

CHINESE NAVAL MODERNIZATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

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ABSTRACT

During the late twentieth century, China's structural reform accelerated the country's development in the political, economic and military realms. This reform's main goal was to transform the People's Republic of China into a major power, increasing its influence in the international system. To this end, the Chinese Armed Forces were modernized, allowing the country to use its military power to exercise strategies such as deterrence. The purpose of this article is to discuss how Chinese naval projection in the South China Sea impacts sovereignty disputes among neighboring states, as well as other events. According to international maritime law, the Chinese claims are illegal. China is attempting to overcome the limits of its Exclusive Economic Zone, granted by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982. Thus, the study analyzes the dynamics of military power in the South China Sea, as well as the United States' attempts to mitigate Chinese military power in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: China. Projection of Military Power. Naval Force. South China Sea.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Measures such as structural reform, market opening and peaceful development, established by Deng Xiaoping's government in the late 1970s, enabled the People's Republic of China (PRC) to experience massive economic growth in the early 21st century (STANZEL, 2017; NORTON, 2015). These measures have put Chinese political and economic in a determinant position in the international system. In an attempt to explain this shift, scholars have sought to identify the main interests shaping the country's policies (CARRIÇO, 2013; NORTON, 2015, STANZEL, 2017).

This article discusses three aspects of China's strategic objectives which influence the dynamics of power projection in the South China Sea (SChS) region: peaceful economic development; the defense of sovereignty and territorial restoration; and, finally, the strengthening of a new concept of security. This study emphasizes the basis of this new security concept on computerization and digitization, both of which shape the ongoing modernization of China's military forces.

Moreover, we address the expansion of Chinese military capabilities in recent decades, with emphasis on their Naval Force. Thus, our analysis investigates both the modernization of naval armaments and China's military action in the SChS, involving strategies such as Anti Access and Area Denial (A2/AD).

In this sense, our research question is the following: is there an impact of Chinese naval modernization over sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea? If so, could this point to an increased Chinese presence in the region, in violation of the nautical limits established by international law? In other words, this article seeks to determine whether China's military programs lead to an imbalance of power in Southeast Asia.

The qualitative method was employed in the analysis of research on the Chinese Navy. The results of this analysis were then applied to the case study of the South China Sea. As such, we carried out a literature review encompassing the main authors who have dealt with this theme (DELLAGNELO; SILVA, 2005): Carriço (2013), Fravel (2011), Heath et al. (2016), Norton (2015), O'Rourke (2012), Poling (2020), Santoro (2016), Stanzel et al. (2017), and Sylvester (2012).

The article is divided into three sections. The first analyzes the overarching interests and objectives of the Chinese state, known as the Grand Strategy. The second assesses the military capabilities obtained

from Chinese modernization, with a focus on the Naval Force. The third and last section is a case study of the South China Sea, assessing Chinese projection and its impacts on the regional environment.

2. THE SECURITY-DEVELOPMENT NEXUS DURING THE COLD WAR

Between the years 2002 and 2012, the Chinese economic ascension created the opportunity for the country to establish itself as a regional and international power, with the ability to exert economic and political influence (US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, 2018). The assertive role of China's foreign policy has led major powers and important analysts in the field of international relations to wonder about the nature of the country's Grand Strategy (STANZEL et al., 2017; NORTON, 2015).

The concept of Grand Strategy encompasses a series of instruments for the unified understanding of the main interests of a state, coordinating and directing efforts towards their achievement (NORTON, 2015). As a foundation for defining possible threats against government policies, the Grand Strategy also guides how the state might use its resources, whether natural, political, economic or military, in order to achieve its purposes (CARRIÇO, 2013; NORTON, 2015).

According to one of the most notorious Chinese strategists and director of the Institute of International Relations at Peking University, Wang Jisi,

Any country's grand strategy must answer at least three questions: What are the nation's core interests? What external forces threaten them? And what can the national leadership do to safeguard them? (JISI, 2011, p. 1).

In this sense, statements by Chinese leaders and official government documents published since 2009 provide support for investigations and findings regarding the country's main political interests. These are key pieces to understand what international role China intends to play in the short and long term.

Our analysis suggests that the Great Chinese Strategy can be assessed by foreign policy means, i.e.: by looking at the country's international position, distribution of power, and execution of economic

and military policies (CARRIÇO, 2013). Furthermore, in the Chinese case, it is based on “peaceful development,” a way to ensure the effectiveness of strategic policies, both internal and external, benefiting a state’s interests and increasing its international influence. China adopts the five principles of peaceful coexistence³ presented in 1954 (CARRIÇO, 2013).

Based on a series of authors to be discussed throughout this study, this article argues that the Chinese claims to the South China Sea have three pillars: peaceful economic development; conservation of sovereignty and restoration of territories; and a new concept of security.

2.1 “PEACEFUL” ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The economic growth experienced by the PRC and China’s position as the world’s second largest economic power are the result of its reformist, open-market model, proposed in the late 1970s during Deng Xiaoping’s government (NORTON, 2013). Under Xiaoping, China’s foreign policy was characterized by a “low-profile” attitude. In strategic terms, this was China’s way of adapting to the international post-Cold War agenda and to multilateralism, while at the same time assuming an inconspicuous profile and focusing on domestic economic-development policies (MOURA, 2015; STANZEL et al., 2017).

The Chinese foreign policy practiced during the last few decades, however, breaks with low-profile paradigms by claiming a more assertive international role, especially since the beginning of Xi Jinping’s government in 2012 (MOURA, 2015). Jinping named this new policy the “Chinese Dream,” that is, the strengthening and rejuvenation of the country under the CCP regime, in order to build a modern and prosperous society. Chinese leaders hope to complete this modernizing drive by 2021. Long-term prospects, on the other hand, reach as far as 2049, the centenary year of the Chinese Revolution and the conquest of power by the Party (NORTON, 2015).

During his opening speech for the 19th PCC Congress, in 2017, Xi Jinping clarified that the main objectives of modernization are to continue economic and technological growth, enabling China to assume the role of global leader in innovation (JINPING, 2017). From the Chinese people’s

³ The five principles are: mutual respect for sovereignty and national integrity; non-aggression; non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states; reciprocal equality and benefits; peaceful coexistence between states (CARRIÇO, 2013).

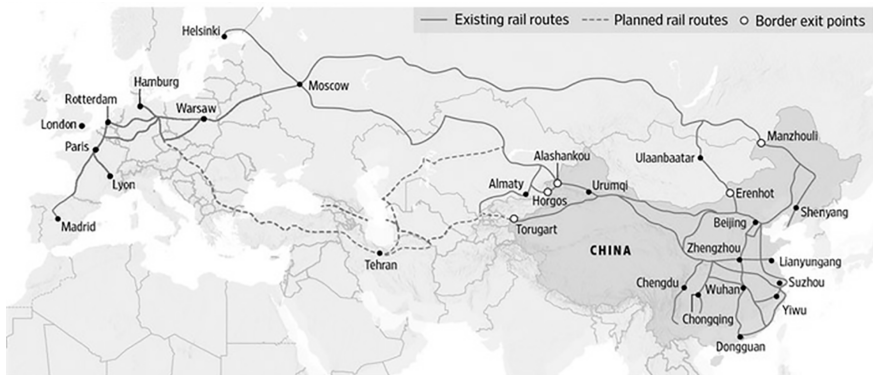
perspective, the rise of this great regional power seeks the path of least resistance, practicing principles of neutrality and non-intervention (NEW CHINA, 2018).

Xi Jinping states:

China will unswervingly pursue peaceful development, push forward joint development, maintain the multilateral trade system and participate in global economic governance. China will never pursue development at the cost of sacrificing other countries' interests (RENMIN BAO, 2013 apud CARRIÇO, 2013, p. 28).

Thus, it is clear that China has been working on the elaboration of strategies focused on peaceful international relations and economic growth. In addition to participating in forums, multilateral institutions and trade groups, such as the BRICS⁴, the Chinese government proposes the reconstruction of regional trade routes such as the Silk Road⁵ (SYLVESTER, 2012).

Map 1 – The Silk Road



Source: Moss (2017).

The above map of trade routes portrays China's interconnection with European and Middle-Eastern countries. This strategy is meant to

⁴ Formed by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

⁵ Historical route connecting traders from China, Asia, the Middle East and the European continent.

expand Chinese trade internationally, in line with the “Chinese Dream” slogan, as seen below:

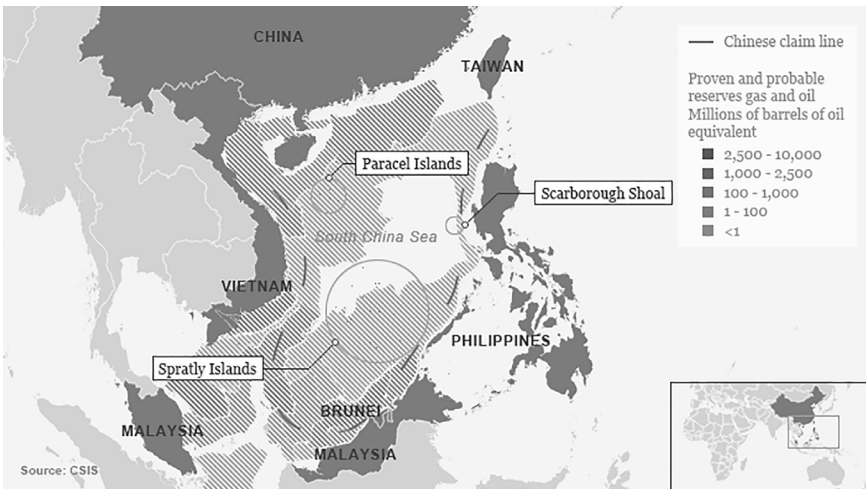
We will develop new ways of making outbound investments, promote international cooperation on production capacity, form globally-oriented networks of trade, investment and financing, production, and services, and build up our strengths for international economic cooperation and competition (JINPING, 2017, p. 31).

Besides the new Silk Road, the South China Sea region is an important area for Chinese economic goals. It is located in the Pacific Ocean and encompasses several countries such as the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam (BEUKEL 2010).

According to Pautasso and Doria (2016), the region is an important area for international trade and communication, valued at approximately US\$ 5.3 trillion dollars. In addition, it is estimated that approximately 60% of Chinese energy imports and 80% of Chinese oil imports rely on the South China Sea. These data are important when considering that China remains dependent on foreign natural resources such as oil. In 2009, China became one of the world’s largest oil importers (NORTON, 2015).

The map below depicts the levels of concentration of natural resources in the SChS, with green denoting the larger agglomerations of oil and gas reserves.

Map 2 – Natural gas and oil reserves in the South China Sea



Source: DW (2017).

According to Fravel (2011), the region holds an equivalent of 105 billion barrels of hydrocarbons, in addition to 11 billion barrels of oil and 190 trillion cubic meters of natural gas. Furthermore, the South China Sea houses a significant fishing area, besides important trade routes, establishing connections with the Strait of Malacca, the Indian Ocean, the Taiwan Strait and the Pacific Ocean (BEUKEL, 2010; FRAVEL, 2011).

Therefore, it is essential for the Chinese to maintain open maritime passages in the SChS, alongside a regional environment bearing the minimum possible intervention by other international powers. However, the United States remains active in the region, installing military bases to contain China's growing influence over Southeast Asia (NORTON, 2015; STANZEL et al., 2017).

Starting in 2018, the two largest economic powers on the globe entered a protracted trade war. This economic dispute began with a series of US taxes on Chinese imports, on the grounds that the trade balance deficit between the two countries was harming the United States. The result was Chinese retaliation, with the Chinese government similarly applying taxes on U.S. products (MONTEIRO, OBREGON, 2019).

The trade war generated noticeable negative impacts for China, including economic slowdowns of 6.4% and 6.2% in the first and second quarters of 2019, respectively (YAO, 2019). In the United States, the agriculture sector was the most severely affected, since China has exponentially reduced its acquisition of American soy (SPUTNIK, 2020).

The dispute has also increased international tensions, prompting fears that the crisis could slow down world trade (PASSARINHO, 2019). However, signs of a possible reversal appeared in January 2020, when the two countries signed the first phase of a trade agreement (BBC, 2020).

Thus, despite the fact that the USA and China assume policies in favor of their conflicting domestic interests, their economic interdependence means that the trade war can cause damage to both countries. As we have already hinted at, the primary Chinese interest is economic development and, therefore, China's diplomacy has an essential role in avoiding further roadblocks (BARRÍA, 2018).

2.2 CONSERVATION OF SOVEREIGNTY AND TERRITORIAL RESTORATION

The preservation of sovereignty and territorial unity are essential components of China's national security policy. The 2013 Chinese Defense White Paper states that it is the duty of the national security apparatus to fight terrorism, extremism and separatism (MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE, 2013).

Since Mao Zedong (1949-1976), Chinese governments have been interested in reunification and the assurance of territorial authority (SYLVESTER, 2012). Due to its millenary past as an imperial power and based on its national policy for the defense of sovereignty, China resists giving up territories and recognizing regions that have proclaimed their independence (MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE, 2015).

The dynasties of the Chinese Empire dedicated little effort to the preservation of the coastal zone. Since the Chinese Empire was a major land power, coastal security policies had little relevance. Moreover, self-sufficiency and the preponderance of trade routes across Western Asia meant there was little need for international trade using maritime routes (STANZEL et al., 2017).

Threats along the coast began to emerge in the middle of the 19th century, with the expansion of European and Japanese imperialism exposing the fragility of the Chinese navy. Due to regional fragmentation, coastal cities had particular objectives and interests, different from those of the interior provinces, which were the focus of government policies. Thus, China was often forced to cede control of its port cities – such as Hong Kong – to foreign powers (SYLVESTER, 2012).

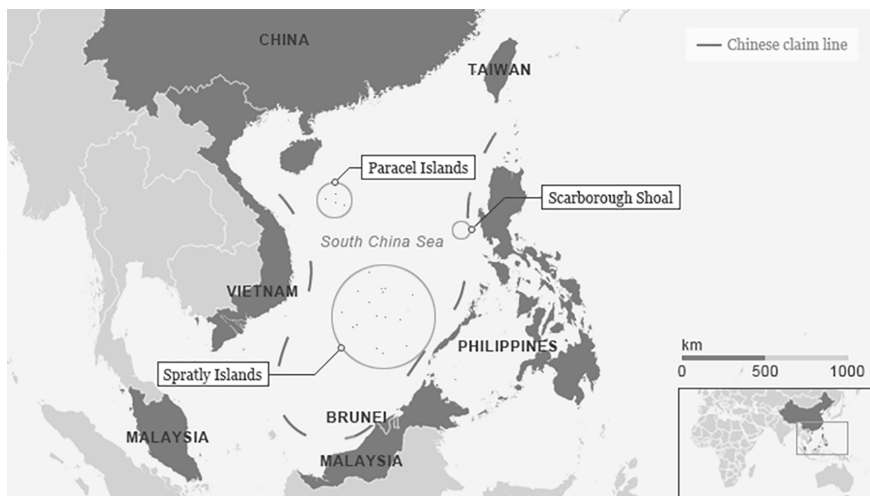
Thus, the Chinese currently believe that demonstrating control over sovereignty and projecting regional power are crucial undertakings. This would take place mainly through well-structured Armed Forces, able to ensure national interests (NORTON, 2015). Advances in naval military equipment, the creation of artificial reefs in the SChS and the attempt to advance maritime authority beyond the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) are practical examples of China's strategy for dealing with territorial disputes.

According to the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the maritime sovereignty of a state is exercised within the area formed by the territorial waters and the adjoining contiguous zone, each measuring 12 nautical miles, for a total of 24

nautical miles. The EEZ region comprises another 200 miles, where the state in question may freely extract natural resources and build artificial islands (UNCLOS, 1995).

However, as shown in the map below, China claims sovereignty over an extensive area of the SChS, exceeding the limits established by international law.

Map 3 – China’s claim to maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea



Source: DW, 2015.

The belt claimed by the Chinese – known as the “nine-dash line” – appears in blue, and represents an extension of the Chinese maritime limit, which has been demanded by the country since the end of World War II⁶. This extension clearly encroaches upon the Exclusive Economic Zones of neighboring states. Other countries criticize the demarcation defended by China for violating international maritime law.

According to the official Chinese position, their claims to maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea have historical origins. The area has had bustling commercial activities for over two thousand years, and the Chinese claim to have been the first to exercise “sovereignty

⁶ According to Baker and Zhang (2012), the shadow of independence movements in neighboring countries meant that the Chinese political strategy garnered little criticism and discussion throughout the 20th century. Although the “nine-dash line” is not recognized internationally, for the Chinese, the fact that it was also not contested during meant that their version of the maritime map had been accepted.

and jurisdiction over [its islands] in a continuous, peaceful and effective way" (PAUTASSO; DORIA, 2016, p. 23, our translation). However, per the UNCLOS, this historical thesis does not provide a legitimate support for Chinese maritime claims, since only maritime authorities bounded by currently established nautical lines may be recognized.

China's first formal manifestation on the issue took place in 1947, with a statement by prominent Chinese Communist Party leader Zhou Enlai and the emergence of the "eleven-dash line" (FRAVEL, 2011). Within this frame of reference, the maritime strip extended practically over the entire Southern Sea, severely limiting the maritime sovereignty of other countries. In 1953, the PRC government erased two dashes, changing the nomenclature to "nine-dash line," the current maritime boundary advocated by China (BAKER; ZHANG, 2012).

Since then, China has boosted its geopolitical strategies for consolidating the country's domination in the South China Sea, including a strengthening of domestic policies following the ratification of UNCLOS in 1982 (FRAVEL, 2011). In 1992, China enacted the "Law on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone," granting itself rights over the South China Sea as well as its islands and archipelagos (BEUKEL, 2010).

China further pursued this policy by reaffirming the extension of the "nine-dash" maritime line in 1996, and by enacting the 1998 "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf", in which it supplemented the 1992 Law with new maritime rights (FRAVEL, 2011). It is important to mention that the "nine-dash line" demarcation of the Chinese maritime area has been displayed in the country's official maps since 1949 (FRAVEL, 2011).

In 1995, the country expanded its maritime presence by building artificial islands near the Spratly Islands, located outside its EEZ. During the following decades the area would also be occupied by Chinese military bases (BEUKEL, 2010). According to UNCLOS (1982), article 60, states have full prerogatives for constructing artificial islands, as long as they lie within these countries' Exclusive Economic Zones. This is clearly not the case of China (JORDÃO, 2018).

There are discussions among scholars of strategic studies as to whether the South China Sea is a new topic in the Chinese Grand Strategy. For Norton (2015), the zone has long stood as integral for the defense of Chinese national sovereignty and territorial integrity, and should not be seen as a new pillar of the Grand Chinese Strategy. However, what is

beyond doubt is that previous maritime frameworks are being replaced by policies focused on maritime defense, favoring China's sovereignty and reunification.

2.3 A NEW CONCEPT OF SECURITY

Due to the expansion of Chinese commercial activities on the global stage, the country's dependence on natural resources, its claim to maritime territories, and its projection as a great power, contemporary Chinese relations can be described as a combination of Soft Power (NYE, 2002) and Hard Power⁷ policies. This is because China's strategic action varies according to the government's interpretation of threats, influences and opportunities for international cooperation.

During the late 1990s – amidst the formation of alliances between Asian countries and the United States, as well as the latter's growing military presence in the regional environment – China had to develop a new concept of security (STANZEL et. Al, 2017). This new concept is defined as a series of Chinese policies meant to allow the country to exercise an

active participation in the containment of belligerent behavior ... in the defense of a free market, in interdependence, in the creation of common interests and in the reduction of conflicts ... [through which] China refutes hegemonic policies and advocates for international peace and development (CARRIÇO, 2013, p. 25, our translation).

Years later, the concept of security was then expanded to also include the defense of Chinese sovereignty, especially in the South China Sea (STANZEL et. Al, 2017). As we have already discussed, Chinese leaders overcame the previous low-profile *modus operandi* by adopting resilient, proactive policies in the defense of their country's national interests.

In this sense, China has been intensifying the capabilities of its Armed Forces at various levels by means of widespread reform and acquisition of new armaments, increasing the effectiveness of the Chinese military complex. China's military modernization has been underway

⁷ Hard Power policies are characterized by the use of military power as a state's main form of influence over the international scenario. Soft Power, on the other hand, denotes a preference for instruments such as diplomacy and international cooperation (NYE, 2002).

since the 1990s, and is characterized as a drive towards the defense of essential government objectives. It also serves as a regional deterrent in respect to local disputes, such as in the South China Sea (CARRIÇO, 2013).

Accordingly, Norton (2015) states that China’s combination of Hard Power and Soft Power, besides its deterrence policy, are crucial for the projection of military power over the region. However, the regional North American presence – in the form of military bases and aircraft carriers – counteracts the possibility of a more comprehensive Chinese advance in Southeast Asia.

The main US military bases in the South China Sea are shown below.

Map 4 – US military bases in Southeast Asia (2011)



Source: Thomson Reuters (2012).

The figure shows the grouping of the various North American bases in Southeast Asia as of 2011. The United States Air Force and Navy

presence in South Korea grew to 28,500 military personnel in 2017, from 25,374 in 2011. In Japan, this number expanded from 35,598 to 50,000 over the same period. More than 20,000 Navy soldiers have been stationed at the Futenma and Iwakuni air bases (PUBLIC RADIO INTERNATIONAL, 2017).

The main drivers for the expansion of US operations in the region are the tensions between China and Taiwan, the disputes over sovereignty in the South China Sea, and the possibility of nuclear conflict with North Korea (O'ROURKE, 2018).

According to Sylvester (2012), in this context China faces three possible scenarios: accepting the American presence, looking for alternatives to reduce its vulnerability, or employing equipment that can improve its global naval capacity. Recently, the country has developed its anti-access and area denial capabilities (A2/AD) through the acquisition of submarines and anti-ship missiles, with the aim of stopping any other nation from interfering with its control of the sea, especially in respect to the South China Sea and maritime sovereignty disputes (A MODERN NAVY WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS, 2009).

Thus, an analysis of contemporary Chinese strategies points to an ambiguity within the country's development policies. On the one hand, China has a strong presence in forums, blocs and multilateral institutions, in addition to participating in regional partnerships such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)⁸ and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)⁹. On the other, the country has been developing capabilities to overcome external threats in the military domain.

3. THE MODERNIZATION OF THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY

The Chinese military modernization model, defended in this article, has been developed by means of a positive hybrid system conceptualized by Professor Edson José Neves Júnior, PhD in International Strategic Studies. This system is characterized by the application of technological and digital means to achieve greater integration between the Armed Forces (Air, Naval, Space, Land) and communication networks,

⁸ Founded in 1967, its members are: Brunei, Cambodia, Philippines, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

⁹ Founded in 1969, its members are: China, Kazakhstan, India, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

while preserving the structures of traditional military forces (NEVES JÚNIOR, 2015).

In terms of operational aspects, this model helps expand situational awareness, i.e., the accuracy of satellite-obtained reconnaissance. As a result, both target acquisition and attacks themselves become more accurate. One may employ guided missiles controlled by a GPS-type system, for instance, reducing operational margins of error (NEVES JÚNIOR, 2015).

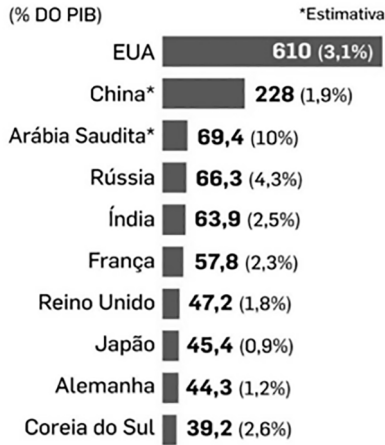
According to Chinese leader Jinping,

We should ensure that efforts to make our country prosperous and efforts to make our military strong go hand in hand. We will strengthen unified leadership, top-level design, reform, and innovation. We will speed up implementation of major projects, deepen reform of defense-related science, technology, and industry, achieve greater military-civilian integration, and build integrated national strategies and strategic capabilities. We will improve our national defense mobilization system, and build a strong, well-structured, and modern border defense, coastal defense, and air defense (JINPING, 2017, p. 49).

Since the late 1980s, China has intensified military programs and the use of technology in order to improve its arsenal. The objective is to transform the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a sharp military instrument, able to operate the most powerful armaments (US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE, 2018). Moreover, the 2015 Chinese Defense White Paper clarifies that maintaining maritime domination and sovereignty is the country's new military priority (HEATH et al., 2016).

The Chinese Communist Party expects the Armed Forces to complete their modernizing drive by 2049. This should transform them into a major world reference (COOPER, 2018). The infographic below portrays the high levels of Chinese investments in the military sphere, establishing comparisons at the regional and global level.

Infographic 1 – World military expenditure in 2017



Source: Diário de Notícias (2018).

The country leads military spending in Asia and ranks second internationally, only behind the vast and virtually unmatched United States military complex. Data from the South Korean newspaper Hankyoreh shows that China's military budget grew by 7% in 2017, while the United States' grew by 10%. Japan, meanwhile, increased its military spending by approximately 2.3% (HANKYOREH, 2017). However, it is important to note that the United States' military capacity remains superior to that of China or any other country.

The new structure of the PLA is based on computerization and digitization, which provide real-time command and control. Computerization refers to the use of modern communication technologies to integrate and coordinate the Armed Forces. Digitization enables quicker and more effective coordination of military forces, while reducing the enemy's counterattack window (OFFICE OF NAVAL INTELLIGENCE WASHINGTON DC., 2009).

Chinese technology includes missiles guided by a GPS-type system as well as satellite navigation, making target acquisition more accurate and reducing the need for infantry deployment and direct contact between forces (HEATH et al., 2016). A robust military force would allow China to achieve the Grand Strategy's objectives, especially in terms of economic and sovereign interests (HEATH et al., 2016).

Thus, despite advocating regional stability for the application of "peaceful development" policies, China also employs warlike mechanisms

in pursuit of its objectives. In fact, the Chinese defense and domination operations in SChS maritime zones have increased substantially since the beginning of the military modernization drive (MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE, 2013).

This fact is evidenced in the 2015 White Paper, which shows that maritime areas are an important topic of Chinese defense and strategy. The document also hypothesizes that the drive towards technology and computerization within the military forces would allow the Chinese to emerge victorious from possible local wars (MINISTRY OF NATIONAL DEFENSE, 2013).

3.1 THE NAVY OF THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) is a key player in the achievement of Chinese maritime interests, especially where disputes over sovereignty in the SChS are concerned. According to Meng Xiangqing, deputy director of the Strategic Research Institute at the PLA's National Defense University, currently, the main threats to regional stability and to the objectives of the "Chinese Dream" come from the maritime zone (HEATH, 2017).

Chinese naval modernization mainly comprises efforts to acquire long-range weapons, such as anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM), and technological vessels, such as aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines (O'ROURKE, 2012). The substitution of the old naval equipment has been carried out since 2015, with an emphasis on restructuring, armament and training (US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, 2018).

Currently, the Chinese Naval Force is considered to be the largest in Asia¹⁰. The PLAN has "more than 300 surface combatants, submarines, amphibious ships, patrol craft, and specialized types" (US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, 2018, p. 41).

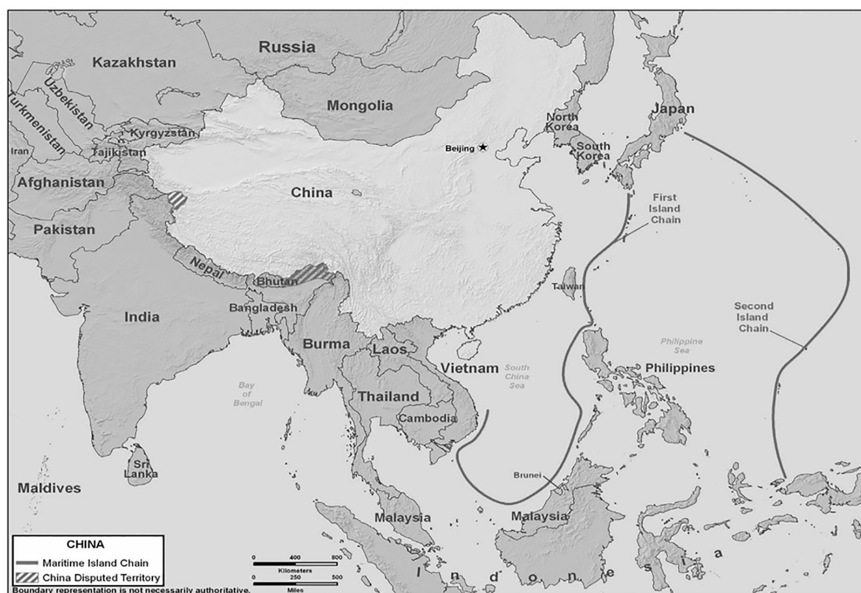
This overarching Chinese maritime strategy emerged in 1982, penned by Chinese Navy Commander Liu Huaqing (1916–2011). Termed "Offshore defense," such a military policy aims to expand naval capabilities in order to defend Chinese interests in the maritime regions to which China claims sovereignty (HARNETT, 2014).

Offshore defense relies on the projection of military power over the region's two island chains (HARNETT, 2014), as shown in the map

¹⁰ Idem.

below. China intends to take maritime control of the first chain, in the South China Sea, to use it as a point of departure to advance towards the second (US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, 2018).

Map 5 – The first and second island chains



Source: Office of the Secretary of Defense (2008).

The first chain of islands is situated in the territory to the east of China, covering Taiwan, the South China Sea, the Paracel Islands and the Spratly Islands. The purpose of this strategy is to employ Anti-Access and Area Denial (A2/AD) techniques to prevent other countries from accessing this maritime territory (A MODERN NAVY WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS, 2009). This is done by means of short-range equipment, in addition to ballistic and cruise missiles, diesel submarines and fighter planes (MACHADO et. Al, 2016).

The second chain of islands is situated in the maritime extension between Southeast Japan and the eastern coast of the Philippines. The interface between the first and second chains is also obtained by long-range technological military instruments conducive to anti-access, such as nuclear submarines, ballistic missiles and anti-ship weapons able to operate over long distances (MACHADO et. Al, 2016).

Thus, Chinese military planning is characterized by technological insertion and acquisition, especially in terms of military platforms,

submarines and missiles. As we have seen, technology also contributes to military logistics, as it effectively integrates communications, command, control and surveillance (O'ROURKE, 2012).

Currently, the Chinese are prioritizing construction projects and increasing submarine capacity, since the latter is able to provide inconspicuous means of deterrence (BRIGGS, 2016). Submarines ensure navigation in areas outside of Chinese territory as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, playing a fundamental role in maritime surveillance (BRIGGS, 2016).

Between 1995 and 2016, the Chinese Navy acquired approximately 50 submarines (both nuclear and conventional). China currently operates "4 nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBN), 5 nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSN), and 47 diesel-powered attack submarines." (US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, 2018, p. 41-42). Considering the country's current naval development, it is believed that by 2020 the PLAN will be in possession of 69 to 78 submarines (O'ROURKE, 2018).

Another type of naval weapon essential to the projection of power are aircraft carriers, since these serve as bases for fighter-plane transport and takeoff. From the beginning of Chinese military modernization until 2012, the PLAN had no aircraft carriers. However, in September 2012, it acquired its first ship of the kind from the former Soviet Union, a Kuznetsov-class ship baptized as Liaoning (MIZOKAMI, 2018).

Since then, China has been dedicated to producing its own aircraft carriers. The Type 001A came to fruition in April 2017, the first Chinese-born aircraft carrier. It weighs approximately 55,000 tons and uses conventional propulsion. Another differentiation between the former USSR's aircraft carrier and the Chinese native has to do with the purposes ascribed to each one. While the Liaoning aims to establish support for technical operations and training, the Type 001A aims to ensure territorial defense and security during wars or skirmishes (MIZOKAMI, 2018).

In early 2018, the PLAN began the construction of its third aircraft carrier, the second ever manufactured nationally. According to the Chinese media, the aircraft's main innovation is the replacement of the old aircraft takeoff system by an electromagnetic catapult. Thus, China would be increasingly prepared for eventual naval battles (O'ROURKE, 2018).

Programs for the construction of surface ships are also essential for defense and long-range operations, especially those that include guided missiles. Also known as anti-ship missiles, these are used to stop

enemy ships and ensure maritime defense. With the massive reshaping of its naval fleet, it is estimated that between 1991 and 2018 China acquired about 30 destroyers, 43 frigates and more than 25 corvettes, in addition to several ships which are currently under construction or in completion phase (O'ROURKE, 2018; US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, 2018).

One of the major changes prompted by Chinese military modernization was the transfer of the coast guard from civilian authority to People's Army administration. Considering its current concerns about sovereignty and maritime domination, China strives to build a defense and protection network composed of patrol ships. According to Erickson (2018), the total number of Chinese coast guard ships is approximately 1,275, a combination of large (1,000 ton) and medium-sized (500 ton) vessels.

By investing in reconnaissance, command and surface control, China strives to ensure its dominance over the South China Sea. Meanwhile, A2/AD capacities have been reinforced by surveillance systems (radars) and programs for the installation of monitoring equipment on the ocean floor (HEATH et al., 2016). The objective is to detect submarines and obtain enemy information in real time, resulting in faster and more accurate military action¹¹.

Thus, Chinese military policy has become much more assertive. This change was made possible mostly by military installations in the Paracel and Spratly SChS archipelagos (US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, 2018). According to Mizokami (2020), approximately seven reefs have been expanded, and around 3,200 acres of land have been created by the Chinese. At first, China argued that these bases were being used for scientific research. It is now clear, however, that they have military purposes (MIZOKAMI, 2020).

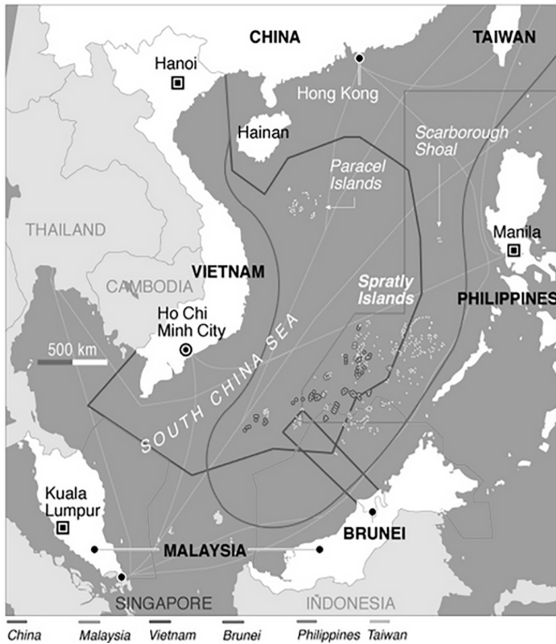
Therefore, an increased Chinese activity in the regional maritime areas justifies the country's various military restructuring budgets. This move is aimed at power projection, sovereignty and overseas operations. The accelerated Chinese military production shows that the People's Liberation Army is taking steps to curb and challenge any regional threats, especially in the South China Sea and Taiwan, in addition to presenting itself as a new power in the face of United States influence.

¹¹ Idem.

4. SOVEREIGN DISPUTES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA AND THE DYNAMICS OF CHINESE MILITARY POLICY

The disputes over maritime sovereignty in the South China Sea have been the subject of international debates, given the irregularity of Chinese claims in a context of growing military projection over the region. As shown in the map below, in addition to China, countries such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia are also part of maritime disputes in the region.

Map 6 – Sea areas claimed by other Asian countries in the South China Sea



Source: Global Journal Cencers (2018).

The maritime demarcations between neighboring states are analyzed above. Since 1970, when territorial disputes between China and Vietnam began, disagreements between these countries have widened, especially due to the propagation of the Chinese “nine-dash line” thesis and the construction of artificial islands in the archipelagos of Spratly and Paracel (SANTORO, 2016).

The Philippines have criticized and rejected Chinese maritime encroachments and the construction of artificial islands since 1992, since the former is located in the purported area of the Chinese Exclusive Economic Zone (FRAVEL, 2011). According to article 60 of the UNCLOS (1982), states have full rights to the construction of islands within their respective EEZs.

In this way, the Philippines have been looking for peaceful, diplomatic and mutually respectful way of solving its grievances with China (BEUKEL, 2010). In 2013, the country even referred the matter to the International Court of Justice in Hague (O GLOBO, 2016).

In January 2016, the Court gave its final decision – supported by the United Nations¹² – approving the exploitation of maritime resources by the Philippines in their legal territory (DORIA; PAUTASSO, 2017). According to the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), China violated the Philippine’s authority over its own EEZ, since Chinese artificial islands interfered in the Philippine’s exploitation of natural resources (O GLOBO, 2016).

Furthermore, it was agreed that Chinese sovereignty claims over the SChS are invalid under the international law of the sea, meaning that China’s historical justification for these claims has been refuted (SANTORO, 2016). Thus, Chinese manifestations of purported sovereignty based on “historical rights” were deemed incompatible with the Exclusive Economic Zones established by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (DORIA; PAUTASSO, 2017, p. 24).

Despite having its supposed rights denied, China persists in overturning the resolutions imposed by the Court, opting for bilateral negotiations. The Chinese do not recognize these decisions and continue to establish military installations close to the archipelagos. They also continue to carry out military operations and naval exercises in order to establish means of deterrence (SANTORO, 2016).

One of the reasons for China to deny the International Court’s deliberations is the claim that disputes should be resolved through the Code of Conduct (COC) for countries with stakes in the South Sea, established between ASEAN members and China in 2002. This document aims to consolidate cooperation between countries and to define South

¹² As one of the founding countries of the UN (1945–), China belongs to the group of five permanent members of the Security Council. As the UN’s main body, the Security Council aims to preserve world peace and, for this purpose, has the power to vote, the ability to impose mandatory decisions to members of the organization, and the prerogative to authorize military interventions.

China Sea policies on the basis of mutual trust (DECLARATION ON THE CONDUCT OF PARTIES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA, 2002).

However, even the COC Declaration is based on the UNCLOS guidelines, making the Chinese projection beyond its legal EEZs once again illegitimate. In any case, the document reaffirms that disputes should be conducted through diplomatic means, without resorting to the use of force (DECLARATION ON THE CONDUCT OF PARTIES IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA, 2002).

Such a clause notwithstanding, the Chinese tactic continues to be the projection of naval power through anti-access and area denial strategies (A2/AD), with the purpose of deterring neighboring states – including the United States – and impeding the action of their navies in the region (PANDA, 2020). This tactic is made possible, in part, by the creation of artificial islands equipped with anti-ship and anti-aircraft missile systems (BRADLEY, 2020). In addition to providing situational awareness, these constructions contribute to the expansion of naval logistics, and can also serve as operational supports for anti-submarine operations (PANDA, 2020).

Thus, the purpose of these bases is to convert naval power into external pressure, eventually forcing competing states to abandon their maritime stakes and rights (POLING, 2020). According to Poling (2020), China hopes that deterrence, provided by growing militarization and demonstration of power, may decrease the chances of military retaliation from other countries, considering the latter's inferior military capacities.

American military presence, however, stands as a major threat to the projection of Chinese power and its current ambitions for the region (O'ROURKE, 2018). According to international analysts, since the election of Donald Trump in the United States, tensions and geopolitical scenarios in the SChS have become increasingly unpredictable, especially for Chinese strategy makers (STEINBERG; O'HANLON, 2017).

The South China Sea is the first place where the international system's norms and rules are being challenged by China. If the USA loses control over navigation in the region, it also stands to lose its global dominance and become just another power (PAUTASSO; DORIA, 2016, p. 30).

After assuming his presidential mandate, the harsh criticisms of Chinese economic policies advanced by Trump during his election campaign were expanded to also target the country's military development

(STEINBERG; O'HANLON, 2017). The 2018 trade war favored the increase of bilateral tensions not only in the economic sphere, but also in the military sphere (HUANG, 2019).

Thus, the United States' operations in the SChS are aimed at mitigating the power-projection effects of Chinese naval action. The United States' so-called "Freedom of Navigation Operations," in principle supported by Article 87 of the UNCLOS¹³, are condemned by China, who insists that North American ships are navigating in areas of the Chinese territory (AXE, 2020). According to estimates, in 2019 approximately 85 United States military exercises were carried out in the Indo-Pacific region, meant to suppress the Chinese military rise in Southeast Asia (HUANG, 2019).

The United States are also increasingly invested in regional alliances, aimed at counterbalancing Chinese leadership. As an example, the Philippines signed the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) with the USA in 2014, allowing the latter's military presence in the country to increase (POLING, 2020).

According to Stashwick (2020), the US presence in the region is of paramount importance, since its unmatched military power is capable of neutralizing the Chinese Naval Force. Without American action, it is likely that Chinese military tensions would come to a boil and assume the form of more aggressive action. Conversely, the appearance of US military ships influences China's military dynamics, as the country also continues to equip artificial islands as a form of defense against the American Navy (AXE, 2020; STASHWICK, 2020).

In addition to the aforementioned missile systems, it is estimated that there are more than 72 Chinese fighter aircraft hangars in the Spratly Islands area, besides 16 in the Paracels (POLING, 2020). Furthermore, China's radar technologies, aimed at detecting all movement in the area, are also advancing in both archipelagos (POLING, 2020).

During the last decades, China has carried out several naval exercises in the region, including tests involving ballistic missiles and naval aviation components (AXE, 2020; HUANG, 2019). The exercises demonstrate Chinese aspirations to form a robust Naval Force, with the ability to position itself as a major regional military power (AXE, 2020).

¹³ Per article 87, "the high seas are open to all States, whether coastal or land-locked. Freedom of the high seas is exercised under the conditions laid down by this Convention and by other rules of international law." (UNCLOS, 1982, p. 57).

China also carries out joint-operation exercises, especially with Russia. These provide a clear opportunity for technology transfer and increased experience in the field (US DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE, 2018). According to the US Department of Defense (2018), approximately 20 bilateral and multilateral operations were carried out by the Chinese Navy in 2018.

For Admiral Davidson, “China is now capable of controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the United States,” meaning that the Asian country may indeed represent a future threat to Americans (EXPRESS, 2018, p. 1). Likewise, the US government admits that an eventual crisis with China would adversely affect the country and its economy¹⁴. One example is the current trade war, which has had negative consequences for both economies.

As we have already pointed out, the United States’ military capacity remains highly superior, contributing to containing China’s possible aspirations for a military conflict in the region. While this stalemate continues, both parties exploit their prerogatives to attempt to resolve sovereignty disputes through diplomatic means (STASHWICK, 2020).

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs is one example. According to Chinese ambassador Liu Xiaoming, navigation of multiple states in the South China Sea region is not an adversity, since the interested parties can use diplomacy and the COC to resolve any potential conflicts, building solid relationships (NEW CHINA, 2018).

As such, a certain ambiguity between discourse and action becomes clear in the country’s strategy. On the one hand, there is peaceful development and the use of diplomacy in the ASEAN domain as means for dispute resolution. On the other, there is the projection of Chinese forces over the SChS, by means of military exercises and the installation of bases on the region’s islands, both aimed at deterrence.

As noted by Heath (2017, p. 6)

On the one hand, some official documents, such as the 18th Party Congress report, assert that “peace and development remain the underlying trends of our times” and that the “balance of international forces” has “tipped in favor of world peace.” On the other hand, the same report noted “growing factors

¹⁴ Idem.

of instability and uncertainty” and trends towards “hegemonism” and “power politics.”

Thus, although China’s military projection and deterrence strategies in the SChS are notorious, the country remains cautious due to the American presence in the region. In this way, the United States provides a balance of power in Southeast Asia and contributes to the de-escalation of military conflict.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

China’s new stance in the international system, stemming from the overcoming of low-profile policies, constitutes a driving force in the defense of the Chinese Communist Party’s interests. Modernization, purchase and manufacture of armaments by the Chinese Navy has transformed it into the most powerful Naval Force among Asian countries, in direct support to the country’s Grand Strategy.

Thus, China’s considerable investments in military acquisitions constitute a pillar for their projection of power and their claim to sovereignty over the South China Sea. Chinese leaders demonstrate an increasingly assertive stance on this issue, even though such a stance transcends the principles of international jurisdiction. The construction of artificial islands in regions that do not belong to China’s Exclusive Economic Zone, the reaffirmation of the “nine-dash line,” as well as the intense demonstration of naval power through various military exercises are the main implications of the modernization of the Chinese Armed Forces in the SChS.

Their aim is to achieve military deterrence tactics aimed at anti-access and area denial (A2/AD), inducing neighboring states to reduce their sovereignty claims over the region. However, despite pooling military efforts to achieve these goals and rising as a major regional power, the counter-presence of the United States’ superior military power complicates geopolitical dynamics in Southeast Asia.

The trade war with the United States, started in 2018, is notorious for its negative consequences for the Chinese economy. This results from the deep economic interdependence between the two countries. Thus, an armed conflict to assert sovereignty would not be beneficial for China’s

main structural-reform goals, meant to elevate Chinese society to a modern level of economic development.

Pending to the US side, the balance of power reduces the chances for China's military deterrence strategy to become effective. Thus, despite Chinese military demonstrations, the country hopes to resolve its disputes by peaceful means, with the Code of Conduct between South China Sea stakeholders playing an important part.

A MODERNIZAÇÃO NAVAL CHINESA E AS IMPLICAÇÕES NO MAR DO SUL DA CHINA

RESUMO

A reforma estrutural da China, no final do século XX, permitiu ao país acelerar o desenvolvimento nas esferas política, econômica e militar. O principal objetivo dessa reforma é transformar a República Popular da China em uma grande potência, aumentando a sua influência no sistema internacional. Para tanto, um dos dispositivos empregados é a modernização das Forças Armadas, uma vez que o poderio bélico permite exercer estratégias como a dissuasão. O propósito deste trabalho é discutir como a projeção naval chinesa no Mar do Sul da China impactam nos eventos e nas disputas pela soberania entre os Estados na região. As reivindicações chinesas são ilegais pelo direito internacional do mar, já que a China ultrapassa os limites da Zona Econômica Exclusiva, outorgados pela Convenção das Nações Unidas sobre o Direito do Mar (UNCLOS), em 1982. Deste modo, o estudo analisa as dinâmicas do poder militar no Mar do Sul da China, bem como o papel dos Estados Unidos no Sudeste Asiático, como forma de mitigar o poderio militar chinês.

Palavras-chave: China. Projeção de Poder Militar. Força Naval. Mar do Sul da China.

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