

# China's PLAN and Alliance Maritime Strategy

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Over the last three decades, China's People's Liberation Army Navy has evolved from a force geared towards coastal defence into a navy capable of high-intensity warfighting within its own region and, increasingly, extra regional power projection. This maritime transformation, which began under the stewardship of Admiral Liu Huaqing, has roots in an assessment of China's geopolitical priorities that has persisted across the administrations of Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping.<sup>1</sup> It is not, as is sometimes assumed, a consequence of the PRC's current leadership's preferences, but is the result of both structural imperatives and deeply embedded perceptions of China's security environment, which will likely remain stable irrespective of who runs China.

As the Cold War ended, China's geopolitical environment was transformed. On one hand, the dissolution of the Soviet Union placed the PRC in the safest geopolitical position that it had enjoyed since its emergence in 1949. For the first time in its modern history, China faced no realistic prospect of invasion by a continental power. Simultaneously, however, the dissolution of the Soviet Union obviated the need for the tacit Sino-American entente that had emerged after Nixon's rapprochement with China. Issues such as the status of Taiwan and China's outstanding territorial disputes on its maritime periphery found new salience as Chinese policymakers adjusted to what they assumed would be an emerging multipolar world in which China's rise would cause friction between the PRC and established powers such as Japan and the United States. Contemporary authors such as Shen Qurong, the then president of the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, and Colonel Cu Weidi of China's National Defence University held the view that the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be characterised by several key features:<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 For a discussion of the history of China's maritime turn, see James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara. *Red Star Over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to U.S Maritime Strategy*. (Annapolis: Naval institute Press, 2018).
  - 2 Michael Pilsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment*, (Washington D.C: National Defence University Press, 2000). <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/china/doctrine/pills2/part09.htm>.

- A multipolar order in which established alliances yielded to a shifting kaleidoscope of transactional short-term alignments
- Friction between the PRC and established powers, primarily on its maritime periphery
- The replacement of the threat of global wars with that of short sharp “local wars” both on China’s periphery and beyond—the key drivers of which being territorial control and access to critical resources

The PRC’s military and political elites were painfully aware of their nation’s weaknesses in this period. The 1996 Taiwan Straits Crisis illustrated the US’ ability to deploy naval and air power in China’s maritime periphery with impunity. Moreover, China’s geography is inherently unfavourable to a state’s sea power ambitions. China is hemmed in by the First Island Chain, running from the Ryukus through Taiwan to the littoral states of the South China Sea. China’s extended coastline requires it to maintain multiple geographically disjointed fleets which would need to traverse a gauntlet of potentially contested waters near Japan and Taiwan in order to combine forces in a wartime scenario.<sup>3</sup>

The Chinese response to this security environment has been two-pronged. First, China has sought to gradually alter its strategic geography by establishing maritime preponderance in the area running from Taiwan through the South China Sea. As Chinese naval strategists conclude, possession of both Taiwan and Hainan Island, along with preponderance in the South China Sea would allow the PLAN to operate from a central position on interior lines to concentrate its forces in both the Central Pacific and Indian Oceans more rapidly than a US navy operating on exterior lines.<sup>4</sup> In light of China’s present disadvantages in the East Asian maritime domain, the PRC has sought to achieve this transformation, where possible, through steps short of warfare and the development of a fleet intended to operate not independently but as part of a “Joint Firepower System”, comprising of an array of long-range precision strike assets distributed across the land, sea and air in order to prosecute a short high-intensity

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3 On Chinese views of the maritime geography of the PRC, see Sidharth Kaushal and Magdalena Markiewicz, *Crossing the River by Feeling the Stones: The Trajectory of China’s Maritime Transformation*, (London: RUSI Occasional Paper, 2019), 10–20.

4 Yanlin Bai, ‘Daolian shang de shijie haijun’ [‘The World Navies on the Island Chains’], *Xiandai de haijun* [Modern Navy], vol. 10 (2008), 10–20. Quote is author’s translation.

fight within the First Island Chain should such a conflict be deemed necessary.<sup>5</sup>

The second component of the PLAN's maritime strategy has been the gradual development of the nucleus of a blue water navy. Currently, the PLAN has limited influence outside the First Island Chain. A more ambitious vision is portended by the expansion of the PLAN's historic mission set in recent editions of authoritative publications such as the Science of Military Strategy as well as China's 2019 defence White Paper. This mission set now includes the concepts of "forward edge defence" along an "arc of interest" spanning parts of the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific beyond the First Island Chain as well as "far seas protection" of the SLOCs, which straddle key Chinese economic interests.<sup>6</sup> Effectively, defence within the First Island Chain and influence beyond it have a symbiotic relationship within Chinese maritime strategy. Dominance of key areas within the First Island Chain would free the PLAN from its maritime shackles into a more prominent global role. Equally, an initially limited presence beyond the First Island Chain could contribute to localising conflicts on China's periphery by deterring or slowing external intervention (forward edge defence) as well as utilising extra regional deployments further afield to form the political and logistical basis for extra regional deployment (far seas protection). In coming decades, a growing and visible PLAN presence in the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf and the Arctic is to be expected.

This twin pronged strategy raises a number of questions for alliance policymakers. This chapter will seek to lay out the contours of the PRC's maritime strategy, its likely impact on alliance interests and the options available to policymakers as they craft a future AMS. The author's core contention is that while the PLAN does not represent a present threat to the alliance, there exists a strong basis for a combination of engagement and strategic hedging to ensure that this remains the case.

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5 Peng Guangqian and Yao Youzhi, *The Science of Military Strategy*, 2nd edition (Beijing: Military Science Press, 2000), 493–95.

6 Shou Xiaosong, *Zhanlue Xue [The Science of Military Strategy]*, (Beijing: PLA Press, 2013), 10; The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 'China's Military Strategy, May 2015. [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2015/05/27/content\\_281475115610833.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm), accessed 29 January 2021. The 2019 defence White Paper reiterates this forward policy of combining near seas and far seas protection; see The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defence in the New Era* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2019).

*The Evolution of the PLAN and its Role in Chinese Grand Strategy*

When Chinese policymakers view the world, they see a series of concentric circles emanating from Beijing. The first encompasses the Chinese mainland, while the second spans China's maritime periphery within the First Island Chain.<sup>7</sup> Beyond this is what the 2013 edition of the doctrinal publication *The Science of Military Strategy* referred to as the forward edge of China's perimeter—the eastern Indian Ocean and the Central Pacific. Beyond this are China's far seas interests, straddling key economic projects such as China's maritime Silk Road. From each circle to the next, China's interests become more limited, as do the range of tools at its leaders' disposal. However, there is a symbiotic relationship between the circles. Maritime preponderance close to home facilitates an expanded presence further afield which, combined with other levers of national power, serves China's regional interests. Consider how China's commercial influence has allowed it to progressively isolate Taiwan.<sup>8</sup> Equally, as figures from Admiral Liu onwards have noted, should this isolation allow for the forceful reunification of China and Taiwan, it will allow the PLAN to operate with greater freedom on the world stage.<sup>9</sup> In effect, there is a positive feedback loop between developing a preponderant position on China's periphery and cultivating influence and a competitive presence further afield.

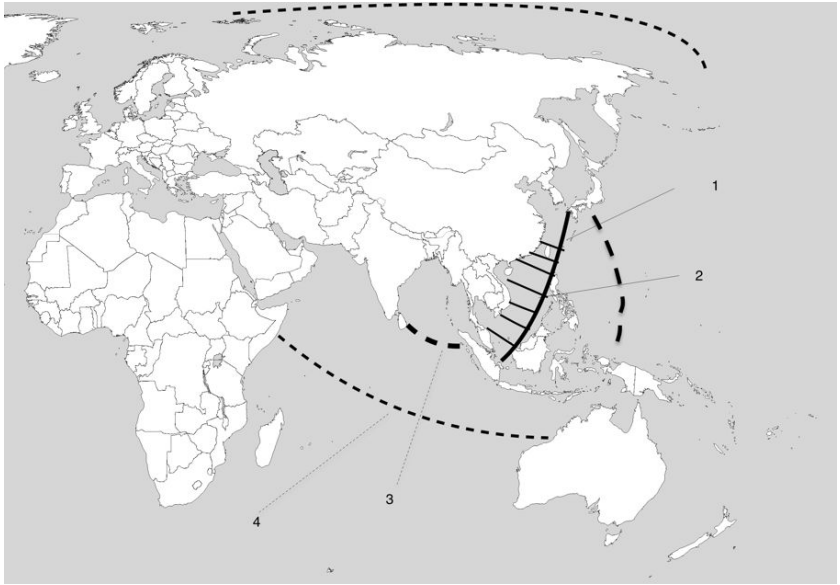
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7 See Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China's Search for Security* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012).

8 Timothy Steven Rich and Vasabjit Banerjee, 'Running Out of Time? The Evolution of Taiwan's Relations in Africa', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, vol. 44, No. 1 (2015), 141–61.

9 Kaushal and Markiewicz, *Crossing the River By Feeling the Stones*, 20–30.

Figure 1: A visualisation of Chinese strategists' security framework.



Legend: 1-The First Island Chain; 2- The Taiwan–South China Sea hinge area “China’s Caribbean”; 3-The forward edge of China’s defence perimeter; 4-The areas in which “Far Seas Protection” missions are to be conducted.<sup>10</sup>

Within the First Island Chain, China’s overarching focus has been on gradually revising the strategic status quo in the subregion stretching from Taiwan through the South China Sea. The Chinese have noted the geographical similarities between this maritime complex and the Caribbean. Much as dominance of the Caribbean coupled with the construction of the Panama Canal allowed the United States to transform itself into a two-ocean navy capable of concentrating power in either the Atlantic or the Pacific more quickly than its European rivals, Chinese strategists posit that dominance of this key region and its multiple routes of egress, such as Sunda, Lombok and Malacca, could allow the PLAN to operate on interior lines between the Pacific and Indian Oceans.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, it has been pro-

10 Note, that the boundaries of each ring are not set in stone. Thus, for example, far seas protection areas could become part of the forward edge if circumstances allow the PLAN to operate more freely.

11 James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, ‘China’s “Caribbean” in the South China Sea’, *SAIS Review*, vol. 24, No. 1, (2006): 79–92.

posed that should China achieve its near seas aims, an independent maritime command operating from either Hainan Island or Taiwan could be established to serve as the command structure for a combined fleet.<sup>12</sup> At present, each of China's three fleets operates under a Joint Theatre Commander with responsibility for the coordination of cross-service assets in a regional conflict. The absence of a dedicated command structure for expeditionary operations illustrates that warfighting at reach is still seen as a distant prospect despite the PLAN's steps towards a forward posture.

### *China's Sea Control Force*

The bulk of PLAN construction over the last three decades has focused on large numbers of smaller vessels such as the Type 056 corvette and the Type 022 Catamaran. These vessels are equipped with the YJ-83 anti-ship cruise missile to play a variety of roles. Built in large enough numbers to maintain a persistent presence alongside the Chinese coastguard and People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia,<sup>13</sup> their anti-surface warfare (ASuW) capabilities render them capable of prevailing against the naval forces of weaker powers in small-scale kinetic clashes. In wartime, these assets would act as aquatic transporter erector launchers (TELs), sheltering under the air defences of larger vessels such as the Type 052D and Type 055 to compensate for their own lack of air defences and acting as part of a cross-domain system of precision strike launchers in tandem with ground and air-based strike assets.<sup>14</sup> Older frigates and destroyers deemed no longer fit for high-intensity warfighting are also part of this force—either through retirement to civilian agencies or reassignment to these tasks within the PLAN.<sup>15</sup>

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12 Zhou Xiaosong, *Zhanlue Xue [The Science of Military Strategy]*, (Beijing: PLA Press, 2013), 108.

13 China has commissioned over 60 Type 056 Corvettes and has constructed 80 Type 022 Catamarans. Ronald O'Rourke, *China's Naval Modernization: Background and Issues for Congress*, (Washington D.C: Congressional Research Service, 2020), 11; Franz Stefan Gady, 'China's Navy Commissions 41st Type 056/056A Stealth Warship', *The Diplomat*, 13 June 2018. <https://thediplomat.com/2018/06/chinas-navy-commissions-41st-type-056056a-stealth-warship/>, accessed 29/01/2021.

14 Nan Li, 'Why is the Surface Fleet Gaining Importance? Insights from PLA Doctrinal Writings', in Peter Dutton and Ryan Martinson (eds.), *China's Evolving Surface Fleet*, (Newport: U.S Naval War College, 2017) 43.

15 For example, old Jiangwei-I class frigates were turned into coastguard cutters—notably without the complete removal of all of their armaments. Franz Stefan

The purpose of this hybrid sea control force is to contribute to a gradual Finlandisation of the states on the southern portion of China's maritime periphery. The 2012 Scarborough Shoals stand-off and the Vanguard Bank stand-off between the Chinese survey vessel Haiyang Dizhi 8 and its coast-guard escorts and their Vietnamese counterparts illustrate the role of the PLAN in grey-zone competition.<sup>16</sup> In each case, the PLAN remained over the horizon, leaving the task of direct contestation to civilian and coast-guard assets. However, the deployment of PLAN vessels off the Scarborough Shoals, as well as its persistent and visible presence within areas claimed by Vietnam, limited rival disputants' response options against Chinese coastguard assets. The risk of localised escalation by persistently engaged PLAN assets left claimants with unsavoury choices between a limited kinetic clash from a position of local weakness, further escalation by building up naval forces in the area or concession.

Operationally supported by military facilities on China's artificial islands within the South China Sea, the PLA's large force of surface combatants can set the terms of engagement for littoral states. Nations which adapt their policies to a more emollient stance vis-à-vis China can expect certain concessions—such as when, following a series of statements supportive of China by President Rodrigo Duterte, Philippine fishing vessels were allowed more latitude to fish near the Scarborough Shoals.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, a more coercive approach was taken towards Vietnam, which has pursued the internationalisation of its territorial disputes with China and supported a wide-reaching code of conduct within the South China Sea, whilst attempting to externally balance Chinese power through partner en-

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Gady, 'How China Is Expanding Its Coast Guard. Beijing is converting old frigates into coastguard patrol vessels', *The Diplomat*, 30 July, 2015. <https://thediplomat.com/2015/07/how-china-is-expanding-its-coast-guard/>, accessed 05/01/2021; In other cases, older vessels have been retained by the PLAN but effectively re-assigned to hybrid missions rather than preparation for warfighting. See Kaushal and Markiewicz, *Crossing the River by Feeling the Stones*, 55.

- 16 Bonnie S. Glaser and Matthew P Funaiolo, 'The South China Sea: Assessing Chinese Paranaul Behavior Within the Nine-Dash Line', in Andrew Erickson and Ryan Martinson, *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press), 189–190; For a brief description of the Vanguard Bank stand-off, see Ankit Panda, "US Slams China's 'Bullying' Amid Vanguard Bank Oil Exploration Standoff With Vietnam", *The Diplomat*, 22 July, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/us-slams-chinas-bullying-amid-vanguard-bank-oil-exploration-standoff-with-vietnam/>, accessed 03/01/2021.
- 17 Peter Dutton, 'Conceptualising China's Maritime Grey Zone Operations', in Andrew Erickson and Ryan Martinson (eds.), *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 30–38.

gements with India and Japan.<sup>18</sup> All of this challenges China's preferred model of direct bilateral engagement, in which the PRC holds distinct advantages.<sup>19</sup> This corresponds to a wider pattern of behaviour in which China has utilised territorial disputes for coercive issue linkage, whereby persistent pressure is used not only to assert control over specific objectives but to shape the wider grammar of engagement between China and neighbouring states.<sup>20</sup>

### *The PLAN's Evolving Blue Water Posture*

The sea control force discussed above is joined by the nucleus of a blue water fleet which, in addition to playing a role in regional competition, serves as the second prong of Chinese maritime strategy—developing a competitive, if not quite preponderant, position beyond the First Island Chain that is consistent with forward edge defence. Exercises by PLAN surface action groups in the Indian Ocean likely serve as preparation for this task.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in 2014, the PLAN docked a submarine in Sri Lanka, ostensibly to support anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden. The implausibility of this pretext lends itself to a counter-interpretation of China trying to habituate regional powers such as India to the presence of Chinese naval assets in the Indian Ocean.<sup>22</sup>

The direct military component of forward edge defence is augmented by the economic and security engagement of countries in the Indian

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18 Lye Liang Fook and Ha Hoang Hop, *Vietnam's Response to China's Maritime Assertiveness in the South China Sea* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2018); Walter Sim, 'On Yoshihide Suga's overseas debut, Japan, Vietnam agree broadly on defence transfer', *The Straits Times*, October 2020. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/japan-vietnam-reach-broad-agreement-on-transfer-of-defence-gear>, accessed 05/01/2021; Hyunh Tam Sang, *Time to Forge New Vietnam India Defence Ties*, CSIS Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, 21 August 2020. <https://amti.csis.org/time-to-forge-india-vietnam-defense-ties/>, accessed 05/01/2021.

19 On China's attempts to socialise ASEAN states into a broader model of bilateral engagement that extends beyond territorial disputes, see David Guo Xiong Han, 'China's Normative Power in Managing South China Sea Disputes', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 10, issue 3 (Autumn 2017), 269–297.

20 Krista E. Weigand, 'China's Strategy in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Dispute: Issue Linkage and Coercive Diplomacy', *Asian Security*, vol. 5, No. 2 (2009), 170–93.

21 Joshua T. White, *China's Indian Ocean Ambitions: Investment, Influence and Military Advantage*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2018).

22 *ibid.*



Ocean. China's construction of dual-use facilities in ports such as Hambantota and Gwadar allows the PLAN to extend its logistical reach without the construction of high-visibility bases.<sup>23</sup> Foreign military sales represent another avenue by which China can achieve strategic effects on its forward edge without the direct deployment of forces. The sale of Yuan Class diesel electric submarines (SSKs) equipped with air-independent propulsion to Pakistan along with the Type 054A Frigate equipped with the supersonic YJ-18 ASCM will, for example, curtail the Indian Navy's freedom of action in the Western Indian Ocean and tie up resources that might otherwise serve India's "Act East" policy of security engagement in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, beyond the twin concentric rings of China's near seas and its strategic forward edge, the PLAN envisions engaging in what it calls protection as opposed to defence. This includes anti-piracy missions, naval diplomacy and combined civil-military efforts to develop domain awareness in key regions. The purposes of these missions can be wide-ranging. They serve at once to protect China's expanding commercial interests and its citizens abroad, to habituate states to the presence of the PLAN beyond its region and to generate the maritime domain awareness which could support a more substantial PLAN presence beyond its forward edge should circumstances dictate.<sup>25</sup> The most prominent of these missions has been the PLAN's involvement in anti-piracy missions off the Gulf of Aden. Less visibly, however, the PLAN has also been involved in supporting Chinese scientific research in both the Arctic and the Antarctic. Through the rotation of personnel with the State Oceanic Administration and the involvement of the PLAN in providing logistical support and protection to research vessels, the PLAN has begun to build a presence in these regions.<sup>26</sup> As the 2015 transit of five PLAN vessels through the Bering Strait demonstrates, this presence will likely become more explicit. Retired Rear

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23 Abhijit Singh, *China's strategic ambitions seen in the Hambantota port in Sri Lanka*, Observer Research Foundation, July 2017. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/chinas-strategic-ambitions-seen-in-the-hambantota-port-in-sri-lanka/>, accessed 05/01/2021.

24 Franz Stefan Gady, 'China to Supply Pakistan With 8 New Stealth Attack Submarines', *The Diplomat*, August 2016. <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/china-to-supply-pakistan-with-8-new-stealth-attack-submarines-by-2028/>, accessed 03/01/2021.

25 See, for example, Ryan Martinson, 'China as an Atlantic Naval Power', *RUSI Journal*, vol. 164, issue 9 (2019), 18–31.

26 Anne Marie Brady, *China as a Polar Great Power*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 70–80.

Admiral Yin Zhuo notes the need for a visible presence to embed China in the governmental structures managing the Arctic and the Antarctic.<sup>27</sup> Some figures have also cited the potential for the Arctic to serve as a relatively safe patrolling area for Chinese Ballistic Missile Submarines.<sup>28</sup> Much of China's presence beyond the forward edge of its security perimeter can be dubbed "competitive cooperation". The provision of public goods such as safe sea lines of communication undoubtedly benefits the PRC, but it also serves another purpose: developing both the pretext for a potentially more substantial presence along China's SLOCs and the logistical and informational sinews to support it.

Over the last several decades, the PLAN has carried out a build-up of larger multi-mission platforms, which has been characterised by periods of cautious experimentation, followed by rapid serial constructions once a platform was selected. The period between 1990 and 2018 saw China build six different types of DDG, combining both Chinese and imported technology. Once the Luyang III (type 052D), which featured the Chinese HHQ-9 SAM system as well as the Type 346B AESA radar, was selected as a viable model comprised mainly of domestic components, China embarked on rapid serial production of this vessel—constructing 14 052Ds in six years after 2012.<sup>29</sup> China's construction of frigates has followed a similar pattern, with four models commissioned over the last three decades before it selected Type 054A for serial production. The vessel, which is equipped with the YJ-18 ASCM and both hull-mounted and variable depth sonar as well as the HHQ-16 medium-range SAM system, reflects lessons learned over the last several decades, during which China built 43 frigates of various classes.<sup>30</sup> Recently, there appears to have been a shift towards even larger platforms such as the Type 055, which is comparable to the Ticonderoga cruiser in terms of its size and capacity for AAW and ASuW and is equipped with a domestically built QC-280 gas turbine engine, as well as a new aircraft carrier class which, unlike China's first aircraft carrier the Liaoning and its sister the Shandong, will be equipped with EMALS.<sup>31</sup> The Type 055 cruiser and Type 003 carrier along with assets such as the

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27 *ibid.*

28 *ibid.*

29 Kaushal and Markiewicz, *Crossing the River By Feeling the Stones*, 52–54.

30 *ibid.*

31 Sidharth Kaushal, 'The Type 055: A Glimpse into The PLAN's Future Developmental Trajectory', *RUSI Defence Systems*, October 2020. <https://rusi.org/publication/rusi-defence-systems/type-055-glimpse-plan's-developmental-trajectory>, accessed 06/01/2021; Sam LaGrone "U.S. Admiral Talks 3rd Chinese Aircraft Carrier: 'Go

planned Type 095 SSN and the Type 076 LHD will likely serve as the nucleus of a far seas navy.

However, China's development of a far seas fleet has proceeded with caution. Currently, China fields fewer vessels of a DDG size or greater than Japan. This partially reflects the technical challenges of building complex multi-mission vessels, but also a careful analysis of China's maritime geography. The sinews of a far seas force both in technical and geopolitical terms are being built cautiously while China seeks to alter the maritime geography of the First Island Chain through a policy of calibrated revisionism.

### *Adapting Alliance Maritime Strategy to the Emergence of a Global PLAN*

#### *The Impact of a Rising PLAN on the Alliance's Strategic Priorities*

At present, there is no NATO-wide consensus on the PRC representing an imminent threat to an alliance which is built around European security. Differences among allies on issues such as the degree to which China's rise should be viewed as an economic opportunity as opposed to a geopolitical challenge are likely to persist—with NATO's London declaration embracing both viewpoints.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, present assessments that the PLAN remains a relatively tangential actor with regards to NATO's AMS are valid. The PLAN is yet to effectively transform its immediate periphery and its track towards a far seas presence is still tentative and limited. The alliance's strategy could engage a rising PLAN reciprocally, whilst hedging against the potentially significant challenges it may well pose in the future.

A framework for a future AMS to contend with China's rise might take as its starting point the concept of concentric circles emanating from the alliance's core which is analogous to the one which Chinese strategists use. The North Atlantic and the Mediterranean—the alliance's core area of re-

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Ahead and Build that Big Ship', *US Naval Institute*, September 2020. <https://news.usni.org/2020/09/17/u-s-admiral-talks-3rd-chinese-aircraft-carrier-go-ahead-and-build-that-big-ship>, accessed 06/01/2021.

32 Mark Webber, 'The Perils of a NATO Rebalance to the Asia-Pacific', in Alexander Moens and Brooke Windsor (eds.), *NATO and the Asia Pacific*, (Rome: NATO Defence College, 2016), 83–100; London Declaration Issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in London 3–4 December 2019, NATO. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_171584.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_171584.htm), accessed 06/01/2021.

sponsibility—still see a very limited PLAN presence. On the maritime “forward edge” of the alliance—the Indian Ocean and the Arctic, which directly abut the alliance’s AOR and will increasingly influence its security—there is a growing overlap between NATO and Chinese interests as both the alliance and the PLAN seek to establish a security presence along key SLOCs. Finally, within its own region, the PLAN retains a preponderance of both interest and capability vis-à-vis the alliance—short of a radical re-ordering of European priorities.

### *Strategic Hedging—An Overarching Concept For Managing a Rising PLAN*

This chapter proposes that the alliance can manage its challenges through strategic hedging on the premise that there are a number of avenues open to the alliance to constrain the PLAN obliquely without direct confrontation.

For example, the alliance could indirectly shape dynamics within the First Island Chain to convince China to reallocate assets to its own region and thus moderate the pace at which the PLAN can evolve into an extra-regional actor. As scholars have pointed out, the First Island Chain is a defence-dominated environment, and many of the anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities that China has developed to offset American naval strengths can be utilised by China’s smaller neighbours to constrain the PLAN.<sup>33</sup>

There is little reason that weaker neighbours cannot emulate the first tier of the PLAN using a hybrid fleet of well-armed light vessels backed by SSKs, a variety of ground, sea and air-launched anti-ship missiles with the more effective use of civilian and paramilitary assets to counter grey-zone activity. Indeed, nations such as Vietnam are already investing in precisely such a range of capabilities. Effectively coordinated and provided with Intelligence Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and maritime domain awareness, such assets could significantly constrain the PLAN’s freedom of action. They may not preclude every individual instance of revisionism, but would deny China the maritime preponderance it needs to alter its

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33 For a fuller discussion of the options available to smaller states, see Michael Beckley, “Balancing China, How to Check Chinese Military Expansion in East Asia”, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, *Policy Watch*, November 2017. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/balancing-china-how-check-chinese-military-expansion-east-asia>, accessed 06/01/2021.

near seas geography.<sup>34</sup> What weaker states currently lack is not sea denial assets per se, but the ISR capabilities and maritime domain awareness to use them effectively.

Members of the alliance can help regional powers to develop the situational awareness that they need both individually and as a collective. In collective terms, the alliance could utilise many of the organisational skills learned by key members such as the UK and France through experiences such as the construction of the Maritime Domain Awareness for Trade (MDAT-GoG) system in the Gulf of Guinea to abet the creation of a regional system for shared maritime domain awareness in the South China Sea. Many well-honed skills that help partners deal with non-traditional security threats also assist regional powers in contending with maritime hybrid warfare. The alliance could also contribute to the creation of underwater domain awareness, given its long experience in this domain. This would go some way towards allowing littoral states to problematise the sea control exerted by China's hybrid presence fleet. Individual regional partners can also be engaged through advise and assist missions to generate the surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities needed to create their own anti-access bubbles. Finally, individual NATO members with experience of littoral warfare in regions like the Baltics could commit to deeper engagement on a bilateral basis with the states of the First Island Chain to complement a wider alliance approach.

Defence engagement which re-enforces an already defence-dominated operational environment by providing partners with the informational capacity to constrain the PLAN more effectively or deny it sea space in wartime need not result in direct confrontation with the PRC. Indeed, even Chinese partners such as Russia have contributed to the development of a Vietnamese A2AD system through the sale of Kilo class submarines. Moreover, such engagement could be couched in terms of helping partners to develop maritime domain awareness as opposed to more confrontational terms.

The first readjustment to AMS that this chapter proposes is the adoption of a model of defence engagement which is consistent with great power competition, if not quite confrontation.

In the Arctic and the Indian Ocean, which directly straddle SLOCs critical to both NATO and the PRC, the alliance must balance the twin aims of maintaining a competitive advantage vis-à-vis the PLAN and accommodating its pursuit of legitimate interests. Existing alliance missions such as

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34 *ibid.*

counter-piracy in the Gulf of Aden should be nested within a wider competitive approach aimed at fostering interoperability with regional navies and cultivating domain awareness, all of which are critical to maritime competition. Combating non-traditional threats ought to be a subcomponent of a wider effort to engage regional powers in areas such as the Indian Ocean through initiatives to share data, conduct joint exercises and develop the interoperability to adjust to a rising PLAN, if needed. Individual alliance members such as France already have agreements on data sharing with key regional states such as India, which could, at least in principle, be adapted to be integrated into a wider framework that encompasses relations between India and the alliance as a whole.

Maintaining the centrality of NATO and its regional partners to secure key SLOCs against non-traditional threats and holding out the option of PLAN participation on the alliance's terms could allow it to set the rules of the road in areas of mutual interest or to compel the PLAN to acknowledge the competitive function of its far seas presence more explicitly. Similarly, an alliance maritime strategy that more fully incorporated the Arctic into alliance planning and included concerns such as Arctic governance and SLOC protection along with more traditional issues such as manning the GIUK gap would both engage and constrain the PLAN in the High North.<sup>35</sup>

### *The Role of Framework Nations in Supporting Strategic Hedging*

Finally, individual allies acting as framework nations could create a structure distinct from but supportive of the alliance to enable allies within NATO to opt into adopting a wider Indo-Pacific role. The Anglo-French Combined Joint Expeditionary Force could realistically serve this role in its envisioned capacity as a high-readiness pool of forces primarily geared to amphibious insertion at reach.<sup>36</sup> To be militarily credible, such a force would need to alter its command structure to integrate partners from both within and outside the alliance more flexibly and incorporate assets such as both nations' emergent carrier-strike capabilities. This was always envisioned as a desired end state for the evolution of the CJEF.<sup>37</sup> A rapid reac-

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35 On the need for maritime strategy to expand beyond Naval Planning, see Frank Hoffman's chapter in this volume.

36 See Alice Pannier, 'The Anglo-French defence partnership after the "Brexit" vote: new incentives and new dilemmas', *Global Affairs*, vol. 2, No. 5 (2016), 481–490.

37 *ibid.*

tion force capable of integrating a wider range of assets than originally envisioned into operations at reach in support of alliance objectives could serve as the second component of a hedging strategy—with the latent potential for “soft balancing” to become hard balancing if certain preconditions are not met. This force could be credible in mid to high-intensity scenarios in areas identified as the forward edge of the PLAN's perimeter, such as the Indian Ocean.

A future AMS should aim for symmetry with the PLAN's own gradual evolution. Tentative steps towards indirectly constraining the PLAN can both slow its evolution into a globally deployed force, socialise the PRC into shared rules of the road and create a vital political, organisational and military substructure to constrain a potential threat to the alliance. This would require an AMS built around the concepts of hedging and soft balancing, coupled with complementary initiatives by framework nations willing to play a coalescing function for members of the alliance that are willing to play a wider role on the shared maritime flanks of China and the alliance.

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