



14/09/2026

China's Naval Strategy and Sea Power

Naval Strategic Thinking

Chinese naval strategists have assimilated the idea that a global maritime power requires "dominant naval power."¹ Their aspiration to become a maritime power has transformed their naval strategic vision, linking China's future to maritime power.² This naval strategic renewal has been grounded in the theories of Anglo-Saxon scholars A. Mahan and J. Corbett on sea dominance and maritime control.

Mahan's vision of "sea power" (the strategic use of the sea by a "maritime power") has taken firm root, as has Corbett's link between "sea dominance" and control of maritime communications. The intellectual incorporation of Mahan and Corbett must be contextualized within the rise to power of Deng Xiaoping.³

The State Council's publication "China's National Security in the New Era" (May 2025) reflects a fundamental reevaluation of China's maritime approach, where maritime affairs acquire strategic priority, moving away from a tactical stance and toward global governance.⁴ Similarly, other recent documents illustrate the maritime question as a key factor in Chinese policy and maritime dominance as a strategic defensive or buffer framework.

Evolution of China's Maritime Strategy

The "coastal defense" strategy, in place for decades, was transformed in the 1980s by Admiral Liu Huaqing into a "proactive, offensive, and offshore" defense strategy.⁵ Together with Admiral Wu Shengli, he redefined the role of the Navy, introducing operational concepts such as "defense on the high seas," "protection on the high seas,"

¹ SWAINE, Michael. "The PLA Navy's Strategic Transformation to the "Far Seas": How Far, How Threatening, and What's to be Done?". (07.05.19). Available in: <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2019/05/the-pla-navys-strategic-transformation-to-the-far-seas-how-far-how-threatening-and-whats-to-be-done>

² CHAWLA, Anil. "Maritime Power and China's Grand Strategy". 2025 Routledge. Consulted: 22.02.26. <https://www.routledge.com/Maritime-Power-and-Chinas-Grand-Strategy/Chawla/p/book/9781032805153>

³ GUNARATNA, Rohan & AMARASINGHE, Punsara. "From Mahan to Corbett: An Inquiry into the Development of Chinese Naval Strategy in the Indian Ocean Region". (08.05.24). Available in: <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3768380/from-mahan-to-corbett-an-inquiry-into-the-development-of-chinese-naval-strategy/>

⁴ GUO, Ziya. CSIS. What China's 2025 White Paper Says About Its Maritime Strategy. 19.08.25. Available in: <https://www.csis.org/blogs/new-perspectives-asia/what-chinas-2025-white-paper-says-about-its-maritime-strategy>

⁵ COLE, Bernard. "The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy" (26.03.24). Available in: <https://strategicspace.nbr.org/the-evolution-of-chinas-naval-strategy/>

and "active defense."⁶

The coastal emphasis formally shifted in 2004. President Hu Jintao promoted "New Historical Missions" in blue waters, introducing the Bi-Oceanic Strategy in 2005.

The shift "from land to sea" modified the strategic direction of its Navy. Beijing recognized the vital need for a new strategy that integrated control of maritime lines of communication (MLCs) and maritime power projection.

In 2015, China unveiled its current strategy, "Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection,"⁷ where the protection of MLCs and the execution of long-range missions become safeguards for its global interests.

The naval theories of Mahan and Corbett have contributed to reshape its maritime strategy, driving the transition from continental defense to the assertion of maritime territories.⁸ This "balance on the high seas" strategy aims to control the maritime-territorial space integrated into the "nine-dash line" (South China Sea – SCS), claim islands in the East China Sea (ECS), recover Taiwan and extend its regional influence.

Near Seas Defense

It aims to defend territorial sovereignty and maritime rights in the Yellow Sea (YS), the East China Sea (ECS) and the South China Sea (SCS) within the First Island Chain (1st. Island.Chain)⁹, dominating this maritime space. Controlling territories (Taiwan, Senkaku Islands, Paracel, Spratly Islands...) ¹⁰ located in these seas is key to this strategy.¹¹ The purpose is twofold: to deter external interventions in this maritime perimeter and to ensure access to "blue waters" for its Navy. To this end, China has deployed tactical Anti-

⁶ "Defense on the high seas" covers the waters within the first island chain, with the aspiration of extending to the second chain. On the other hand, "protection on the high seas" expands missions to global waters.

⁷ RICE, Jennifer; ROBB, Erik. "China Maritime Report No. 13: The Origins of "Near Seas Defense and Far Seas Protection". U.S Naval War College (02.21). Available in: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/13/>

⁸ GUNARATNA, Rohan & AMARASINGHE, Punsara. *Ibidem*

⁹ USHIROGATA, Keitaro. "Global Maritime Military Strategy, 1980–2023 (pp.155-169)". (Mar.2025) Consulted: 18.03.26

¹⁰ NAVAL ASSOCIATION OF CANADA. "Understanding China's Maritime Power". (09.21). Available in: <https://www.navalassoc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/China-NAC-Report-2021..pdf>

¹¹ SALISBURY, Emma. "China's PLAN: Maritime dominion beyond the South China Sea". Counsel-on-Strategy. (20.05.24). Available in: <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/research/chinas-plan-maritime-dominion-beyond-the-south-china-sea/>

Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities,^{12,13} especially in the MSC, complemented by a "gray zone" strategy.

Maritime Dominance in the SCS

China's maritime strategy is a combination of history, nationalism, and strategic calculation. China continues to emphasize its alleged "historical rights" over vast areas of the SCS, based on its naval utilization.¹⁴

The demarcation known as the "nine-dash line" (九段线), a symbol of Taiwan's maritime claims, has evolved (internally) since 2023 to the "ten-dash line"¹⁵ (including Taiwan). It symbolizes the strategic importance of maritime control and embodies the goal of "national revitalization," a key element of President Xi Jinping's political strategy.

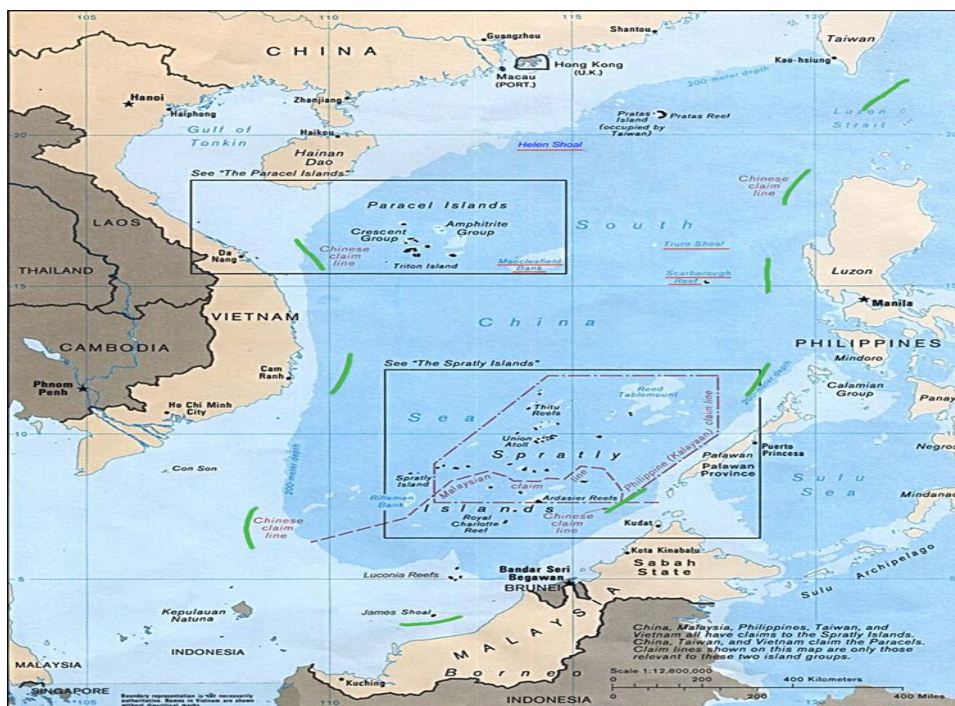


Figure 1. China's Nine Dash Line. Source: Ikeshima.2013

¹² MAHNKEN, Thomas. "A Maritime Strategy to Deal with China". US Naval Institute. (02.22) Vol. 148/2/1,428.

Available in: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2022/february/maritime-strategy-deal-china>

¹³ China has developed the "Great Underwater Wall", a network of surface/underwater sensors for detecting and tracking naval targets, reinforcing its maritime presence in the MCM and near Guam.

¹⁴ AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, Federico. "Geopolítica naval de la rivalidad chino-norteamericana (reedición)". Analysis Paper IEEE 52/2022. Available in:

https://www.iee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2022/DIEEEA52_2022_FEDAZN_Geopolitica.pdf

¹⁵ ROMANIUK, S; FABE, A; CSICSMANN, L; SONG, J. "China's Strategic Ambitions, Assertiveness and Escalation in the South China Sea – Analysis". (24.11.25). Available in: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/24112025-chinas-strategic-ambitions-assertiveness-and-escalation-in-the-south-china-sea-analysis>

To achieve effective control of the SCS and reinforce its maritime claims, alongside the Navy, Chinese strategists have deployed other mechanisms.

Coast Guard (CCG)

Under the Central Military Commission (CMC), it carries out maritime security missions, increasingly restricting access to claimed territories and escorting activities on disputed islands. It uses corvettes and catamarans.¹⁶

Maritime Militia (CMM)

A crucial naval asset for hybrid/gray zone strategy¹⁷ and reinforcement of the A2/AD architecture. Composed of maritime workers, it carries out “patrol, surveillance, search and rescue” missions.¹⁸ Trained to support naval operations in war, they protect Chinese fishing vessels in disputed waters and play a key role in the occupation of conflict zones.¹⁹ Subject to the administrative authority of Hainan, it can be deployed to control maritime territory by occupying “gray” spaces, asserting its de facto sovereignty over them. China has been cautious in using its Navy in hybrid operations, leveraging these asymmetric assets against neighboring naval forces. The ambiguous nature of the SCS allows for plausible deniability while reinforcing its maritime claims.²⁰

Construction of artificial islands. Militarization of reefs (the “gray” zone)

¹⁶ A 2021 Coast Guard Act granted the CCG the power to use force in “maritime zones under Chinese jurisdiction.”

¹⁷ MAHNKEN, Thomas. *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ POPESCU, A. I. C. “The ‘China’s dream’ - the grand strategy of transforming China into a global Maritime power”. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1) 2024. Available in: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2414873>

¹⁹ Beijing has subsidized the introduction of steel hulls. In the last decade, the “Spratly Backbone” fleet (approximately 235 vessels) and the “Civil Mobility Management Unit” (Paracel Islands) have been built.

²⁰ RAND National Security Research Division. “Understanding and Countering China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations”. (2024). Consulted: 24.04.26 https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2954-1.html

The construction of artificial islands and advanced naval installations in the SCS enhances its surveillance, logistics, and power projection capabilities.²¹ The Paracel (Xisha in Chinese) and Spratly (Nansha in Chinese) archipelagos provide significant influence; their artificial islands and reefs constitute a new regional security architecture²², hosting airstrips, radars, and missile systems.

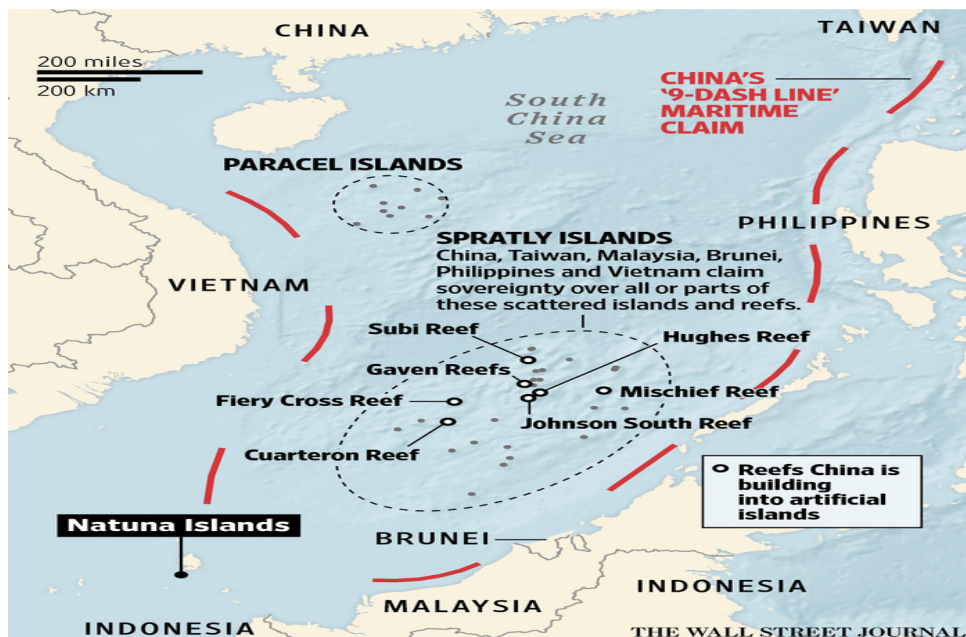


Figure 2. Artificial Islands (Spratly Islands). Source: Wall Street Journal

The city of Sansha (Woody Island/Yongxing Island in Chinese) in the Paracel archipelago, as the civil/military administrative authority, provides a permanent framework for control, consolidating Chinese sovereignty over the disputed areas. It administers the Paracel, Spratly, and Zhongsha Islands (Macclesfield Bank).

²¹ TheWarRoom. "Naval Supremacy Showdown: US Navy vs China in 2025". (14.03.26). Available in: <https://www.inthewarroom.com/naval-supremacy-showdown-us-navy-vs-china-in-2025/>

²² The artificial islands of Fiery Cross, Subi, or the Mischief reefs have become fully operational military nodes in the A2/AD architecture.

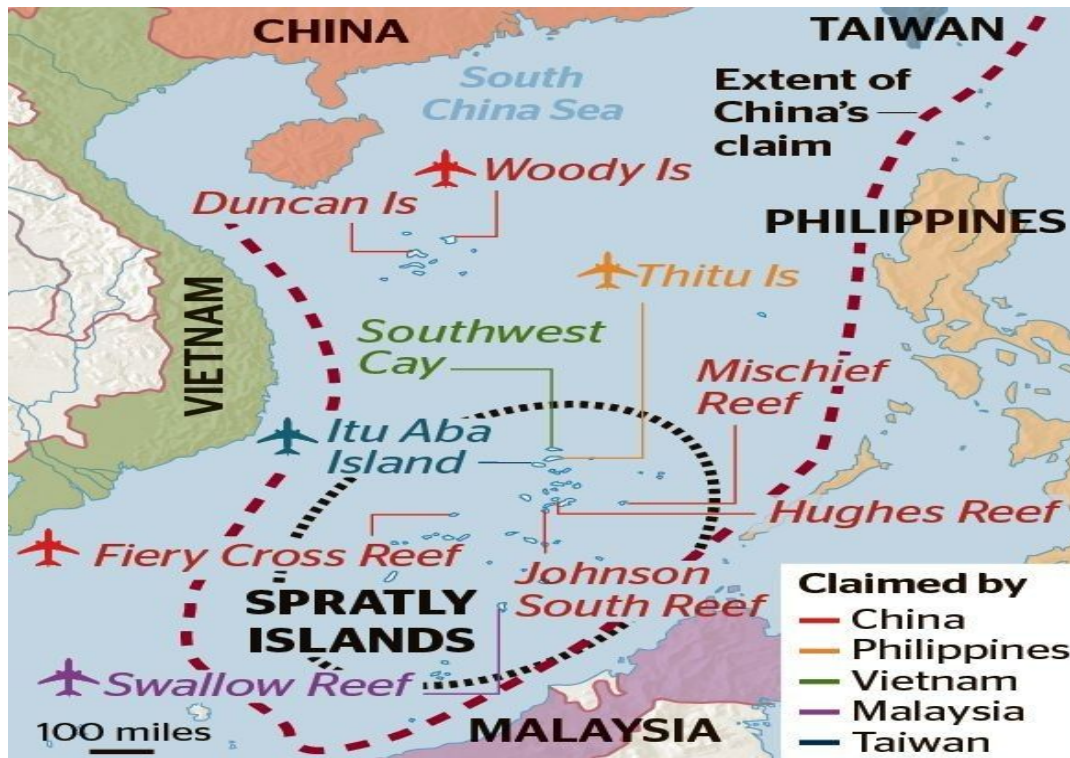


Figure 3. Military bases in the South China Sea. Source. Artofit.org

Maritime Diplomacy and Regulations

China selectively uses the law, accepting, rejecting, or reinterpreting international rulings to reinforce its claims. Furthermore, bilateral trade agreements and investment projects are used as diplomatic tools to mitigate opposition from Southeast Asian countries (ASEAN), which seek to establish stable regional norms (ASEAN-China Code of Conduct).²³

Normalizing its growing presence in the SCS is part of its maritime strategy, shaping regional governance.²⁴

According to Chinese experts such as Wu Shicun²⁵ and Zheng Zhihua, instability in the SCS is primarily caused by the Philippines and the US ignoring its claims, circumventing Chinese territorial sovereignty through maritime demarcations. International norms must

²³ ROMANIUK, S; FABE, A; CSICSMANN, L; SONG, J. *Op.cit*

²⁴ Renaming maritime geographic spaces has become a tool for China to reinforce the narrative of historical legitimacy and control.

²⁵ The construction of artificial islands in the Spratly Islands is a countermeasure to the arbitration initiated by the Philippines that violates the commitment to "refrain from occupying uninhabited islands and reefs" (Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea).

be considered, but regional traditions and consensus²⁶ must also be respected —a view perceived by its neighbors as coercive diplomacy.

Therefore, the Chinese narrative emphasizes a defensive strategic approach to protect its sovereignty and presence in the Indo-Pacific, since the United States, by encroaching on its maritime security perimeter (SCS), threatens its MLCs.²⁷

Although China can retake maritime territories occupied by other countries by force, according to Hu Bo, it has opted for an attitude of "shelving disputes" and strategic patience, avoiding military escalations.²⁸

The East China Sea (ECS) is another critical scenario, marked by the overlapping of exclusive economic zones (EEZs) and the dispute with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands (in Chinese), where the presence of the Chinese Coastguard (CCG) has recently intensified. The presence of US allies and the proximity of military bases hinder Chinese maritime projection, generating a sense of strategic "cornering."²⁹

Far Seas Protection

The incorporation of this strategic element addresses the problem of controlling maritime lines of communication (MLCs), aligning with the objective of projecting power and positioning the Navy as a naval force with global reach.³⁰

Currently, "oceanic" operations complement those in near seas. However, the deployment of naval forces in "blue waters" aims to extend the "strategic edge," expanding the defensive perimeter in its near seas.

The "*corbettian*" vision is illustrated by the strategic use of MLCs, facilitating a greater presence in the Indian Ocean and consolidating its maritime-continental influence in the

²⁶ South China Sea Strategic Situation Probing Initiative (SCSPI). "Chinese Experts on the Situation of the South China Sea". (05.11.24). Available in <https://www.scspi.org/en/dtfx/chinese-experts-situation-south-china-sea>

²⁷ Chinese strategic thinking holds that making concessions would weaken its influence over maritime norms and governance.

²⁸ HU, Bo. "Chinese Maritime Power in the 21st Century Strategic Planning, Policy and Predictions". Published: 01.04.2021 Editorial Routledge. Consulted: 22.03.26 <https://www.routledge.com/Chinese-Maritime-Power-in-the-21st-Century-Strategic-Planning-Policy-and-Predictions/Bo/p/book/9780367777579>

²⁹ The Navy has increased operations crossing the Ryukyu Islands into the Pacific or SCS, or by sending units into the Sea of Japan through the Tsushima Strait.

³⁰ Beijing uses the term "two oceans region" to refer to the Indo-Pacific area formed by the Indian and Western Pacific Oceans.

4th and 5th island chains.³¹

The “Island Chain” strategy



Figure 4. Island Chain Strategy. Source: ChannelnewsAsia

The transformation of the Navy into a “blue water” naval force is not solely the result of the strategic imperative to protect key maritime routes for its economy.

This “*mahanian*” strategy³² reinforces Xi Jinping’s vision of a great maritime power: building a Navy to secure its own trade and, in war, to restrict the trade of its rival, expanding its maritime control. The utmost goal of naval warfare is sea dominance, to control maritime communications.³³

Under its current leadership, China has shaped its strategy to transform itself into a global maritime power, projecting the necessary maritime power for the goal of “national revitalization.”³⁴

Indeed, forward defense within the First Island Chain and influence beyond fit

³¹ The fourth and fifth island chains cover areas of the Indian Ocean (Sri Lanka or East Africa) underscoring the ambition to define the maritime domain.

³² MILLER, Lydia. “China’s Mahanian Naval Strategy – And Why America Needs One Too”. (27.03.25). Available in: <https://centerformaritimestrategy.org/publications/chinas-mahanian-naval-strategy-and-why-america-needs-one-too/>

³³ CORBETT, Julian S. “Some Principles of Maritime Strategy”. 1911. Ed. Pantianos Classics. Consulted: 20.02.26

³⁴ HU, Bo. *Op.cit*

symbiotically into its maritime strategy. Regional dominance would free the Navy from maritime constraints, allowing it to assume a more prominent global role.

An initially limited presence beyond the First Island Chain would help focus conflicts on China's periphery, deterring or slowing external intervention (forward defense), while simultaneously deploying forces in subsequent island chains to establish political and logistical bases (protection on the high seas). It should be noted that the boundaries of each island chain are not fixed. High seas protection zones could form the forward operating front if China achieves its objectives in the nearby seas, establishing an independent maritime command (Hainan, Taiwan) of a combined fleet.

China, considering the control of key strategic maritime points in its adjacent seas³⁵ as the main impediment to its naval rise, argues that dominating this crucial region and its access routes (the Sunda, Lombok, or Malacca Straits) would allow the Navy to operate inland routes between the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Building Global Maritime Power

Maritime power is defended both by one's own naval capabilities and by preventing the naval superiority of competitors.³⁶

China has shaped its strategy to transform itself into a global maritime power whose naval approach extends beyond the strictly military.³⁷ It operates one of the world's largest shipping fleets and the largest deep-sea fishing fleet, which, together with its global network of seaports, demonstrates the effective use of its naval capabilities. Therefore, it is expanding its presence, both in ports through shipping companies and logistics firms (some with military involvement) and in maritime straits through its Navy, aware that achieving such maritime power primarily requires controlling key maritime geographical features.

³⁵ KODA, Yoji (VADM). "China's Blue Water Navy Strategy and its Implications". *China's Bluewater Navy Series*. (03.17). Available in: <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/chinas-blue-water-navy-strategy-and-its-implications>

³⁶ POPESCU, A. I. C. *Op.cit.*

³⁷ FEITH, Douglas. Hudson Institute. "China's Maritime Strategic Challenge". (18.10.19). Available in: <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/china-s-maritime-strategic-challenge>

Modernization of the Navy

The Chinese Navy currently constitutes the world's largest fleet by number (exceeding 1,000 ships), including more than 370 main combat ships and submarines. The overall strategic objective is to have a fully operational "blue water" fleet by 2050.

The following table summarizes the estimated composition of the main fleet in 2025:

Category	China	USA
Aircraft Carriers	3	11
Cruisers	0	18
Destroyers	58	78
Frigates	47	1
Corbettes	55	33
Submarines (total)	73	71
Amphibious Assets	107	58
Support/Logistics Ships	468	81
Others	225	120
Total. Naval Assets	1036	471

Table 1. China/US Fleet Comparison. Source: GlobalMilitary.net, CMPR, CSIS

Despite these figures, some analysts argue that China's numerical advantages are outweighed by the US Navy's greater tonnage and displacement capacity, making it advantageous for the US as long as aircraft carriers and naval air power remain decisive. However, the Chinese Navy could surpass the firepower of the US Navy by 2027 (greater total number of vertical launch system cells).

It is worth noting that approximately 70% of the Chinese warship fleet mentioned above was launched after 2010 (compared to only about 25% of the US Navy).³⁸

³⁸ CSIS. "Unpacking China's Naval Buildup". (05.06.24). Available in: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/unpacking-chinas->

Although the United States has an advantage in destroyer-cruisers, China has doubled its destroyer fleet in recent years, excelling in frigates and corvettes. A significant portion of naval construction for the Chinese Navy has focused on these types of naval assets for the CCG with the aim of maritime dominance in the Near Seas.³⁹

Naval expansion to reinforce its strategic approach of global projection is diverse, focusing on the launching of destroyers, multipurpose vessels, aircraft carriers, amphibious ships, and submarines.

They advocate for a force of up to six aircraft carriers by the 2030s, with the next one under construction being nuclear-powered. The objective is to support global expeditionary operations alongside other multi-mission platforms (amphibious ships, etc.) for this purpose. Investment in amphibious landing and resupply ships reflects a clear expeditionary commitment.

The strategic component of regional dominance, and therefore the deployment of A2/AD, has required that submarine force and anti-submarine warfare have been a priority in naval modernization, accelerating the transition from diesel-electric submarines to a nuclear fleet.⁴⁰ Although US submarines continue to dominate, Chinese submarine technology is rapidly improving.

Furthermore, the development of early warning aircraft (KJ-600, similar to the American E-2C/D Hawkeye)⁴¹ for aircraft carriers and the improvement of anti-submarine helicopters are planned.

The modernization of the Navy has also affected its human and organizational components, shifting from a Fleet structure to a Theater Command structure (proposing approaches to the CMC that determine strategy), with responsibility for nearby seas. Additionally, Chinese leaders perceive weaknesses in human capital⁴² (recruitment and training additional crews in new technologies, and training officers and non-commissioned officers in combat).

naval-buildup

³⁹ IRIA. "China's Ambitions at Sea and Naval Modernization". (30.06.24). Available in: <https://www.ir-ia.com/Defense-Review/China-s-Ambitions-at-Sea-and-Naval-Modernization.pdf>

⁴⁰ The development of nuclear ballistic missile submarines is an important step as a maritime power.

⁴¹ BALESTRIERI, Steve. "China's Navy is on a quest to built 6 Aircraft Carriers". (27.02.26). Available in: <https://nationalsecurityjournal.org/chinas-navy-is-on-a-quest-to-built-6-aircraft-carriers/>

⁴² ERICKSON, Andrew. "The People of China people of China's Navy and Other Maritime Forces". *U.S. Naval War College*. (05.25). Available in: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cmsi-maritime-reports/47/>

Merchant Fleet

The Chinese merchant fleet (more than 172,000 ships) complements its maritime power projection. Its strategic effectiveness stems from the use of certain merchant ships (container ships or roll-on/roll-off vessels) as naval support platforms in combat situations.⁴³⁴⁴

Shipbuilding Industry

China dominates global shipbuilding, consolidating a powerful industry. The merger of the two major state-owned corporations (CSSC and CSIC) in 2025⁴⁵ has forged the world's largest shipbuilding company, with over 530 vessels on order, exceeding 55% of global capacity. The main shipyards in Bohai, Jiangnan, Hudong, and Wuchang combine military and commercial shipbuilding under the principle of "military-civilian fusion."⁴⁶ The modernization of naval infrastructure includes the expansion of naval bases such as Sanya-Yulin (Hainan) and Yuchi (Shandong), with docks and dry docks capable of accommodating multiple aircraft carriers and escort vessels⁴⁷, providing a strategic advantage in the event of a prolonged naval conflict; they can repair or build ships more efficiently than their rivals.

Strategic Port Infrastructure

Although it currently only has the naval base in Djibouti, China recently requested to expand its facilities at the Ream Naval Base (Cambodia), where currently has partial access. In 2023⁴⁸, US Naval Intelligence suspected that China wanted to promote "dual"

⁴³ COLE, Bernard. *Op.cit*

⁴⁴ Since 2015, the newly built merchant fleet (container ships, bulk carriers, roll-on/roll-off cargo ships, etc.) must meet specific "national defense" requirements.

⁴⁵ <https://www.mundomaritimo.cl/noticias/china-consolida-el-mayor-astillero-del-mundo-en-medio-de-rivalidad-con-estados-unidos> (16.08.25)

⁴⁶ CSIS. "China Dominates the Shipbuilding Industry". (25.03.25) Available in: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-dominates-shipbuilding-industry>

⁴⁷ Chinese shipyards have demonstrated the ability to launch large-tonnage vessels with production cycles of 2-3 years for destroyers and frigates, and less than 5 years for aircraft carriers.

⁴⁸ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/04/26/chinese-military-base-uae/> (26.04.23)

logistics facilities in the Persian Gulf, either in the UAE (Khalifa)⁴⁹ or in Oman (Salalah).⁵⁰

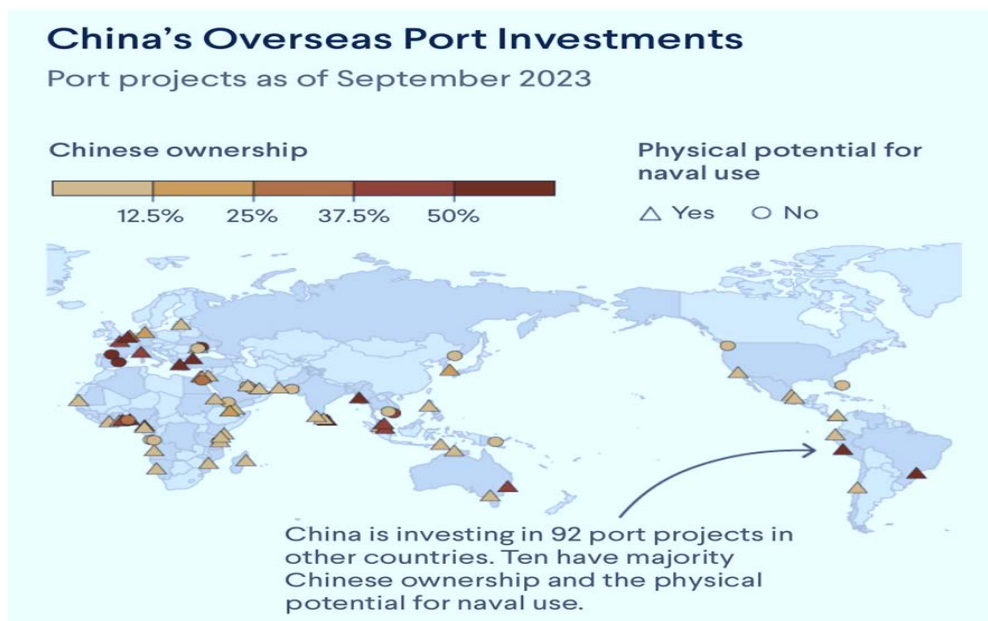


Figure 5. China's Overseas Port Investments (2023). Source: Council-on-Foreign Relations

China manages a significant network of seaports⁵¹ that allows it to use key facilities for civil-military maritime operations, from where the Navy could effectively threaten local maritime control temporarily.⁵²

China has opted to use its shipping and port logistics companies to control critical infrastructure and exert political influence.⁵³ Lacking sufficient naval bases for sustained operations, dual port facilities play a key role in its maritime strategy; they allow the Navy to extend its reach by projecting power without resorting to visible military bases. Ports such as Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), and Gwadar (Pakistan) have a commercial purpose but also function as logistics terminals for military support (replenishment and maintenance of naval assets).

⁴⁹ HAMMES, Thomas. "China's exploitation of overseas ports and bases". (21.03.25). Available in: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/chinas-exploitation-of-overseas-ports-and-bases/>

⁵⁰ MAZZUCCO, Leonardo. "China's basing quest in the Gulf: Pipe dream or strategic reality?". (13.06.25). Available in: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/chinas-basing-quest-in-the-gulf-pipe-dream-or-strategic-reality/>

⁵¹ ROMERO JUNQUERA, Abel. El poder portuario como elemento clave en el ascenso marítimo de China. Analysis Paper IEEE /2026. Available in: <https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieeee/poder-portuario-elemento-clave-ascenso-maritimo-china>

⁵² MARCHANT, Aaron. "China's Global Maritime Ambitions 10,000 Miles Beyond Taiwan". Vol. 150/12/1.462 U.S. Naval Institute. (12.24). Available in: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/december/chinas-global-maritime-ambitions-10000-miles-beyond-taiwan>

⁵³ KUO, Mercy. *The Diplomat*. "Shipping, Ports, and China's New Maritime Empire". (06.02.24) Available in: <https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/shipping-ports-and-chinas-new-maritime-empire/>

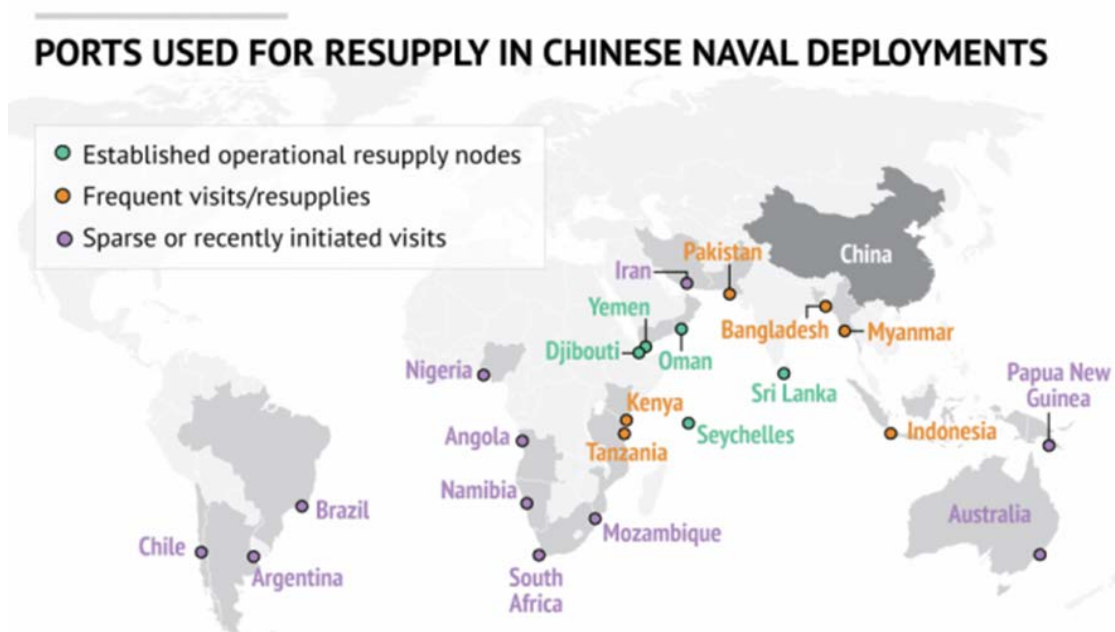


Figure 6. Ports for resupplying - Chinese Navy. Source: Stratfor

Similarly, it seeks to expand port access concession agreements and/or the establishment of bases to strengthen its logistical-military infrastructure. However, without a network of military bases, the Navy relies on logistical support from its shipping companies (COSCO, etc.) in almost all major ports in the Indo-Pacific.

Currently, naval deployments in Africa⁵⁴ and the South Pacific are particularly valuable within Beijing's naval diplomacy program, seeking to increase its global presence and influence with new port facilities (Equatorial Guinea, Vanuatu, Mozambique, Oman, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands, among others).

Maritime Diplomacy

China promotes a narrative of "maritime civilization" as an integral part of its long-term naval strategy, expanding its discourse as a tool for geopolitical legitimization. This maritime "soft power" constitutes a multidimensional power projection that integrates the blue economy, ocean culture, science and technology, and global port infrastructure.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ HOLLINGSBEE, Trevor. "China's navy – an agent of international influence and maritime diplomacy". (21.08.24). Available in: <https://www.bairdmaritime.com/security/naval/column-chinas-navy-an-agent-of-international-influence-and-maritime-diplomacy-naval-gazing>

⁵⁵ YUE CHAN, Edward (2025) China's Discourse of Maritime Power: A Thematic Analysis, Journal of Contemporary China, 34:153, 432-450, Available in: [DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2024.2319064](https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2319064)

China presents its maritime rise as peaceful and civilizational. In the Indo-Pacific, this narrative serves the clear function of neutralizing perceived threats (coercive diplomacy) by attempting to redefine its regional legitimacy.

Likewise, the Navy has begun deploying beyond the 1st Island Chain, increasing its port calls and participating in naval exercises, humanitarian missions, and anti-piracy operations. Although most oceanic operations take place in the northern Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific, China has increased the frequency and range of its aircraft carrier deployments in other areas (Philippine Sea, etc.), along with replenishment ships, enabling it to conduct naval exercises in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea.

Conclusions

The evolution of China's naval strategy is redefining the global maritime balance, forcing the US and its allies to rethink their own strategy in the Indo-Pacific.

Under President Xi's leadership, maritime power has become a central pillar of national strategy. China's current maritime strategy has focused in the short term on "nearby" maritime spaces and territories, gradually altering the strategic geography of the First Island Chain to achieve effective control of the "nine-dash line," which includes Taiwan and adjacent maritime areas, especially the South China Sea. Consequently, China will maintain a strong strategic focus on enabling regional dominance, recognizing that it will not become a global maritime power until it addresses the challenges of defending its maritime rights and interests.

In the medium term, China aims to consolidate an ocean-going navy capable of sustained operations in the Indo-Pacific, enabling the security and protection of critical shipping lanes, as well as safeguarding Chinese overseas interests. Beijing has undertaken a significant modernization effort integrating new technological capabilities and expanding its fleet with new aircraft carriers, a robust nuclear submarine force, and advanced multi-domain warfare capabilities.

In parallel, it pursues political projection, with a naval focus on developing itself as a maritime power by expanding its global influence and establishing its maritime role to promote the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation." To this end, it is building maritime power through the deployment of an extensive port network, maritime diplomacy

missions, a powerful shipbuilding industry, and a global merchant fleet.

The long-term strategic horizon will be marked by consolidating its role as a major maritime power, with naval and logistical capabilities comparable to those of the United States, ensuring the protection of its strategic interests, the defense of its territorial claims, and the ability to influence international maritime governance.

Competition with the United States will remain the main challenge, but China will seek to avoid direct confrontation by striving to promote a peaceful transition of power. Disputes in the South and East China Seas will continue to be sources of tension, but the use of "strategic patience" will prevent uncontrolled escalations.

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