



*We often say that to get rich we must first build roads;  
but in coastal areas, to get rich we must also first build ports.*

Xi Jinping, 19 April 2017 (during a visit to the port of Tieshan)

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the global geopolitical landscape has been transforming rapidly. We are moving from a unipolar, rules-based world (led by the United States) to a multipolar order, with China and the United States as the main poles, giving rise to a kind of "bipolar multipolarism", whereby realism and power relations (driven by interest and force) take centre stage.

In classical geopolitics, when it comes to major power competition, there lies an unresolved disagreement over the sources of power and prosperity, which manifests itself in two antithetical global visions<sup>1</sup>, which have their origin in geography (hence the name geopolitics). On the one hand, in that of the continental world, where the source of power is land, this leads to conflicts between neighbours in the struggle for territory, in a zero-sum, winner-takes-all game. On the other hand, in the maritime domain, the source of power is money, wealth, not territory, and national prosperity is promoted through trade and industry, in a game where all sides can win, and neighbours are seen as trading partners rather than enemies. In this scenario, China, traditionally considered a continental power (it borders fourteen countries), is revealed as the great emerging power, which, through its so called «peaceful rise», seeks to dispute global hegemony with the United States.<sup>2</sup> This includes areas as diverse as technology, trade and diplomacy, all of which are complementary, but above all it seeks to dispute in maritime affairs.

It is arguably in the latter, the struggle for hegemony at sea, where China is most active, and where the United States is trying to protect its decades-long pre-eminence.

To frame the current dispute over maritime hegemony, we can use the aphorism of Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618), an English sailor and politician. He defended the importance of controlling the sea, capturing the essence of the postulates of the maritime geopolitical

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/land-or-sea-paine>

Note: All hyperlinks in this article are active as of 23 February 2026.

<sup>2</sup> The United States, from a geopolitical perspective, is practically an island (thanks to the Panama Canal). It only borders Canada and Mexico, which pose no realistic threat to Washington.

school that Alfred Mahan would develop 300 years later. This remains at the core of thalassocracy (maritime power) as a geostrategic concept. "He who controls the sea controls trade; he who controls trade controls the wealth of the world; and consequently the world itself".

We will use as a theoretical framework the theories of Mahan, who defended the superiority of maritime power (thalassocracy) over terrestrial power (telluric), as well as his theses which developed in some way the content of the aforementioned aphorism. Becoming a major power (which should be a maritime one) was based on three interrelated elements: being a manufacturing (industrial) power, producing goods for trade; taking into account that the sea is the easiest, cheapest, and most profitable way to transport goods and raw materials. The second element needed was a merchant fleet (actually a maritime industry<sup>3</sup>), which would make this trade possible; and the third component was a military navy to protect this merchant fleet and secure the shipping lanes. These three elements make up what we might call the "triad of maritime power", to which Mahan adds the need for bases or ports, distributed along these maritime routes, as a means of supporting the military (and merchant) navy.

Currently, almost 90% of international trade is conducted by sea<sup>4</sup>, making maritime transport the lifeblood of the global economy. Freedom of navigation and the security of shipping routes (even though we take them for granted) remain critical elements for the global economy and, therefore, for the "stability" of the international system.

## **CHINA AS A MARITIME POWER. CURRENT SITUATION**

The case of China is paradigmatic. Being an essentially continental power in the classical geopolitical sense, with unfavourable geographical conditions<sup>5</sup> for it to be a maritime power, it has both the vocation and the need to be one, and therefore the ambition to become the first major hybrid "continental-maritime" power in history.

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<sup>3</sup> We include not only merchant ships, but also shipyards and shipbuilding, shipping companies that manage cargo transport, as well as ports, where goods and raw materials are loaded and unloaded.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ics-shipping.org/shipping-fact/shipping-and-world-trade-global-supply-and-demand-for-seafarers/>

<sup>5</sup> Mahan identifies six main elements (grouped in pairs) which favour maritime power development: geographical location (being an island, archipelago or having coastlines on several seas or oceans, such as the United States) as well as the physical configuration of the territory; relevant demographics and the population's orientation towards the sea; the entrepreneurial and commercial character of the population; and the appeal of governments in promoting maritime-oriented public policies. Of these six elements, China is essentially limited in the first, as only one of its four façades, the eastern one, faces the sea, and its access to ocean waters is blocked by the so-called first island chain, dominated by allies of the United States (South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, The Philippines).

Analysing the elements of the maritime triad mentioned above, with regard to the first, China is currently the major industrial power that produces around 35% of global manufacturing, and which, if trends continue, could exceed 40% in a few years<sup>6</sup>. China exports mainly by sea (90 %), about 8 % by land (mainly via the overland Silk Road) and less than 2 % by air<sup>7</sup>. Thus, in addition to its dependence on maritime routes for trade, it is also dependent on oil and gas imports from abroad; around 80% of its oil imports arrive by sea through the Strait of Malacca (mainly from the Persian Gulf, but also from Africa and South America)<sup>8</sup>. China depends on the sea both to export goods and to import energy and raw materials.

Regarding the second element, the maritime industry, China's position is one of increasing dominance. In 2024, 53% of global merchant ship tonnage was built in Chinese shipyards<sup>9</sup>, which together with South Korea (29%) and Japan (13%) account for almost 95% of the world total, while the United States represents only 0.1%. The trend in the coming years is towards even greater Chinese prominence. As far as shipping companies are concerned, Europe still holds the hegemonic position, with four of the world's top five companies (MSC, Maersk, CMA-CGM and Hapag-Lloyd). However, China's COSCO stands in fourth position, which is becoming increasingly influential on a global level.

It is a fact that China is consolidating its leading position in the maritime industry; most of the new merchant ships are of Chinese origin, and Chinese shipping companies, in particular COSCO, are playing an increasingly important role. In addition, the cargo carried by the ships is also mainly of Chinese origin. Goods produced in China are transported on Chinese ships, which are managed by Chinese shipping companies.

Mastering the first two elements of Mahan's maritime triad is a good way to control maritime trade on a global scale.

With regard to the third element, the naval force that must protect these merchant ships and ensure freedom of navigation along maritime routes, combined with the growth of the

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<sup>6</sup> PALACIO, Ana. "El mundo es rugoso", *El Mundo*. 10 January 2026.  
<https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2026/01/10/69610803e4d4d84c028b4575.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://menafn.com/1109964798/String-Of-Pearls-Chinas-Oceanic-Gambit>

<sup>8</sup> China consumes over 17,000,000 barrels of oil per day, of which it imports around 11,500,000. Nearly 80% arrive by sea, via the Strait of Malacca. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/south-first-connectivity-the-malacca-strait-s-strategic-role>

<sup>9</sup> In 1975 The US shipbuilding industry was the largest in the world. Today it ranks 19th, accounting for less than 1% of global shipbuilding production. <https://www.politicaexterior.com/el-poder-de-los-astilleros/>

Chinese navy over the last 25 years has been spectacular, although the United States continues to maintain clear leadership. China has gone from having a coastal navy, with virtually no capacity to operate in oceanic waters, to having the world's largest navy in terms of number of ships (370 ocean-going vessels compared to 296 in the United States), with this gap likely to widen in the coming years. However, in terms of both total tonnage and combat capability, the US Navy still maintains a clear superiority over the Chinese navy. However, China's warship-building capacity (in line with merchant ships) is clearly superior to that of the United States<sup>10</sup>, a strategic disadvantage that is a cause for concern in the United States in its military competition with China.

The facts show that, of the three elements of the maritime triad, China dominates the first two by a growing margin. Although it is still far behind in the third, it is seeking to reduce the US advantage, with the aim of achieving parity<sup>11</sup> (it is not expected to achieve this, and if it does, it would not be before 2045).

To these three elements, Mahan added the need for naval bases or support stations along maritime routes, both commercial and, above all, military, which would allow the naval force to extend its field of operations. The United States has important bases that allow it to maintain a naval presence in all the world's seas<sup>12</sup>.

In contrast, China has only one overseas naval base, in Djibouti (since 2017), but it has interests and influence in a significant network of commercial ports (more than 120 ports) around the world, which, although initially intended for civilian and commercial use, some could be used for military purposes if necessary.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PORTS IN MARITIME POWER

We will now analyse the importance of commercial ports for maritime power, essentially in their civil dimension, but also with a view to their potential military use.

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<sup>10</sup> US CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE. Report *China Naval Modernization: Implications for US Navy Capabilities*. 24 April 2025. Available at: <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33153>

<sup>11</sup> In the IEEE document: ROMERO, A. *Disputa por la hegemonía marítima. China sigue aguas a Mahan; EE. UU., trata de recuperar rumbo*, 18 June 2025, shows in more detail the figures for the Chinese maritime industry and its navy, and their relationship with the US. Available at: [https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieeee/disputa\\_por\\_la\\_hegemonia\\_maritima\\_2025\\_dieeee46](https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieeee/disputa_por_la_hegemonia_maritima_2025_dieeee46)

<sup>12</sup> It has more than 130 naval bases, 13 of which have facilities valued at over a billion dollars. The largest are located in Diego Garcia, Djibouti, Guantanamo, Sigonella and Naples in Italy, Sasebo, Yokosuka, Ikego and Atsugi in Japan, and Rota. US Marine Corps bases are not included. Data available at: [https://files.visualbases.org/pdf/BSR\\_Extracts\\_FY2018.pdf](https://files.visualbases.org/pdf/BSR_Extracts_FY2018.pdf) y <https://www.navyadvancement.com/navy-bases/navy-bases-overseas.php>

Noorali, Flint and Ahmadi, in their academic article entitled "Port Power: Towards a New Geopolitical World Order"<sup>13</sup> argue that, although ports seem to play a primarily economic and essentially local role, they are also highly relevant in global geopolitical processes. They connect land and sea as geographical areas, with the dual function of being economic gateways and strategic hubs.

The concept of port power is defined as the way to achieve a hegemonic position in the geopolitical transition towards a new order, based on gaining power through the construction, development, hegemony, and ownership of ports<sup>14</sup>. The way of measuring and assessing port power is based on considering eight parameters, essentially relating to the construction, management, control, and connectivity of ports.<sup>15</sup> This enables the relevant players in this field to be identified, as well as considering them in the field of maritime transport and naval capacity. Thus, the current moment of geopolitical transition can be interpreted by taking into account the evolution of port power, which could lead us to conclude that the global geopolitical order of the 21st century will be dominated by whichever country is the dominant port power, and China is currently in the best position to assume that role.

The geo-economic and also geopolitical importance of ports in global trade is part of the power struggle between major powers in the process of controlling global maritime routes. A port hegemon can become a major player in global trade by controlling interconnected networks of ports outside its own territory. Ports have clear geopolitical value, as they are hubs<sup>16</sup> that allow a country to exert influence, both economic and political, beyond its territory. The more dominant a player is in the economy of construction, exploitation, and operation of ports, the greater its influence.

Seen from the opposite perspective, a maritime power needs to have a global network of ports in order to be dominant. In fact, the control of ports, especially those located at key

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<sup>13</sup> NOORALI, FLINT and AHMADI. "Port power; Towards a new geopolitical world order", *Journal of Transport Geography*. December 2022. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S096669232200206X>

<sup>14</sup> NOORALI y MAMADOUH. "Port power 02: Chinese geoeconomic hopes and American geopolitical fears», *Journal of Transport Geography*. May 2025. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0966692325000985>

<sup>15</sup> Eight parameters are identified to measure the port power of a nation: Flow of global trade through national ports; National affiliation of port operating companies; National investment in global ports; Port cities as global cities; Construction of maritime transport networks; Centrality of ports in geopolitical codes; Using ports to maintain a blue water navy; Access to the Eurasian landmass.

<sup>16</sup> Ports are like nodes in a transport network, the starting and ending points of the different lines in that network; points of convergence between the maritime domain, where global trade takes place, and the land domain.

points (*choke points*), is usually one of the main components of the geopolitical code of countries with a maritime vocation; as is the case of India or China, which want to change the world order in their favour; or as was once the case with the United Kingdom, the Netherlands or the United States itself<sup>17</sup>.

If Mahan said that geopolitical power required access to safe harbours that could shelter naval fleets (war fleets) and merchant fleets, Spykman emphasised the importance of the *rimland* (or belt land), where the maritime and terrestrial worlds meet (where all ports are located), valuing the connectivity between these two domains as key to the global projection of US power.

## CHINA AND ITS GROWING PORT POWER

Xi Jinping has emphasised on numerous occasions that economic powers have to be maritime and shipping powers. As China consolidates its position as the world's leading exporter<sup>18</sup> and dominator of the maritime industry (shipbuilding, shipping companies, port management companies, etc.), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will become the dominator of global maritime trade<sup>19</sup>.

In 2015, China's *Defence White Paper* highlighted important changes in the country's maritime objectives, advocating a move away from the traditional mindset that land is more important than sea, and stressing that great importance should be given to the management of the seas and oceans, and in particular the protection of maritime rights and interests. In this new scenario, the Chinese navy is called upon to protect the security of sea lines of communication (SLOC)<sup>20</sup> and national interests abroad, turning commercial ports into essential logistics platforms for its global operations<sup>21</sup>. A strong and clear statement of intent.

China is doing this by trying to create a global network of ports and maritime-terrestrial corridors, in order to influence the geography of global maritime transport. In the current

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<sup>17</sup> NOORALI, FLINT and AHMADI. *Op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> China produces over 35% of global manufacturing (more than the US, Japan, Germany, South Korea and the UK combined). MANRIQUE, L. «El poder de los astilleros», *Política Exterior*. 24 October 2024. Available from: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/el-poder-de-los-astilleros/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/responding-chinas-growing-influence-ports-global-south>

<sup>20</sup> Usually referred to as Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC).

<sup>21</sup> NOORALI and MAMADOUH. *Op. cit.*



Figure 1. Belt and Road Initiative. <https://dics.co/current-affairs/10-years-of-belt-and-road-initiative-upsc>

geopolitical scenario of competition between major powers, initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative<sup>22</sup> (BRI) (fig. 1) are presented as another element of their doctrine of peaceful rise, as a strategy for international cooperation, but in reality, it is nothing more than a project that seeks to consolidate a hegemonic position in global maritime transport.

Given that more than 90% of China's foreign trade is conducted by sea, and that the route through the Indian Ocean is vital to China's national interests (it connects China to its major manufactured goods market in Europe and its main source of energy in Persia), the influence and control it can exert over certain ports in the region in order to ensure freedom of navigation and protect the merchant ships that carry its cargo is indeed a strategic necessity for China.

If we analyse port power on the basis of the eight factors mentioned above, we come to the conclusion that China is the emerging world port power. It has the most populous port metropolises and seven of the ten most important ports in the world; it has invested in

<sup>22</sup> The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a major investment project in infrastructures led by China aimed at improving connectivity, trade and communication in Eurasia, Latin America and Africa. Although China emphasises that it intends to strengthen economic ties and cooperation in the target regions, in the West it is seen as a strategy to expand China's economic and political sphere of influence in the world. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Belt-and-Road-Initiative>

more than one hundred geostrategic ports in sixty-three countries; it has made port development and control a central component of its geopolitical code; it has paid special attention to international corridors as well as ports themselves; and it has made port development and control a central component of its "Pacific Rise Doctrine" which it has embodied in the BRI initiative. This is a national strategy to strengthen regional and global economic integration in its interest<sup>23</sup>.

### China and its port power tools

It is an indisputable reality that China is the largest global port power. Its coastline is home to eight of the world's ten largest ports in terms of total cargo tonnage, and seven of the ten largest in terms of container traffic<sup>24</sup> (none of which are European or North American). This situation allows it to lead the Maritime, which measures the integration of countries (or ports) into global maritime transport networks and gives us an idea of the country's accessibility to global trade through maritime networks, that is, the ease of trading by sea. China tops this *ranking*<sup>25</sup> with more than twice as many points than the second-placed country (South Korea).

In addition to this enormous capacity, over the last two decades China has pursued an aggressive port policy around the world, investing in various ways: port concessions, leases of terminal facilities, purchases of shares in terminal operators, port construction projects, etc.<sup>26</sup>.

In fact, it is Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs<sup>27</sup>) that dominate the financing, design, construction and management of port infrastructures abroad, the most important of which are China Ocean Shipping Ports (COSCO), China Merchants Group, and CK Hutchison Holding Ltd<sup>28</sup>, which manage and operate port terminals, in addition to China Communications Construction Company Limited (CCCC), the largest port design and construction company in the world<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> NOORALI and MAMADOUH. *Op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> KARDON and LEUTERT. "Pier competitor: China's Power position in Global Ports", *International Security* 46 (4). 2022. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00433](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00433)

<https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/46/4/9/111175/Pier-Competitor-China-s-Power-Position-in-Global>  
<https://conectividad.elestrechodigital.com/paises>

<sup>25</sup> NOORALI and MAMADOUH. *Op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup> NOORALI and MAMADOUH. *Op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> SOE: State Owned Enterprise.

<sup>28</sup> KARDON and LEUTERT. *Op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/responding-chinas-growing-influence-ports-global-south>

Of the 75 most important container ports in the world (outside Chinese territory), almost half have Chinese ownership, either in their capital or in port operations (allowing China to control access to terminals, supplies, dry docks, and warehousing). Of these, more than half are on the maritime routes linking China to Europe and Persia via Indian Ocean.

All these projects are part of the Maritime Silk Road (part of the BRI), which, according to China's State Council Information Office, has reached 117 ports in 43 countries, mainly in the global south. For the United States, China's position of control and influence over most of the world's port infrastructure poses a significant threat to its economic and military security. China could use its power to interfere with operations that depend on access to ports (both military and economic), which are vital to US interests.

As a means of projecting its power<sup>30</sup>, the Chinese state bureaucracy running the "Party-State" (CCP) has organisational (e.g. the appointment of company management authorities) and legal (mandatory reporting to the CCP on its activities) mechanisms to influence the assets and operations of individual companies abroad<sup>31</sup>. It coordinates or coerces its own port companies to comply with state guidelines.

In addition to the above tools, China also influences through instruments within the scope of port distribution and management itself. It produces more than 90 % of all containers, and almost 80 % of the cranes that load and unload at port terminals around the world<sup>32</sup>. In addition, many ports globally use the Chinese computer system Logink<sup>33</sup> (which it distributes free of charge) to track commercial maritime traffic information. They have Chinese 5G telecommunications towers installed, or Chinese computer systems for their port facilities, all of which potentially allows Beijing to have privileged information on global maritime trade and traffic, and therefore, on the vulnerabilities of Western supply chains, and even the ability to track shipments of military supplies, equipment, and components.

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<sup>30</sup> Of the big three companies, the Chinese central government owns both COSCO Shipping Group and China Merchant Group (parent companies of COSCO Shipping Ports and CMPort). The former is subject to greater Party-State influence, being located in mainland China, and the latter is somewhat more removed from direct control, being in Hong Kong. Hutchinson, a private company also based in Hong Kong, is subject to slightly less state control.

<sup>31</sup> KARDON and LEUTERT. *Op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> MANRIQUE, L. *Op. cit.* The Chinese company ZPMC supplies 70 % of the cranes currently in operation in port terminals around the world.

<sup>33</sup> The LOGINK system can provide ship and cargo information, customs, billing and payment data, geolocation data, pricing information, permits and licences, cargo manifests, booking data, etc.

This is why the US is currently investigating port cranes<sup>34</sup> as potential tools for espionage<sup>35</sup>.

Although China wants to give its growing port power abroad a primarily geo-economic dimension and a constructive and cooperative character (within the framework of its 'peaceful rise'), the reality is that it is causing fears at the geopolitical level. This is because it is believed that with this control of ports, it wants to take over resources and geographical areas, using mechanisms such as infrastructure construction or loans on unfavourable terms, which can lead to situations such as the so-called 'debt trap'<sup>36</sup>, allowing it to gain hegemony and thus threatening world order.

### **Regions and maritime routes where China is developing its port power**

The port assets of Chinese companies abroad are concentrated near major resource areas and export markets, in a geographical distribution that reflects commercial and strategic objectives. There is little distinction between commercial and strategic locations, as the economic importance of both resources and markets creates a military imperative to secure access<sup>37</sup>.

Given the global distribution of the areas where both resources and markets are located, the investment and operation of Chinese companies is geographically balanced in ports around the world (fig. 2). On the one hand, there is Central and South America<sup>38</sup> and Africa, mostly countries in the global south, which are small markets but major suppliers of raw materials<sup>39</sup>, and on the other hand, there is Europe, which is the largest market for Chinese exports.

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<sup>34</sup> <https://smallwarsjournal.com/2025/08/07/handling-our-cargo-how-the-peoples-republic-of-china-invests-strategically-in-the-u-s-maritime-industry/>

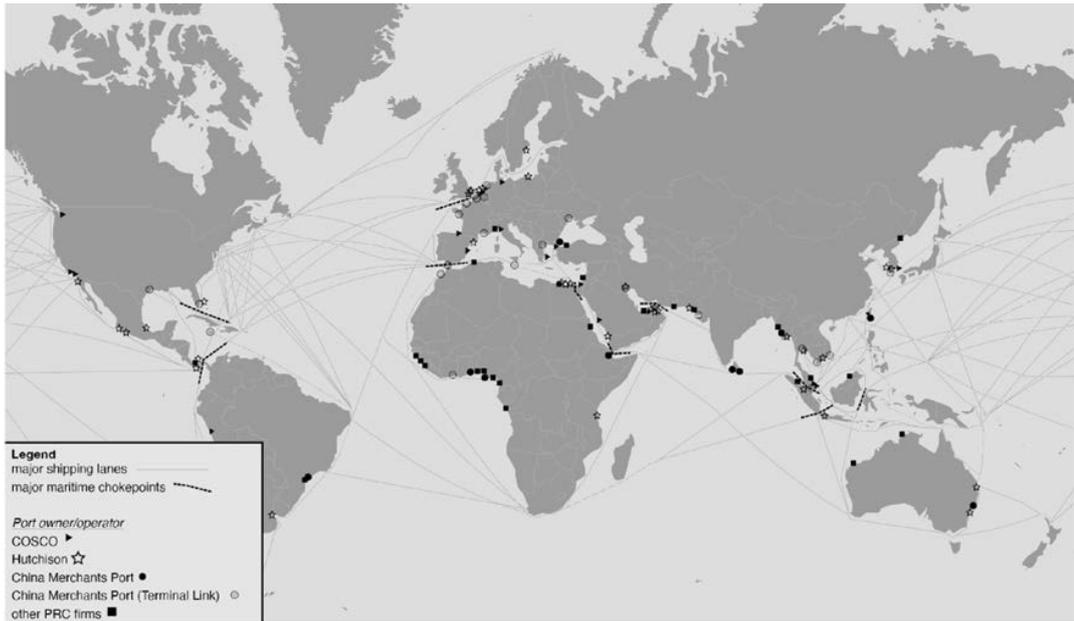
<sup>35</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/20/china-shipping-maritime-logistics-lanes-trade-ports-security-espionage-intelligence/>

<sup>36</sup> In this case, it is referred to as "debt trap" diplomacy when a country (in this case China) grants excessive credit to build infrastructure, with the intention of obtaining economic or political concessions when the debtor country is unable to meet its debt obligations.

<sup>37</sup> KARDON and LEUTERT. *Op. cit.*

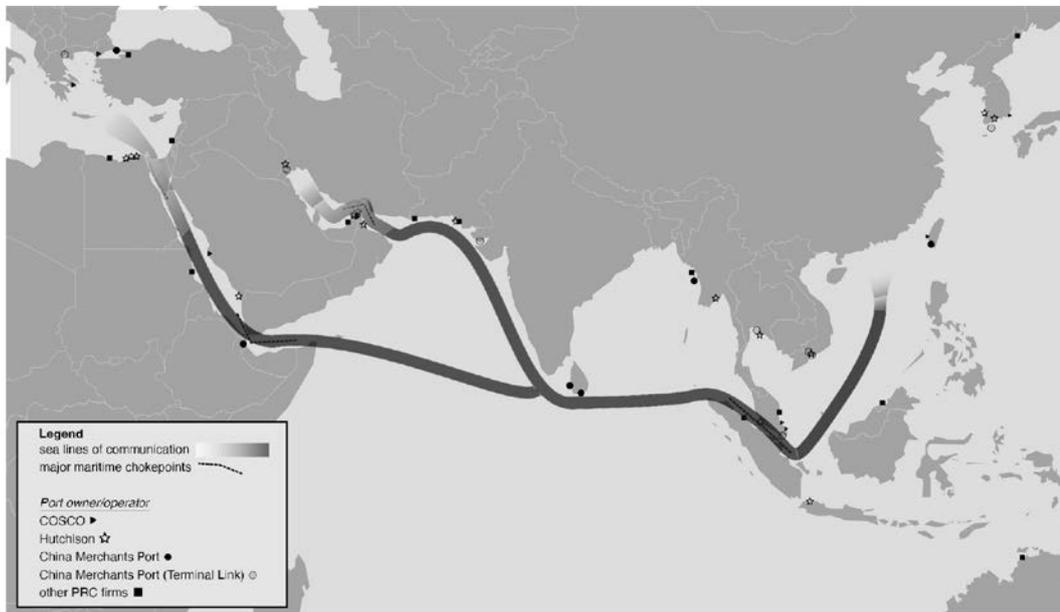
<sup>38</sup> Chankay in Peru, Paranagua in Brazil and Kingston in the Caribbean; in Africa, the following stand out among others: Nigeria, Angola, Cameroon or Togo.

<sup>39</sup> If maritime transport is the backbone of international trade with more than 80% by volume, this figure is even higher for developing countries, which have hardly any infrastructure. Thus, low-income countries and small islands are 1.5 to 2 times more dependent on their ports for trade than the world average, making quality port infrastructure growth-enhancing, especially in export-driven economies in developing regions. This favours their readiness to welcome Chinese investment.



SOURCES: Kardon and Leutert, "PRC Firm-Owned/Operated Port Terminals Worldwide"; "Mapcreator" (Eindhoven, Netherlands: Mapcreator) <https://mapcreator.io/>; and OpenStreetMap contributors, "OpenStreetMap," <https://www.openstreetmap.org>.

But the area of greatest interest to China is the Indian Ocean. Chinese analysts refer to the route linking China to the Indian Ocean via Malacca the "maritime lifeline" <sup>40</sup>. This route splits into two: one heading to Europe (its major market) via Red Sea and the Suez Canal (through which 30 % of global container traffic passes), and the one linking it to the Persian Gulf, its main source of energy (gas and oil).

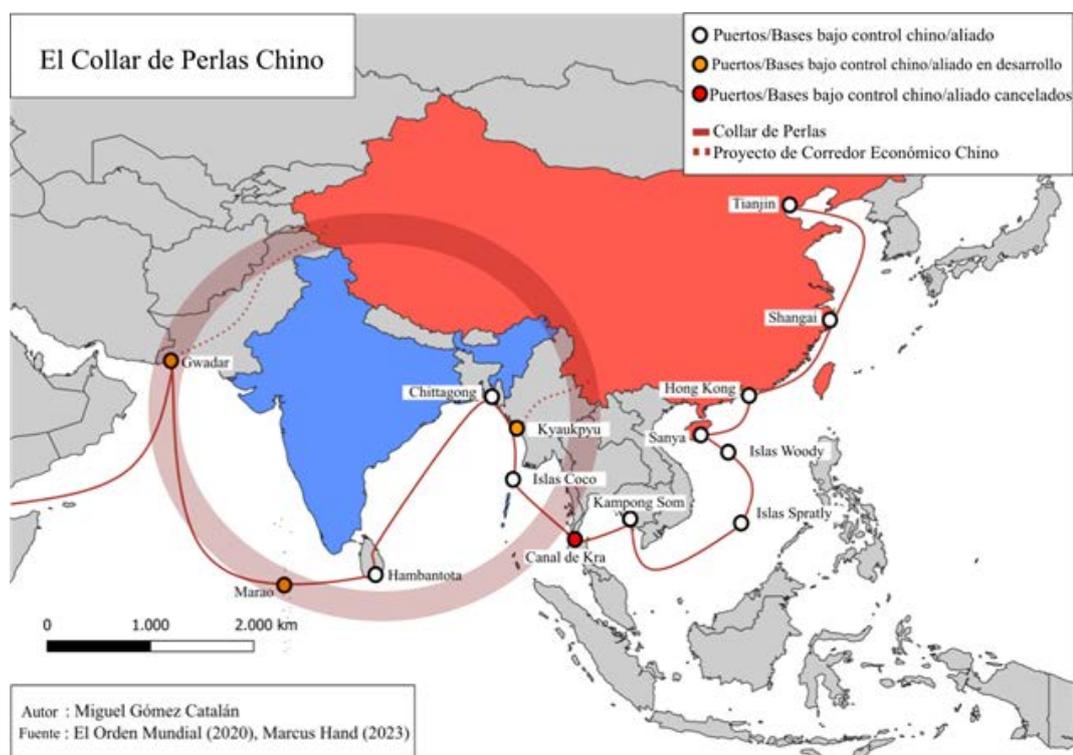


SOURCES: Kardon and Leutert, "PRC Firm-Owned/Operated Port Terminals Worldwide"; "Mapcreator"; and OpenStreetMap contributors, "OpenStreetMap."

<sup>40</sup> 80% of China's oil imports pass through the Strait of Malacca.

For China, securing maritime activity in these two lanes (fig. 3) is existential, and a major task assigned<sup>41</sup> to its navy (PLA-N)<sup>42</sup>.

It is in the Indian Ocean that China has invested heavily in the ports of the so-called "string of pearls" (Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota and Colombo in Sri Lanka, Chittagong in Bangladesh, and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar), all of which are either close to critical choke points such as Hormuz or Bab-el-Mandeb, and/or serve as entry/exit points for land corridors or pipelines<sup>43</sup> (fig. 4). This allows China to reduce its dependence on Malacca, its vulnerability in maritime routes, and therefore its commercial and energy interests.



Having "Influence" in the region's ports and the potential capacity to deploy naval forces is an almost existential factor for Beijing. The various ports in the region include Gwadar (gateway to the Persian Gulf and origin of the land corridor), Hambantota, as well as the naval base in Djibouti (the only Chinese naval base abroad), all of which are of enormous strategic importance for China and where its companies are of considerable importance. Although subject to national sovereignty, they could serve as support bases for warships.

<sup>41</sup> KARDON and LEUTERT. *Op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> PLA-N (People Liberation Army - Navy). The naval service of the Chinese Armed Forces; its navy.

<sup>43</sup> Land corridor linking Gwadar to China (via the overland Silk Road) or the pipeline linking Myanmar to China, which bypasses the Strait of Malacca.

Mention should be made of the Chinese influence in Europe, a key destination for Chinese manufactured goods, where the presence of Chinese companies<sup>44</sup> is very relevant in Greece (in Piraeus, where COSCO has a majority stake in the port's terminals, operates two through a subsidiary, and has operational control through a majority stake in the port authority), as well as in Germany (COSCO has a stake in a terminal in the port of Hamburg), the Netherlands (COSCO and Hutchison have stakes in terminals in the port of Rotterdam, the latter being the largest container operator in the port), Belgium (COSCO controls a terminal in the port of Bruges), Spain (COSCO has a majority stake in terminals in Valencia and Bilbao, and Hutchison has a stake in Barcelona) and Italy, among others.

In 2019, the EU adopted new measures to control foreign investment in critical infrastructure, including ports. In addition, in recent years several European governments have expressed concern about the possible use of Chinese state-owned companies to exert political influence, including large-scale investments in ports, which in some cases are logistical hubs for NATO military equipment and materiel<sup>45</sup>.

This mistrust of Chinese investment and presence in the ports is beginning to take on a global character, especially after cases such as that of Sri Lanka, which fell into the so-called "debt trap diplomacy"<sup>46</sup>. The country accumulated a debt of more than eight billion dollars with Chinese SOEs, of which more than 1.1 billion was used to build the port of Hambantota (of dubious commercial interest, but of great military interest to China due to its strategic location). In 2017, it was agreed to lease the port to China for 99 years in exchange for debt relief, although in 2024 it had to be renegotiated. This case has sparked widespread concern about China's economic and geopolitical influence through predatory lending, and the risks for smaller countries that enter into infrastructure agreements with China. A similar case is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which links the Silk Road (land) on Chinese territory with the Pakistani port of Gwadar<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> The three main Chinese companies operating in Europe are: COSCO Shipping, China Merchant Ports Holdings y Hutchison Port Holdings. Data on the influence of these companies in EU countries. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/739367/EPRS\\_ATA\(2023\)739367\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2023/739367/EPRS_ATA(2023)739367_EN.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>46</sup> The debt trap.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/responding-chinas-growing-influence-ports-global-south>

As mentioned above, Chinese-backed port infrastructure projects are being developed across the global south (the majority with potential for dual civil-military use<sup>48</sup>), and many of them under unsustainable financing conditions, lack of transparency and little respect for environmental and social standards.

### **Concern about the development of Chinese port power on a global scale**

While it would be expected that China would seek naval bases abroad (currently it only has one in Djibouti) to support the deployment of its naval force and thus control and protect the maritime routes on which it is dependent, the reality is that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has wisely chosen to invest in civilian ports as a way of influencing global trade and logistics and, if necessary, to use them (potentially) to support its naval forces<sup>49</sup>.

However, this ambiguous approach raises concern about China's possible use of foreign ports for military purposes. Although figures vary according to sources, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) counts 130 port projects globally with Chinese investment, of which China has a majority shareholding (*ownership*) in 17. Of these, the majority (90) have physical potential for military use, particularly in 14 of the 17 where China has a majority stake<sup>50</sup>. In the same vein, and focusing specifically on the global south, the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) estimates that, of the 70 commercial port projects in that area, 55 have potential for naval use, confirming CFR figures, with China owning the largest share in 10<sup>51</sup>.

This concern is particularly acute in the Indian Ocean, where the aforementioned "maritime lifeline" runs. Its only overseas naval base, located in Djibouti since 2017 (entrance to the Red Sea), is joined by the port of Gwadar (Pakistan), a traditional candidate for militarisation, and Khalifa (United Arab Emirates), a potential facility to support China's naval activities (both in the Persian area)<sup>52</sup>. The possibility of using the Ream Naval Base (Cambodia) should also be highlighted, as well as, outside the Indian

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<sup>48</sup> Of the 70 commercial port projects being developed in the global south, an estimated 55 have potential for naval use, which is more likely in the 10 projects where China has the largest stake.

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.cfr.org/trackers/china-overseas-ports>

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/responding-chinas-growing-influence-ports-global-south>

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*.

Ocean, a naval base on the Atlantic coast of Africa<sup>53</sup> (Equatorial Guinea), or the potential dual use<sup>54</sup> of the port of Chancay (Peru).

Furthermore, the port infrastructure itself can also be used for espionage and intelligence gathering. With its influence and control over terminals around the world, China could spy on the commercial and military movements of third parties (including the US). A 2024 US Congressional investigation showed communications equipment in cranes manufactured in China and located in US ports, suggesting vulnerabilities in supply chains, and the possibility to obtain commercial data and other confidential information. China currently has an advantageous position through the aforementioned Logink (also known as the National Transport and Logistics Public Information Platform), implemented in at least 24 ports around the world, which would allow China access to confidential information related to transport, pricing and commodity management (including military equipment), threatening the economic and military security of the United States<sup>55</sup>.

## **THE REACTION OF THE MARITIME HEGEMON, THE UNITED STATES**

In the year 2000, the United States was the largest trading partner for more than 80 % of the world's countries. Today, this figure has fallen to 30%, while China has become the largest trading partner for more than 120 countries. This is true in South America, and especially in Africa in terms of total volume, eclipsing trade between the United States and this continent by a factor of four<sup>56</sup>.

As far as ports are concerned, US port companies do not score well in the *global rankings*. None of the world's top 10 shipping companies or the top 10 global maritime port operators are American, and only four US ports are among the world's 50 busiest. As for overseas ports, the United States does not manage or own any commercial ports outside its territory.

Currently China dominates maritime trade in terms of volume, shipbuilding activity, and port construction and ownership worldwide. This situation jeopardises the economic

<sup>53</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2024/06/china-and-equatorial-guinea-why-their-new-comprehensive-strategic-partnership-matters/>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/f6589d13-6014-47d0-8cc5-e98a0b7ad0bc>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/responding-chinas-growing-influence-ports-global-south>

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*.

interests and national security priorities of the United States<sup>57</sup>. While China presents itself as the great global geo-economic hope, the US tries to resist by generating geopolitical fears about Chinese initiatives and investments.

As an example, in 2019, then US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pressured Pakistan, Panama, Israel and other countries to be wary of Chinese investments and their risks, emphasising that China's efforts to build ports around the world were not about being good infrastructure builders or effective shipping managers, but about having an element of state national security in every foreign port. He wanted everyone to understand the threat posed by China through the dangers of port investments. In the same vein, back in 2018, Mike Pence, then US vice-president, stressed that his country did not drown its partners in a "sea of debt", nor did it compromise or coerce their independence.

This was a reactive offensive to China's port expansion by the United States, which sought to build a narrative of fear about China's supposed intentions to control the world by using the geopolitical effects of transport and ports, and consequently advocating that all the countries of the world should reject this strategy<sup>58</sup>. The American challenge to China's rise is based on two key elements of port power: having a network of (naval) bases supporting an oceanic navy, and the presence of global services in port cities<sup>59</sup>. In any case, the United States has no ambitions to become a port power, but it does want to prevent China from achieving this. We can conclude that the current geopolitical transition is driven by one country's aim to become the world's port power, and the declining hegemonic power's attempt to deny it.

Thus, the United States, with a clear geopolitical orientation based on realism, is supporting Indian port projects in the Indo-Pacific region as a counterweight to China's 'string of pearls' strategy. However, the facts show us that the geopolitical transition is driven by economic processes and not only by realistic calculations<sup>60</sup>, and actions such as Washington's withdrawal from Trans-Pacific Partnership in 2017, or China's growing presence in economies of the Middle East and Africa, do not favour American ambitions<sup>61</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/responding-chinas-growing-influence-ports-global-south>

<sup>58</sup> NOORALI and MAMADOUH. *Op. cit.*

<sup>59</sup> NOORALI, FLINT and AHMADI. *Op. cit.*

<sup>60</sup> The creation of the AUKUS military and security pact in 2021 in the Indo-Pacific are signs of the dominance of geostrategic thinking in US foreign policy towards China.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem.*

In recent years, and despite realistic challenges from the United States and India, China's rise as the dominant port power has continued, which could lead Washington to a continued decline in hegemonic power if it continues to pay little attention to the port power components of its foreign policy.

However, recent months, the United States has become increasingly aware of its weakening maritime hegemony and is starting to become more active. On 9 April (2025), President Trump signed an Executive Order<sup>62</sup> to "restore maritime dominance" to the United States. Which, in Article 5 proposes a series of actions against what it considers to be unfair actions by China in the maritime, logistics and shipbuilding sectors, and in particular in port equipment for cargo handling in ports, especially cranes. Last February, the Action Plan<sup>63</sup> derived from this Executive Order was released, containing more specific measures, focused mainly on restoring national shipbuilding capacity, and revitalizing the maritime industrial base and the U.S. merchant fleet. Added to these initiatives is the bill known as the "SHIPS Act<sup>64</sup>", which aims to re-establish the American shipbuilding industry, and is presented as a national security measure to counter China's dominance in shipbuilding and global maritime transport.

With regard specifically to port control, the new US Administration is being more forceful in its strategy to counter Chinese influence in the so-called Western Hemisphere as articulated in its new *National Security Strategy*<sup>65</sup>, and particularly in Latin America. Thus, it is exerting pressure to try to reduce China's presence (exercised by the company Hutchinson Ports Holding) in the ports of Balboa and Cristobal, on both sides of the Panama Canal<sup>66</sup>, or on the government of Peru, as a warning to the region and to the world in general, for fear of losing sovereignty in the supervision of the port of Chancay, operated by Cosco Shipping Ports, and where the majority of investment comes from China. The message is that cheap Chinese money pays in sovereignty<sup>67</sup>.

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/04/restoring-americas-maritime-dominance/>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/Restoring-Americas-Maritime-Dominance.pdf>

<sup>64</sup> SHIPS (Shipbuilding and Harbour Infrastructure and Prosperity and Security - SHIPS - for America Act). <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/3151/all-actions>

<sup>65</sup> With regard to the Western Hemisphere, it highlights '... the reduction of adverse external influence — from control of military installations, ports and key infrastructure to the purchase of strategic assets ....' Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1km4vj3pl0o>

<sup>67</sup> <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2026/02/11/eeuu/preocupacion-peru-facultades-puerto-chancay-china-orix>

The reality is that the United States cannot respond alone to China's growing presence in ports around the world, particularly in the global south; and one of its potential strategies should be to rely on the financing and expertise of development banks<sup>68</sup>. However, Chinese credit conditions, coupled with China's growing influence in these institutions, make the process difficult <sup>69</sup>.

## **BY WAY OF CONCLUSION**

China's rise as a maritime power is extraordinary; it is building the world's most powerful maritime industry; it dominates merchant shipbuilding; Chinese companies have interests, manage and operate in more than 100 ports around the world, it has a 40:1 market share in commercial fleet operations, and a dominant position in logistics systems, maritime technology and production of equipment<sup>70</sup>. In this scenario, port control is an additional but critical element in the consolidation of Chinese maritime power.

China currently has the largest and best port structure in the world, with 7 of the 10 most important ports in the world located within its territory and it has links with more than 600 ports globally. In addition, it controls, manages, or operates terminals in 96 foreign ports, 36 of which are among the world's 100 most important in terms of container traffic (another 25 are in mainland China itself)<sup>71</sup>. This network of ports enables China to optimise its maritime trade at a global scale. It stands out from the rest of the countries in its level of maritime connectivity, which allows for maximum trade efficiency. Not only does it dominate world maritime trade, but it is also the most efficient.

Returning to the elements of Mahan's triad, China dominates the first two: manufacturing capacity and maritime industry. It does not have a global network of naval bases that would allow it to deploy its naval force around the world, but in a more "friendly" way it is trying to create a network of ports (under some control of Chinese companies) of potential dual-use, which, in addition to commercial use, would also allow for military use, supporting and sustaining its naval deployments.

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<sup>68</sup> Such as the World Bank, European Investment Bank, African Development Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, etc.

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.csis.org/analysis/responding-chinas-growing-influence-ports-global-south>

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/restoring-america/courage-strength-optimism/3855812/maritime-wake-up-call-competing-with-china-at-sea/>

<sup>71</sup> KARDON and LEUTERT. *Op. cit.*

China's vulnerability is centred on the third element, naval strength to enable it to control the sea and trade routes. The US remains the hegemonic power with its mighty US Navy, although the wealth that China generates from maritime trade is enabling it to build a navy that could rival the US Navy in less than two decades. China's ambition is not to depend on third parties to ensure freedom of navigation and the security of its trade routes of interest. Mahan at his best.

As for China's priority areas of interest, these are the Indian Ocean (trade route with Europe and energy route with the Persian Gulf) and the global south (major supplier of raw materials and energy), both critical to China's commercial and strategic interests.

China justifies its port expansion with a discourse of geo-economic hope, which it materialises in the revival of the Silk Road (particularly in its maritime dimension), and seeks to convince third world countries to entrust their ports to China and thus promote their economic development. In contrast, the United States, in a hegemonic discourse, warns of geopolitical risks stemming from the rise of China, which it presents as a threat to its national security and the Western democratic and free order. It argues that foreign ports under Chinese investment will be places where Chinese naval forces can be deployed in times of need.

The undeniable fact is that whichever country is the dominant port power, it has the greatest potential to drive the current geopolitical transition and shape the next global geopolitical order; ports are both a means and an end to China's potential to change the geopolitical landscape.

We are currently in a period of geopolitical transition towards a multipolar order, where the different poles of power are seeking to improve their position. In this framework, ports play a leading role in geopolitical competition as they facilitate the projection of economic and strategic reach across the oceans. Building and controlling ports to establish trade networks has a decisive influence on the geographical distribution of power in the international system.

As a historical lesson, we can recall that previous geopolitical transitions have involved attempts to control the Eurasian landmass; we can reference those of Napoleon and Hitler, based on continental strategies that ended in failure.

In this case, and with Eurasia also being at the centre of the current geopolitical transition, China's strategy is different in that it uses ports rather than platoons as its geopolitical means. The port power strategy has the potential to be more effective as it is not based on a false geopolitical dichotomy between land and sea power or between the continental and maritime domains. Ports, as nodes in economic networks, have the potential to function as gateways between the oceans and the Eurasian landmass.

All the great maritime powers in history built their naval strength on a commercial base and a global shipping capability. The United States also did so in its day. Rebuilding that base is not an option, it is a necessity if Washington intends to remain a global power in the 21st century<sup>72</sup>. Manoeuvring to prevent or limit the Chinese maritime boom is not enough; it is a question of regaining the initiative.

The final reflection leads us to consider that if China succeeds in developing a naval force that can challenge the United States for control of the seas and maritime routes, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, it would become the regional maritime hegemon, with a likely global vocation, and could become the first major "continental-maritime" hybrid power of the modern era. For this endeavour, a global network of ports, which in addition to commercial use can also have military use (function as naval bases), is essential for success. Conversely, preventing this network of ports from falling under Chinese influence is a necessary (though possibly not sufficient) condition for preventing China's rise to global maritime hegemony.

The reality is that the West (currently the United States, but in the past the English, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese), which has controlled the seas for the last 500 years, guaranteeing freedom of navigation and the safety of routes, may be displaced by a new emperor of the seas, a King Neptune of the Chinese Communist Party dynasty.

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<sup>72</sup> <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/restoring-america/courage-strength-optimism/3855812/maritime-wake-up-call-competing-with-china-at-sea/>