geopolitical setting by closing the gap even more with Pakistan which, thanks to its role in the Indian subcontinent, became the major foreign market of Chinese arms sale. In fact, Pakistan has recently bought eight diesel-powered attack submarines. In addition to the purely military exchange, Pakistan and China signed in early April 2015 an important economic agreement;

\(^{115}\) Lanxin Xiang, "China And The 'Pivot'", pp. 114-115

\(^{116}\) Toshi Yoshihara and James R Holmes, Red Star Over The Pacific, p. 54; for an explanation of what is the difference between encirclement and deterrence, see: Nina Silove, "The Pivot Before The Pivot: U.S. Strategy To Preserve The Power Balance In Asia", p. 66

\(^{117}\) Dai Xu, C Shape Encircle, China'S Breakthrough With The Internal Concerns And External Dangers (C-形包围—内忧外患下的中国突围), 1st ed. (Beijing: Wenhui Chubanshe, 2009), pp. 1-47

the so-called CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor), which allows both countries an extended volume of trade and an even more tangible geopolitical presence of China into the Indian subcontinent.\textsuperscript{119}

On the Asia-Pacific side, China had responded, since 2008, by elaborating its Near Sea Doctrine, whose intent was to deny the use and the access of the East and South China Sea to the United States, which, under the Obama administration, started to be concerned with the drawing of the new forward defense line, especially after realizing that China had acquired the military potential to project its power as far as Guam and the Second Island Chain. The first American military plan to counter China and its so-called A2/AD (Anti-Access/Area Denial) was the Air-Sea Battle concept, which inevitably increased Chinese concerns about the American military involvement in the region.\textsuperscript{120}

These elements profoundly influenced the diplomatic relationship between the two countries. And the events in 2010 further increased the mutual mistrust. In order to avoid this confrontation, Xi Jinping tried to establish, the year after – that is, during the formulation of what would have been recognized as the “Pivot to Asia” – a “new model of great power relations,” through which China, Russia, and the US would have been considered as great powers. Xi’s “New Model,” in fact, was conceived with the clear idea of raising Chinese geopolitical profile in a time of uncertainty, in order to advance at the international level what it recognized to be its “core interests.”\textsuperscript{121}

The identification of the pivot to Asia in the new defense strategic guidance by the US in 2012 further increased the misperception between the leaders. China identified this behavior as the clear evidence of “Washington’s growing concern about the erosion of its superiority, which it described as ‘supremacy anxiety.’” Throughout 2012 and 2013, then, China tried to articulate the right strategic response. There have been several options and discussions in the official newspapers, however, most of them targeted one central component: balancing vigilance with calmness. For example, Zhu Feng, from Peking University, “built on this concept of a balanced response, encouraging Chinese leaders to respond with a light touch, ‘by coupling strength and gentleness, and using softness to conquer strength’ (gangrou bing ji, yi rou ke gang).”\textsuperscript{122} At the operational level, this type of engagement translated the year after in the establishment of the ADIZ (Air Defense Identification Zone) around East China Sea, which represents a necessary step for China to check the surrounding geopolitical environment.

These operational elements found a clear confirmation in the 2013 Defense White Paper. This document, in fact, emphasized the need to “safeguard stability and safeguard rights (weiwen yu weiquan).” In other words, the document “elevated the priority of defending the country’s expanding rights and interests to a level co-equal with the old focus on upholding stability.” This had illustrated China’s will to “tolerate more


\textsuperscript{120} Michael J Green, \textit{By More Than Providence}, p. 529

\textsuperscript{121} Michael J Green, \textit{By More Than Providence}, p. 527

\textsuperscript{122} Michael Chase and Benjamin Purser, III, "Pivot And Parry: China's Response To America's New Defense Strategy", \textit{China Brief} XII, no. 6 (2012), p. 11
risk for the sake of securing gains regarding the nation’s interests, but only to a point that does not endanger the international stability needed for economic growth.”

The further expansion of this concept, that is, the balance between active military options and the maintenance of stability, culminated in the adoption of a controlled use of force in order to achieve specific objectives. The concept of the “war control” (zhanzheng kongzhi) refers to the “employment of all elements of comprehensive national power to shape the international environment and manage conflict in a favorable direction if war does break out.” This strategic asset has been further developed in the 2013 edition of the Science of Military Strategy, which emphasized that China needs to undertake a “transition in focus from ‘defense’ to ‘control,’ from ‘combat’ to ‘momentum,’ and from ‘combat victory’ to ‘early victory.’”

Perfectly in line with Chinese overall strategic culture, the next step concerned the establishment of the coordination with nonmilitary elements of society. In order to create a higher strategic awareness, in fact, the government has advanced institutional programs that would coordinate the military effort with, for example, law enforcement agencies. One clear case is the Chinese Coast Guard, which “has played a leading role in managing tensions in the maritime domain.”

The combination of the military with the nonmilitary assets and the establishment of the Coast Guard created two important phenomena in Chinese strategic setting. One refers to the so-called junmin ronghe (i.e. the fusion of the civil with the military assets) and the other refers to the creation of the maritime militia haishang minbing (海上民兵). The maritime militia, moreover, is in itself, a representation of the junmin ronghe, simply because, as the principles of the civil-military integration explain, “the mixture of economic integration with the State and the banner of nationalism form an effective patron-client relationship that benefits both the Chinese fishing community and the Chinese Communist party.”

This has been also exemplified by the 13th Five Year Plan 2016-2020, released on March 17, 2016, which clearly stated what China’s maritime objectives should have been for the near future. It stated that China needs:

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123 Timothy Heath, “Chinese Political And Military Thinking Regarding Taiwan And The East And South China Seas”, RAND Corporation Testimony presented before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission on April 13, 2017, p. 3. The underlining assumption within these Chinese military documents is that China should balance between a clear military development and a crisis management. This is because “crises present both ‘risks and windows of opportunity to resolve contradictions and issues.’”


126 Timothy Heath, "Chinese Political And Military Thinking Regarding Taiwan And The East And South China Seas”, p. 6

127 Because of its peculiar organizational structure, the current maritime militia was labeled by Professor Andrew Erickson as “Little Blue Men”; that is, a readjustment of the term “Little Green Men”, in vogue in the military, which describes the asymmetric warfare operations Russia has conducted in Crimea, through the use of a special group of soldiers, equipped with modern military equipment. Sergio Miracola, “La Milizia Marittima e la Guerra di Popolo nel Mar Cinese del Sud” (The Maritime Militia and the People’s War in the South China Sea), Cinaforum, May 2016.

1. Build itself into a “maritime power”;\textsuperscript{129}
2. Strengthen the exploration and development of marine resources;
3. Deepen historical and legal research on maritime issues;
4. Create a highly effective system for protecting overseas interests and safeguard the legitimate overseas rights/interests of Chinese citizens and legal persons.
5. Active promote the construction of strategic strong points (\textit{zhanlue zhidian} 战略支点) for the “21\textsuperscript{st} century Maritime Silk Road”
6. Strengthen construction of reserve forces, especially the construction of maritime mobilization forces.\textsuperscript{130}

This theoretical development has originated from the early twenty-first century’s military thinking which emphasized the employment of “preemption, a broad spectrum of advanced military technologies, and integration of civilian and military forces in missions (e.g. “guerrilla warfare on the sea”) that incorporate political, economic, and legal warfare.” The emphasis, moreover, is on the use of asymmetric platforms – here considered to be \textit{shashoujian} (杀手锏), that is, trump cards – through which exploiting the enemy’s weaknesses.\textsuperscript{131}

Moreover, the creation of the maritime militia is also related to the fact that “China operates the world’s largest fleet of civilian fishing vessels and trawlers, and many of their crews and ships form a maritime militia used to advance the country’s geopolitical claims in the East China Sea and South China Sea.”\textsuperscript{132}

This explains, moreover, how China is willing to even pursue a “people’s war at sea.”\textsuperscript{133} The Chinese PLAN, in fact, is trained to “adopt the ‘attrition concept’ of wearing and tearing down the enemy vessels

\textsuperscript{129} This document is quite important because it highlights the importance that China started to attach to the maritime domain, since, historically, China has vastly dedicated its military effort to the development of land forces. Now the objective is different, with the fundamental idea that China should become a “hybrid land-and-sea power.” An authoritative document, the 2001 Science of Military Strategy, in fact, highlights that this is an “era of sea”, characterized by the application of the “Mahanian and other strategies ‘to actively develop comprehensive sea power’ and ‘expand strategic depth at sea.’” Guangqian, Peng, and Yao Youzhi, \textit{战略学 [The Science Of Military Strategy]}, cited in Andrew Erickson, "Doctrinal Sea Change, Making Real Waves: Examining The Maritime Dimension Of Strategy", in \textit{China's Evolving Military Strategy}, Joe McReynolds ed., (Washington: The Jamestown Foundation, 2016), p. 106

\textsuperscript{130} Andrew Erickson, “Doctrinal Sea Change, Making Real Waves: Examining The Maritime Dimension Of Strategy”, pp. 103-104.

\textsuperscript{131} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 108-109

\textsuperscript{132} James Kraska and Michael Monti, “The Law Of Naval Warfare And China’s Maritime Militia”, \textit{International Law Studies}, vol. 91, 2015, pp. 451-452, 456. It should be pointed out that maritime militia represents an important asset not only for the naval military operations, but also as a way of defending fishermen which would find in the militia the protective shield against the foreign competition for the control of the fish stocks. It should be specified that historically “the use of fishing vessels as an adjunct to naval forces is not new, although the scope and depth of China’s effort is unprecedented.”

from the source of resupply, and employing its overwhelmingly large number of conventional combat ships and fishing boats to ‘drown the enemy.’” This had been also attested by the 2006 White Paper which highlighted today’s PLAN’s attempt to implement a strategy – and the associated tactics – of “maritime people’s war under modern conditions.”

China’s increasing power at both military and economic level has increased its potential worldwide to the extent that from 2013 onwards, along with the strategic principle of active defense, a new concept had been theorized: “the forward edge defense.” It consists of extending “the potential culminating point of any future conflict as far from the mainland as possible.” In other words, the fundamental idea is to expand the strategic area of interest, projecting Chinese power beyond its territorial waters as far as creating an “arc-shaped strategic zone that covers the Western Pacific Ocean and Northern Indian Ocean.” In so doing, China could exploit this area as a “strategic outer line,” whose military operations occurring within would be supported by “operations with the mainland and the coastal waters as the strategic inner line.” This strategic vision is often referred to as “using the land to control the sea, and using the seas to control the oceans (yiluzhihai, yihaizhiyang 以陆制海，以海制洋.” This also reflected the 2015 Defense White Paper, in which, along with the traditional “near-seas defense” principle an additional one has been added: the “faroceans protection (yuanhaihuwei 远海护航).”

On the same pace, since 2012, China has also elaborated new methods to combine all the different military assets into a comprehensive framework, that is, the creation of joint operations. Specifically, Beijing is pursuing the establishment of a more complex form of joint operations. In order to achieve this objective “a system of systems (tixi) integrated communications network, building joint military talent and development of a joint operations doctrine are fundamental to this effort.” One of the first steps towards the


135 Thomas Kane, *Chinese Grand Strategy And Maritime Power* (London: Frank Cass, 2002), p. 76. This training parallels some actual naval operations conducted in the ‘50s and ‘60s, when the Chinese «proved adept at the art of naval ambush, concealing their torpedo craft behind reefs or fishing vessels». This legacy still exerts an important influence, since “Chinese strategists advocate the employment of more technological means of hit-and-run combat at sea.”

136 Dannis Blasko, *Chinese Strategic Thinking: People’s War In The 21St Century*, p. 6. As the author explained this specific strategic setting: “a multitude of military and civilian forces allows China to ‘flood the zone’ with activity, confusing and complicating opponents’ intelligence collection and targeting capacity. Massive deployments may also divert attention from the main effort, perhaps permitting certain movements to occur undetected. Could the harassment of the USNS Impeccable and USNS Victorious have been conceived to mask other activity happening at the same time? Indeed, these events took place as the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy’s South Sea Fleet was conducting exercise involving destroyers, submarines, and helicopters in the South China Sea.”

137 Andrew Erickson, “Doctrinal Sea Change, Making Real Waves: Examining The Maritime Dimension Of Strategy”, p. 111. It is important to highlight that while the first part of this strategic vision (using the land to control the sea), “representing a continental approach to maritime security,” has witnessed ample consideration, the second part, instead, “is newer in its emphasis,” emphasizing, therefore, how Xi Jinping has combined the traditional strategic principles with the new military assets. In relation to the newer elements, the 2013 edition of the Science of Military Strategy discusses the possible eight strategic missions that the PLAN should perform: 1) Participate in large scale operations in the main strategic axis of operations. 2) Contain and resist sea-borne invasions. 3) Protect island sovereignty and maritime rights and interests. 4) Protect maritime transportation security. 5) Engage in protecting overseas interests and the rights/interests of Chinese nationals. 6) Engage in carrying out nuclear deterrence and counterattack. 7) Coordinate with the military struggle on land. 8) Protecting the security of international sea space.” Xiaosong, Shou. *战略学 [The Science Of Military Strategy]*, pp. 209-212, in Andrew Erickson, “Doctrinal Sea Change, Making Real Waves: Examining The Maritime Dimension Of Strategy”, pp. 112-115
achievement of this objective refers to the creation of “an integrated C4ISR architecture with ‘system of systems’ operations capability (tixi zuozhan nengli) based on modern information systems [which] will act as the foundation of the PLA’s joint operations capabilities.”

These measures, besides being the clear reactions to US behavior in the region, are also intimately intertwined with the overall political objective of the national revival: the so-called “China Dream,” first inaugurated by Xi Jinping. This aspect is relevant, because Chinese geostrategic agenda is, at the present, more concerned with the protection of “economic-related vulnerabilities abroad upon which its growth depends, such as vital sea lines of communication, access to markets, and natural resources.” Moreover, another delicate issue in the overall US-China relations concerns Taiwan. The future unification with the island as well as the contested islands are part of the China Dream logic. In fact, in 2014, a Chinese retired General has published a vast work on Island Warfare, illustrating the major elements characterizing this type of conflict and what type of approach China should have if such a situation erupts. These measures, therefore, clearly explain how China is trying to avoid that American forces could handicap Chinese development process.

In 2014, China has further developed its military doctrines in order to effectively respond to possible threats to its own political and strategic development. Liu Shenyang, for example, advocated that the centrality of China’s military struggle should focus on “‘target-centric warfare’ as the practice of war control in conflict.” This has to do with the fact that in war it is fundamental to “achieve operational objectives as quickly as possible,” “sabotage links and nodes,” and “paralyze the enemy’s entire command system.”

The continuous balancing options offered by Washington in this period – culminating in the recent May 2015 incident in which a U.S. P8-A Poseidon surveillance aircraft received alert warnings by the Chinese navy, because of its alleged penetration into the Chinese ADIZ (Air Defense Identification Zone) – have contributed to make China more assertive and, apparently, more expansion-seeker, as attested by the latest China’s Military Strategy White Paper. Even if we can find significant references to the growing Chinese global power and the associated necessity to build adequate PLA capabilities in order to cope with the globalized environment,

China’s latest statement of military strategy is full of the doublespeak that whitewashes new and assertive content through self-contradictory statements, ambiguous phrases and benign framing devices even as it describes a brave new PLA for a brave new world. Chinese doublespeak, especially on military matters, is hardly new. But the consequence of it is to reinforce fissures in Asia, driving a wedge between

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139 Timothy Heath, "Chinese Political And Military Thinking Regarding Taiwan And The East And South China Seas", p. 3
141 Timothy Heath, "Chinese Political And Military Thinking Regarding Taiwan And The East And South China Seas", p. 5
those who find it inconvenient to acknowledge Chinese assertiveness and those who believe they may one day be on the receiving end of Chinese ambitions.\textsuperscript{143}

However, one central point seems to have emerged from the White Paper document: the centrality of Taiwan, which still reminds policy-makers and Chinese experts of the regional priority for the short-term perspective. “Despite all its talk of ‘[securing] China’s overseas interests’ and ‘[safeguarding] its national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests,’ the PLA’s overarching strategic priority remains Taiwan. The Taiwan Strait remains the primary war-fighting scenario for the PLA.”\textsuperscript{144}

\textit{Chinese maritime capabilities}

Chinese economic and strategic developments “suggest that China will soon embark on a more ambitious maritime policy, beginning with the construction of a power-projection navy centered on an aircraft carrier.”\textsuperscript{145} In the meantime, China, while refurbishing “the former Ukrainian hybrid aircraft carrier Varyag,” has developed “one ocean-going Type 071 Yuzhao-class LPD (landing platform dock) that can carry up to four landing craft or air cushion vehicles (ACVs).” This allows China to conduct “sustained operations in the open ocean, with proper logistics support.” China could, therefore, embark on any “maritime contingency, ranging from humanitarian assistance missions to a non-combatant evacuation (NEO).”\textsuperscript{146}

Moreover, since 1992 China has started to focus on its submarine forces to a point in which China seriously developed a “submarine-centric navy,”\textsuperscript{147} making China “the only naval power in the world that has amassed undersea power prodigiously in both the conventional and nuclear domains.”\textsuperscript{148}

In fact, it acquired twelve Kilo-class diesel submarines from Russia, while also building “three new classes of advanced diesel-electric boats (the Kilo, the Song, and the Yuan).”\textsuperscript{149} For what concerns the Song-class, China has “produced approximately twelve diesel submarines.” These types of submarines are equipped with anti-ship cruise missiles. According to their technical elements these submarines do not carry nuclear warheads; condition that makes them acoustically quiet.\textsuperscript{150} This characteristic has increased the

submarine military and strategic potential against possible US military operations in the Western Pacific Ocean. The technical modernization process has also caught states by surprise when, in 2004, China created the *Yuan*-class submarine, a “second-generation nuclear attack boats and fleet ballistic-missile submarines.” The major surprise behind the *Yuan*-class is that it is believed to possess air-independent-propulsion (AIP) system “that significantly extends their capacity to operate underway.”

Among the overall number of submarine classes, China has introduced two classes of second-generation nuclear power, such as the *Jin* SSBN and the *Shang* SSNs. “This is unrivaled anywhere.” For what concerns the missile potential, most of the Chinese capabilities are nuclear-powered, such as: the ASCMs (Anti-ship cruise missile) and SSGNs (guided-missile attack submarine). One additional element which demonstrates Chinese naval development is the introduction of the ballistic and cruise missile for anti-navy operations, such as the new DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile “of which China had deployed small numbers beginning in 2010.” The DF-21D is particular important, because it provides China with innovative capabilities. In fact, because of its high technology, the DF-21D has been defined the “carrier killer – which flies at hypersonic speeds (Mach 5) and has a range of 1,500 kilometers.”

China has also tried to develop specific naval capabilities which could exploit the natural advantages of its geography. This, in turn, required the combination of “land-based, mobile ICBMs, the DF-31s, and the sea-based component.” These capabilities constitute the essential military posture in order to make these military elements survive in potential first-strike attacks. Moreover, the DF-31 mobility “will allow the PLA to exploit China’s geographic depth.” Moreover, in 2016, China has also demonstrated to have mastered the technology for the creation of more sophisticated ICBMs, such as the new DF-41, which highly increased the attack range, attested around a 15,000 km hit capability, therefore surpassing the American LGM-30 Minuteman III, which has an attack capability of around 13,000km.

When it comes to surface warships, China, since 2004, has developed an extensive destroyer force, such as Type 051C and Type 052C. Both of these classes are equipped with “phase array radars and digital combat systems.” The Type 052Cs, moreover, “show some stealth characteristics; that is, its hull and superstructure have been shaped to reduce radar cross-section.” Along these classes, China also relies on the Sovremenny-class destroyers which China ordered from Russia. These types of destroyers are equipped with ASCMs.

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151 Robert S. Ross, "China's Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, And The U.S. Response", p. 58
152 Toshi Yoshihara and James R Holmes, *Red Star Over The Pacific*, p. 64
154 Toshi Yoshihara and James R Holmes, *Red Star Over The Pacific*, p. 199
155 Andrew S. Erickson, "Rising Tide, Dispersing Waves: Opportunities And Challenges For Chinese Seapower Development", p. 379, 384
157 Toshi Yoshihara and James R Holmes, *Red Star Over The Pacific*, p. 137
159 Carl Otis Schuster, "China. Its Maritime Traditions And Navy Today", p. 60
China, moreover, has also developed an extensive mine-warfare capability. “These ‘weapons that wait’ are the quintessential naval asymmetric threat, pitting adversaries’ strengths against what they perceive as naval and maritime weaknesses. Indeed, sea mines are key to regional navies’ anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) and sea-control strategies and operations.”

Finally, another important tactical asset that characterizes Chinese maritime military development has been the commissioning of the new aircraft carrier. At the present, China possesses only one, the Liaoning, which had been bought from the Ukrainian government in the ‘90s. Because of its very limited abilities, the current aircraft carrier has been mainly used for small patrol operations, or jet fighter training at sea, as attested by the test flights of the J-15 during the period 2015-2017.

However, the new aircraft carrier, the Type 001A, it seems already clear, will not be built on the basis of the new highly technological aircraft generation. In fact, it already resembles the already possessed Liaoning aircraft, which, according to its technical elements would not allow for long distant military operations. Specifically, the new aircraft carrier would be built around the STOBAR system (short takeoff but arrested recovery). This system would allow the aircrafts to take off through the so-called ski-jump ramp, which represents a platform of 12 degrees slope, equipped with metallic cables necessary for the completion of the landing process. The STOBAR is much easier to build and maintain than other more important assets, like the CATOBAR, which is installed, for example, into the American aircraft carriers.

Conclusions

“As the rulers of the Han Dynasty discovered, China’s maritime capabilities are strongest when its landward trade and security are robust as well.” The same condition could also apply today. Chinese naval modernization has influenced strategic considerations in the region for sure, but it has also responded to the US strategic measures adopted in the region. The US has even moved one step forward by advocating the Air-Sea doctrine, which, however, still requires a more detailed configuration. One major problem, however, besides the typical military escalation characterizing the Thucydidean Trap, is the progressive “trust deficit” which represents the origin of any strategic confrontation potentially leading to war. Increasing American maritime military operations in the area, in fact, increase the overall Chinese strategic anxiety. In 2009, for example when the incident against the USNS Impeccable occurred, “PLA Navy compared the US

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163 Thomas M Kane, Chinese Grand Strategy And Maritime Power, p. 109
presence in those waters to a ‘man with a criminal record wandering just outside the gate of a family house.’”

Therefore, the US engagement, thorough the so-called Pivot to Asia, does not seem to play a relevant role in establishing the course for a peaceful development of the region. Moreover, its overall strategic engagement does not fully recognize the intimate historical nature of Chinese strategy both at sea and on land. Misinterpretation that has led to a wrong strategic asset. The Cold War mentality, in fact, seems to still exert some leverage on the US strategic calculation, when in reality China cannot be contained like the USSR, simply for two major reasons: on one hand, China’s politico-economic profile put it on a different political stage, creating, in turn, a profound contradiction; the US, “the only indispensable superpower, is also a super-indebted power, and its biggest external creditor happens to be its presumed chief strategic rival. Is it logical … to encircle one’s own banker militarily?”

The second reason, connected to the previous one, refers to the obvious “China’s existing integration in the global system,” which inevitably classifies China as a different state-actor with respect to the then Soviet Union.

In this delicate political perspective, it is important to recognize, instead, the real nature of Chinese maritime strategy which resembles the strategic legacy of the past, at least for now. Some additional tactical considerations have been included in the overall strategic equation, such as building a blue water navy for open seas operations. However, at the present, this tactical capability did not extend beyond the HA/DR operations, which do not require a clear military engagement. After all, it should be remembered what the major function of the PLA still is: the protection of the Party. In 2004, in fact, Hu Jintao “announced a new set of strategic missions” for the PLA and, among those, the guarantee of the Party’s rule stood clearly as the central one.

Moreover, since ground warfighting doctrines still exert a deep influence on the other military bodies, it is undeniable that China’s doctrine of “fighting and winning local wars under high-technology conditions” does not allow the navy, at the present, to codify a global strategic perspective. For example, one of the clearest commitment of China to the legacy of Mao’s doctrine is the “formation of small, mobile ‘Fist’ or ‘Rapid Reaction Units’ (RRU).” Therefore, “China’s emerging maritime strategy will, in all likelihood, draw its inspiration from Mahan and combine it with China’s tradition of land warfare.”

Moreover, the definition of strategy, in this case, helps to understand the issue: strategy can be defined as the “instrumental link between military means and political ends.” Hence, part of the explanations resides with the amount and nature of capabilities China is developing. The overreliance on

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166 Lanxin Xiang, "China And The ‘Pivot’", p. 119
171 John Stone, *Military Strategy*, p. 4
submarine warfare and the clear ability of the navy to conduct “dispersed attacks on the exterior lines” by employing “orthodox and unorthodox methods and weaponry into its defensive scheme” are the clearest evidences of the strategic continuity that links Mao’s active defense with today’s understanding of China’s naval strategy. Continuity expressed by the clear preference to “‘lure the enemy in deep,’ near or within the first island chain, before dealing out decisive blows using operational concepts from Mao’s active-defense doctrine.”

172 Toshi Yoshihara and James R Holmes, *Red Star Over The Pacific*, p. 85-86
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