

## Annual Award of Excellence 2018

### Honourable Mention

#### *The Observable “Cult of the Defensive”: PLAN Strategic Shift Toward a Blue Water Navy and American Strategic Perception*

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#### **An Introduction: Captives of Strategic Cultural Norms and Reason for Security Skepticism in the Pacific Maritime Domain**

A grand strategic narrative holds captive global impressions of Chinese statecraft as a peace loving, restraint oriented process geared toward establishing a harmonious world order.<sup>1</sup> Ostensibly concerned only with maintaining domestic harmony and respecting the sovereignty of other states, Chinese action of late has not matched this narrative. Over the course of two decades, the People’s Liberation Army of China (PLA) has embarked on a pointed quest toward modernization while simultaneously

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<sup>1</sup> See notion of linguistic captivity put forth by Jonathan Havercroft, *Captives of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

reconsidering its defensive doctrine and attempting to assert its presence on the global stage. China's opening under Deng Xiaoping during the 1980s unleashed dramatic growth in the Chinese economy and gross domestic product, making possible increased military spending in pursuit of a highly sophisticated fighting force. In 2018, the PLA is well on its way to developing an extended power projection capability and deterrent not only commensurate with the pursuit of regional interests, but with Beijing's global aspirations as well.

During the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping stated that "the military should make all-out efforts to become a world-class force by 2050 and to strive for the realization of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."<sup>2</sup> What Xi means by rejuvenation is open to debate. While he assures the world that China seeks peaceful development by purely pacifistic measures, historical investigation shows that the Chinese prefer use of force if the option is viable. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is undertaking a process of reorganization in its command/control and military doctrine that actually reflects an element of Chinese grand strategy that has always been a part of China's military history, though rarely acknowledged, a willingness to harness military force for the purpose of pursuing the national interest. Some in the American defense community have begun reading the tea leaves alluding to a shift in Chinese strategic action. Simply put, Chinese rhetoric does not match PLA weapons capabilities and the manner in which the Chinese are deploying its forces.<sup>3</sup>

Some branches of the PLA received more budgetary and strategic attention than others. As Bernard D. Cole points out, "[a]ll services and branches of the military have benefitted, but the navy, air force and the new Rocket and Strategic Support Forces now hold pride of place in China's military priorities. The navy in particular. . . is depicted as a global force with far-reaching strategic missions."<sup>4</sup> These three elements of the PLA are specifically power projection arms of the institution. The People's Liberation Army

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<sup>2</sup> Zhao Lei, "PLA to be world-class force by 2050," *China Daily*, 27 October 2017; [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-10/27/content\\_33756453.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-10/27/content_33756453.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Huang Panyue, "China's Rocket Force Embraces New Medium-Long Range Ballistic Missile," *China Military Online*, 16 April 2018. [http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-04/16/content\\_8005761.htm](http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/view/2018-04/16/content_8005761.htm)

<sup>4</sup> Bernard D. Cole, *China's Quest for Great Power: Ships, Oil, and Foreign Policy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2016), p. vii.

Navy (PLAN) is and will continue to be the key support to Chinese regional and global aspirations. A key adversary for the Chinese in the Indo-Asia-Pacific is the United States Navy. With a strengthened fleet with new and improving support capabilities, the Chinese seek to box out the American Navy to solidify territorial claims, control relevant maritime trade routes, and establish a security perimeter of its own in the Pacific.

Comprehending the etymology of China's grand strategy to make Xi's "Chinese Dream" a reality requires a historical investigation into the various origins of Chinese strategic thinking. In this essay, I will argue that the dualistic nature of Chinese strategic culture hinders the ability of US policy makers to correctly gauge Chinese willingness to utilize military force, including why and how the PRC would justify military action.<sup>5</sup> As Andrew Scobell maintains, "China's strategic behavior is influenced not just by a Realpolitik strand but also by a Confucian one. The combined effect is what [he] has dubbed a Chinese Cult of Defense, in which realist behavior dominates but is justified as defensive on the basis of a pacifist self-perception."<sup>6</sup> Thus, American strategic calculus, in respect to China, struggles to find certainty and predictability in the face of Beijing's multiple strategic personalities.

The endogenous cultural, historical, and philosophical variables matter in our attempts to grasp Chinese strategic intent and attitudes concerning the use of military force. As Mark Edward Lewis points out, we should be concerned about how domestic, historically embedded norms influence foreign policy objectives and the means by which China is willing to obtain such goals.<sup>7</sup> Rivalry, an exogenous factor, also matters as the CCP tightens its grip on the PLA organization and doctrine with the goal of producing a lean fighting force to counter adversarial capabilities, most specifically, the US.<sup>8</sup> In turn, if the United States wishes to avoid what Graham Allison has termed a

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> This is a historical factor during the Song Dynasty that Peter Lorge points out; Peter Lorge, "The Rise of the Martial: Rebalancing Wen and Wu in Song Dynasty Culture," in ed., Kai Filipiak, *Civil-Military Relations in Chinese History: From Ancient China to the Communist Takeover* (London: Routledge, 2015).

classic case of “Thucydides’s Trap,” policy makers and military officials must seek to understand the very real strategic implications of a global Chinese Navy bolstered by a network of cyber and quantum computing assets.<sup>9</sup> The unreadability of Chinese strategic intention, at the very least, can be dispelled by examining where defense budgetary allocation seems to be flowing.

US policy makers should place primary importance on how China develops weapons systems, deploys them, and utilizes them. Secondary to such an assessment, though, should be a thorough engagement with Chinese justifications for its power maximizing behavior. Uncertainty, bargaining leverage, and historically embedded strategic culture are just a few possible heuristic sets through which the CCP justifies its deployment of military force. Through an examination of PLAN modernization and the manner in which US military officials perceive the implications of emerging Chinese capabilities, I seek to articulate the core preferences through which we might understand PLA strategy and what the likely outcome might be given American reactions.

I will first assess the characteristics of strategic culture as a lens through which both China and the US view the use of force to obtain political outcomes. Through historiographical tracing, I will show the immense influence Chinese strategic culture and ideational factors have on the US-China security dilemma. Moreover, reflection on great power conflict suggests that China will in fact feel emboldened to utilize force as a justified means to its political ends given the relative decline of the United States unipolarity. Next, I will look at current literature on PLAN modernization, reorganization, and doctrinal change, to shed light on different assessments of current Chinese regional and international military intentions and capabilities. Third, the essay will examine the strategic shift in command/control doctrine, heightened R&D, and emergence of global and regional strategic objectives that might pose as flash-points between the People’s Liberation Army Navy and the United States Navy. Of particular interest is the cross-Strait contingency and the possible use of force to “liberate” Taiwan. Such a phenomenon seems much more likely after the abolition of term limits for Xi

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<sup>9</sup> Graham Allison, *Destined for War: an America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

Jinping.<sup>10</sup> The core underlying question this essay poses is how US security officials understand PLAN activities within the past few years and why historical understandings of Chinese strategic culture matter in formulating American strategic assessments.

### **Literature Review on Chinese Grand Strategy, Strategic Culture, and Implications for PLA's Command/Control Doctrine**

Military and diplomatic historian Hal Brands defines grand strategy as “the integrated set of concepts that gives purpose and direction to country’s dealing with the world.” He maintains further that it is the “intellectual framework that connects means to ends, ideas to action, at the highest level of national affairs; it is a country’s guiding conception of where it wants to go and how it seeks to get there.”<sup>11</sup> Strategic ideas affect decision making across a taxonomy of domains ranging from tactical use of force and preference for diplomatic settlement. In short, grand strategic heuristic sets provide the fodder for policy decision making and use of both soft and hard power to obtain political ends.<sup>12</sup> Through an ideational lens, grand strategy can be understood as a mechanism that shapes security preferences and threat perception.

Strategic culture and the numerous elements bound up within its explanatory value is not often identified as an important causal variable compared to the materialist or structural factors favored by IR realist thinkers and military scientists. In fact, strategic culture can often influence and normalize policymakers’ behavior and decision making. As Yuan-Kang Wang maintains, “one constitutive effect of strategic culture is that policymakers adhere to certain norms or rules of behavior, not for fear of the consequences of non-adherence, but because violation of these norms is considered

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<sup>10</sup> Ben Bland, “Taiwan and Hong Kong fear China’s harder line after Xi Jinping power play,” *Financial Times*, 27 February 2018. See also Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “Xi Jinping Steers China back to the Days of Mao Zedong,” *The Jamestown Foundation: China Brief*, 5 March 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Hal Brands, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), p. ix.

<sup>12</sup> See also Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 241.

illegitimate and inappropriate.”<sup>13</sup> If strategic culture has a normative, causal, if not narrative impact, on a state’s decision making, analysts can trace ideational influences through mental modeling.

Political scientist Alan Jacobs conceptualizes this approach as “a causal theory (or explanation) in which the content of a cognitive structure influences actors’ responses to a choice situation, and in which that cognitive structure is not wholly endogenous to objective, material features of the choice situation being explained.”<sup>14</sup> Moreover, “a primary effect of ideas is to direct actors’ attention in the course of decision making.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, the subject, having reflexive knowledge of itself, can come to a strategic conclusion about what the best route forward is in relation to possible alternatives.<sup>16</sup> The ideational approach to strategic analysis in the case of China provides a rich explanatory basis for how we might understand, as Ralph Sawyer points out, the “opacity” and oscillation of the Chinese security paradigm between “being peaceful and rustic to being dominated by martial values in order to survive.”<sup>17</sup> Using mental models to analyze the likelihood of a Chinese decision to use military force requires an examination of how China’s past might affect leadership behavior. Therefore, as China appears more likely to consider the use of military force to achieve political goals, we ought to be compelled to peek inside the black box of the state’s past in search of clues to provide us with a sense of China’s strategic preferences.

In his work, *Cultural Realism*, Alastair Johnston expounds upon the bifurcated philosophical influences that shape the Chinese use of force, maintaining that there is, “in the Chinese case, a long term, deeply rooted, persistent and consistent set of assumptions about the strategic environment and about the best means for dealing with

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<sup>13</sup> Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p 12.

<sup>14</sup> Alan M. Jacobs, “Process Tracing the Effects of Ideas,” in Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel, *Process Tracing From Metaphor to Analytic Tool* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> Alan M. Jacobs, “How Do Ideas Matter?: Mental Models and Attention in German Pension Politics,” *Comparative Political Studies* 42, no. 2. (February 2009): p. 253.

<sup>16</sup> Utility of tracing the causal effect of counterfactual; James Fearon, “Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science,” *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (Jan., 1991): p. 173.

<sup>17</sup> Ralph D. Sawyer, *Ancient Chinese Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), p. 402.

it.”<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, discourse on Chinese statecraft is dominated by a pacifistic, Confucian consensus in which war is justified only under limited and morally acceptable circumstances. On the other, there is what Johnston refers to as the parabellum paradigm, or a realpolitik preference for decisive victory over an adversary within a security dilemma. He finds through an examination of ancient Chinese texts known as the Seven Military Classics (武經七書) that Chinese statecraft favors the use of military force to resolve security problems when the option is available.

In contrast to arguments put forth by structural realists, Johnston argues that it is not only pressures generated by the anarchic structure of the international order or analysis of relative capabilities that push the Chinese to act in a realist manner. Rather, China pursues power maximization for historically contingent reasons that stem from how the Chinese assess warfare as a viable tool to reach political goals and perceptions of external and internal threats.<sup>19</sup> The reigning parabellum paradigm, “assumes that conflict is a constant feature of human affairs, due largely to the rapacious or threatening nature of the adversary, and that in this zero-sum context the application of violence is highly efficacious for dealing with the enemy.”<sup>20</sup> The PLA incrementally employs an offensive realist strategy today through sophisticated weapon systems research and development, island construction, and development of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities as a priority in military spending. The American financial crisis of 2007-08 partnered with a Bush-Obama era foreign policy embroiled in the Middle East gave China a window to assert itself militarily, albeit incrementally, in the Asia-Pacific. Many scholars, such as Brands, noted that “removal of the American pacifier,” in the region “would likely yield not low-cost stability, but increased conflict and upheaval.”<sup>21</sup>

The PRC has repeatedly made clear its intention to rise “peacefully” and to “never seek hegemony.”<sup>22</sup> In 2014, for example, Xi reiterated China’s commitment to

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<sup>18</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 258.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>21</sup> Brands, *American Grand Strategy in the Age of Trump*, p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> See Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).



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peaceful development, maintaining that “the Chinese nation, with 5,000 years of civilization, has always cherished peace. The pursuit of peace, amity, and harmony is an integral part of the Chinese character which runs deep in the blood of the Chinese people.”<sup>23</sup> But as strategic analyst Richard Fisher points out, “one can question the sincerity of such pronouncements in the face of China’s rich domestic and foreign martial heritage and its veneration of strategies of deception, subterfuge, and, when necessary, ‘total war.’”<sup>24</sup> The United States’s national security apparatus recently homed in on China’s increasingly offensive operational and strategic posturing.

It is thus useful to note also the manner in which the US perceives its strategic interests in the Indo-Asia-Pacific with China emerging rapidly as a peer competitor in the maritime domain. Indeed, America has its own historically constituted strategic culture in calculating risk in Asia.<sup>25</sup> Directed largely by a post WWII strategy of containment, the US seeks to uphold democratic alliances, and is concerned with geographic features that constitute and define American interests in the region.<sup>26</sup> Washington sees China as the most obvious threat to US freedom of navigation, balance of maritime power, and flow of goods through key waterways in the Pacific. Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, one of America’s saltiest sea strategists of the 19th century, maintained that three core pieces make up US maritime strategy and dominance in blue waters: production, shipping, and alliances.<sup>27</sup> With lines of trade being threatened and regional alliance systems disconnected, US strategy will demand either Chinese cooperation or retrenchment of its maritime forces. As Michael Green points out, “if there is one central theme in American strategic culture as it has applied to the Far East over time, it is that the United States will not tolerate any other power establishing exclusive hegemonic control over Asia or the Pacific.” Policy makers wish

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<sup>23</sup> Xi Jinping, Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2014) p. 290.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Fisher, *China’s Military Modernization: Building for Regional and Global Reach* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2008), p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Michael Auslin, *End of the Asian Century: War Stagnation, and the Risks to the World’s Most Dynamic Region* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> Tom Mahnken, “Containment: Myth and Metaphor” in *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft*, ed., Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Admiral James Stavridis, *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World’s Oceans* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017) p. 311; Rear Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1890).



to ensure that “American ideas and goods flow westward, and not for threats to flow eastward toward the homeland.”<sup>28</sup> With strategic uncertainty looming, US policy makers seek to “offset” a possible security dilemma with China through the deployment of a joint-operational force with guaranteed access and mobility on land and sea. Deployment of US forces in the region serves to ratchet up tensions as American interests run counter to the Chinese. As China expands incrementally in the region, there is reason to assume that the PLA wishes to establish its own maritime perimeter, one in which the US is not present.

Historically, American military assets in the form of basing, freedom of navigation (FONOPS) exercises, and fleet command established a tightly woven alliance system that ensured the protection of the vital movement of goods and people. Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, as well as India play key roles in America’s extended containment and reversal strategy to parry Chinese expansion. Taiwan, in particular will be a key flashpoint in possible conflict between the PLAN and the US Navy, and as Ian Easton makes clear, “any conflict between China and Taiwan will almost certainly involve America. . . For both legal (Taiwan Relations Act) and moral reasons, the U.S. would be compelled to side with this island nation, even if it meant risking war with the world’s second most powerful country.”<sup>29</sup>

The PRC strategic doctrine seeks to achieve “national unification” based in traditional Qing dynasty geographic territory, and China is indeed asserting itself as the dominant actor in the region, though being quick to claim that naval training exercises are “not aimed at any specific country or target.”<sup>30</sup> During a meeting with an American counterpart in 2016, PLAN Admiral, Wu Shengli asserted that “we will never stop our construction on the Nansha Islands [Spratly] halfway... the Nansha Islands are China’s inherent territory, and our necessary construction on the islands is reasonable, justified and lawful.” The PLAN commander went on to clarify that “any attempt to force China

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Green, *By More than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017) p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat: Taiwan’s Defense and American Strategy in Asia* (Arlington: Project 2049 Institute, 2017), p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> Chen Guoquan and Li Tang, “Chinese Navy to conduct combat drills in South China Sea,” *China Military Online*, 23 March 2018.; [http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-03/23/content\\_4807710.htm](http://eng.mod.gov.cn/news/2018-03/23/content_4807710.htm)

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to give in through flexing military muscles will only have the opposite effect.”<sup>31</sup> Li Kexin, spokesperson for the PRC Foreign Ministry, reiterated Wu’s point, maintaining that “the day that a U.S. Navy vessel arrives in Kaohsiung is the day that our People’s Liberation Army unifies Taiwan with military force.”<sup>32</sup> Statements such as these put forth by PRC officials provide valid strategic warning signs of China’s growing commitment to having the military option on the table for reuniting the Chinese civilization. As Xi Jinping maintained, “we must handle cross-Straits relations on the basis of a clear understanding of the trend of history.” For the CCP, history evokes a unified struggle across the Strait with a “common goal of renewal.”<sup>33</sup> The Taiwan issue symbolizes a clear divergence in American and Chinese strategic interests in the Indo-Asia-Pacific maritime domain.

Strategic culture and grand strategic narratives have geopolitical implications for the US-China security relationship. As Admiral Jim Stavridis states, “the arms race in East Asia is simply a reflection of the geopolitical tensions that will remain high in the region for the foreseeable future.”<sup>34</sup> China’s blatant disregard of international norms incentivizes the Pentagon to apply more pressure to the region, but in doing so, validates Chinese military modernization, reorganization, and expansion into the littoral space in the South China Sea and beyond. China is playing an ostensive game of “catch up.”

Indeed, there is an element of revolutions in military affairs that pushes states to modernize and pursue power maximizing behavior. As military historian Williamson Murray notes, “military revolutions recast society and the state as well as military organizations. They alter the capacity of states to create and project military power. And

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<sup>31</sup> Cited in Sam LaGrone, “PLAN’s Wu to CNO Richardson: Beijing Won’t Stop South China Sea Island Building,” *USNI News*, 18 July, 2016.; <https://news.usni.org/2016/07/18/plans-wu-cno-richardson-beijing-wont-stop-south-china-sea-island-building>

<sup>32</sup> Li Kexin, “US Military, govt ties with Taiwan opposed,” *China Daily* (中国日报网), 14 December 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Xi Jinping, Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2014) p. 257.

<sup>34</sup> Admiral James Stavridis, *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World’s Oceans* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), p. 195

their effects are additive.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, when gauging the US-China security climate in a rapidly changing strategic environment characterized by heightened degrees of uncertainty, American policy makers are left with more questions than answers. Murray clarifies further that “technology did not simplify war, as contemporary superstition now claims: it made it exponentially more complex. Each new scientific development, each new weapons system<sup>36</sup> demanded fresh thought and ever-greater tactical, technical, and logistical expertise.”<sup>37</sup> A Clausewitzian “fog of war” seems to engulf US-China relations, and the PLAN is using this ambiguity to its advantage to gain a strategic upper hand in China’s littoral as well as over sea lines of communication (SLOC) and their key choke points. But the US will need to look to long term strategic goals to understand better the security situation playing out against China on the open seas. As Easton underscores, “it is not enough for American strategists to think about whether or not they could fight and win a war. They must also think about how their adversary thinks about war so they can effectively induce him or coerce him away from it.”<sup>38</sup> The next section of this essay will thus explore the interplay of a changing Chinese naval force and its political and strategic implications for US security official decision making.

### **Case Study: PLAN Modernization, Littoral Anti Access/Area Denial Forces, and A Blue Water Capability**

Historically, Chinese maritime presence remained limited to regional trade with the notable exception of Zheng He’s voyages in the early 1400s. With no identifiable

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<sup>35</sup> Williamson Murray & MacGregor Knox, “Thinking About Revolutions in Warfare,” in *The Dynamics of Military Revolution, 1300-2050*, eds., MacGregor Knox & Williamson Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 7.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, ship mounted rail gun technology. Minnie Chan, “China’s military fires up world first in revolutionary rail gun technology,” *South China Morning Post*, 6 February 2018.

<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2132263/chinas-military-fires-world-first-revolutionary-rail>

Nuclear subs, super carriers, and ship robotics. Jeffrey Lin and P.W. Singer, “A Chinese shipbuilder accidentally revealed its major navy plans,” *Popular Science*, 15 March 2018.

<https://www.popsci.com/china-nuclear-submarine-aircraft-carrier-leak>

<sup>37</sup> Williamson Murray & MacGregor Knox, “The Future Behind Us, pp. 176-77.

<sup>38</sup> Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat*, p. 250.

enemy on the high seas, Chinese emperors had no imperative to update naval force capabilities. Recent Chinese revolutions in military affairs within the maritime domain display a distinct shift from China's traditional land-focussed military orientation. As Cole notes, "China has historically been a continental power, with land forces typically defending against threats from the northern and western reaches of Asia."<sup>39</sup> Since 1949 and the founding of the PRC, however, Beijing sought to ensure its regional security against the possibility of another "century of humiliation" (百年国耻) at the hands of foreign powers. Recent history provides China with an incentive for power maximizing behavior and, perhaps, a more aggressive posture in its twenty-first century statecraft. China, however, justifies its military build up as benign feature of Chinese rejuvenation which requires China to take on "non-traditional" security roles such as contributing troops to UN peacekeeping missions, counter-terrorism and counter-piracy operations.<sup>40</sup> Notwithstanding China's claims, if we accept Johnston's cultural realism mental model, an investigative analysis shows a renewed emphasis on Chinese military power as a tool for geopolitical restructuring.

In 2008 and 2015, Beijing published two important documents on its salient military strategy. From the China Military Strategy white paper, the PLAN seeks to address "the need for China to become a world-class maritime power, capable of defending national security interests globally."<sup>41</sup> With a total modernization goal set for the middle of the twenty-first century (2049), the PLA will seek to establish an integrated, joint operational, military force under the command of the Central Military Commission (CMC).<sup>42</sup> Operating out of three key regionally based port facilities in Qingdao, Ningbo, and Zhanjiang, the PLAN are will be tasked with responding to

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<sup>39</sup> Bernard D. Cole, *China's Quest for Great Power: Ships, Oil, and Foreign Policy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2016), p. 9.

<sup>40</sup> Office of Naval Intelligence, "2015 PLA Navy," (Washington, D.C.: ONI, 2015); [http://www.oni.navy.mil/Portals/12/Intel%20agencies/China\\_Media/2015\\_PLA\\_NAVY\\_PUB\\_Print\\_Low\\_Res.pdf?ver=2015-12-02-081233-733](http://www.oni.navy.mil/Portals/12/Intel%20agencies/China_Media/2015_PLA_NAVY_PUB_Print_Low_Res.pdf?ver=2015-12-02-081233-733)

<sup>41</sup> Cole, *China's Quest for Great Power*, p. 51.

<sup>42</sup> Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "China's National Defense in 2008," published by Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2008DefenseWhitePaper\\_Jan2009.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2008DefenseWhitePaper_Jan2009.pdf)

different threats and contingencies in the region.<sup>43</sup> Future port facilities, though, are a bellwether of a new Chinese naval intentions. Following the Belt-Road Initiative (一帶, 一路), the CMC is establishing heightened military presence abroad to protect and hold maritime choke points and ports around the world, ranging from the Strait of Hormuz to the Panama Canal.<sup>44</sup> An observable manifestation of increasing Chinese naval presence abroad is the logistical “support base” at Djibouti.<sup>45</sup> The key African port serves as an entryway for Chinese infrastructure development and to establish Chinese markets abroad. Initially, PLAN vessels on the Horn of Africa posed little military threat to US interests in the region. The strategic move implied a new willingness to open Chinese markets to the world, engage in UN peacekeeping missions, and participate in counter-terrorism and counter-piracy operations. US officials now display a worry about the PLA working to establish a foothold in Africa, denying American access to the region. Head of US Africa Command, Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, made clear in a recent House Armed Services hearing that “if the Chinese took over that port (Djibouti), the consequences could be significant if there were some restrictions on our ability to use that, because obviously the supplies that come in not only take care of Camp Lemonnier (US base) and other places inside the continent, it is a huge activity there.” Rep. Bradley Byrne echoed Waldhauser’s concerns, stating that the “Chinese aren’t there for purely charitable reasons, we all would recognize that. They obviously believe it’s a strategic location.”<sup>46</sup> Though the US continues to look for points of agreement and cooperation with the Chinese, the door seems to be shutting slowly. Given the observable implications emerging from the Chinese base in Africa and expanding military maritime forces, US military leadership seems to be understanding Chinese strategic maneuvering and intentions in a more offensive realist posture.

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<sup>43</sup> For example, the Northern Theater Command is best postured to respond to a Korean Peninsula conflict and the Southern/Eastern Theaters to a Taiwanese contingency.

<sup>44</sup> See “Critical Maritime Trade Checkpoints,” *Epoch Times*, 25 January 2016.

[https://www.theepochtimes.com/assets/uploads/2016/01/25/Global-Chokepoints\\_WEB-01.jpg](https://www.theepochtimes.com/assets/uploads/2016/01/25/Global-Chokepoints_WEB-01.jpg)

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Jacobs and Jane Perlez, “U.S. Wary of Its New Neighbor in Djibouti: A Chinese Naval Base,” *The New York Times*, 25 February 2017; <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/25/world/africa/us-djibouti-chinese-naval-base.html> ; Also an element of Easton’s strategic indicator model. Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat*, p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> Cited in Travis J. Tritten, “China may try to control key US military port in Africa, general says,” *Washington Examiner*, 6 March 2018.; <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/china-may-try-to-control-key-us-military-port-in-africa-general-says/article/2650821>

The Chinese, moreover, have the largest fleet in the world. As scholar and analyst Andrew Erickson points out, “the PLAN currently has slightly over 300 vessels; by 2020, the U.S. Office of Naval Intelligence forecasts that it will have 313–342 warships. . . . While Chinese warships lag behind their American counterparts in individual capabilities — a ‘mandarin oranges to apples’ comparison — numbers matter significantly when it comes to maintaining presence and influence in vital seas.”<sup>47</sup> The PLAN force, on aggregate, is made up of a fleet force, a coast guard, and a “maritime militia,” which is made up of civilians and private assets answering to the PLA chain of command (COC).<sup>48</sup> The Chinese Coast Guard and maritime militia provide an alternative, informal means by which the PRC can project asymmetric force under the guise of Scobellian “Cult of Defensive” tactics.<sup>49</sup> Together, the somewhat disjointed armada is also postured to overcome the numerous command/control and organizational problems China faced historically in military operations.

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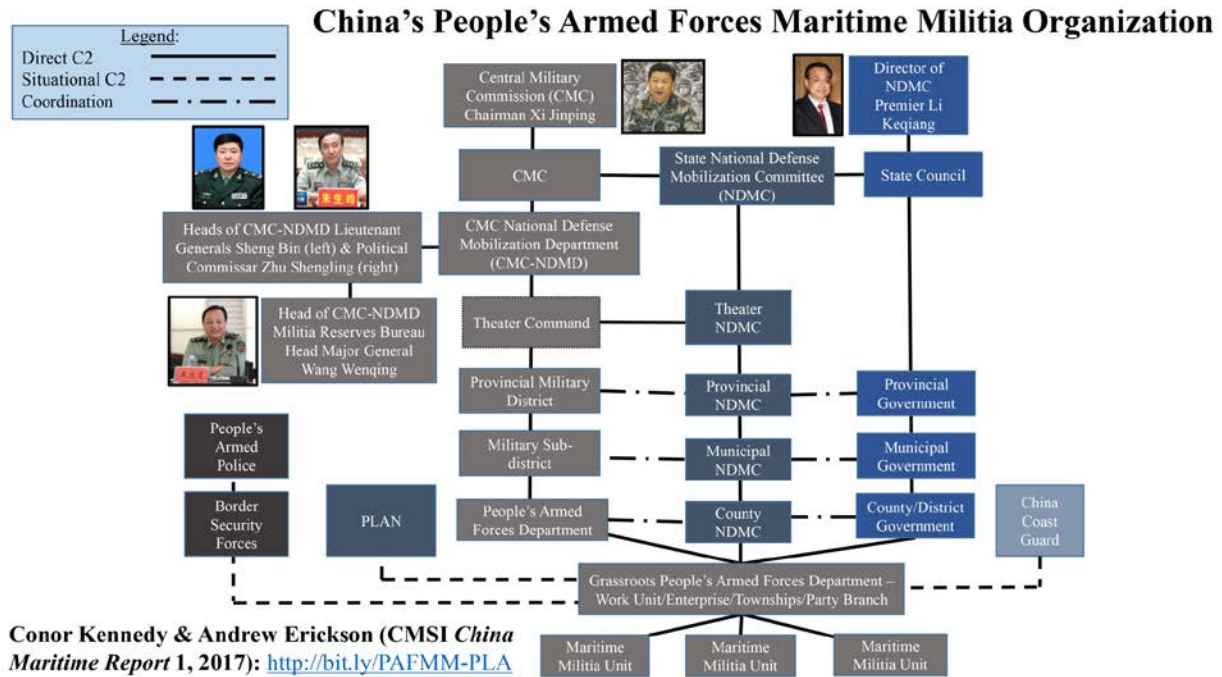
<sup>47</sup> Andrew Erickson, “Understanding China’s Third Sea Force: The Maritime Militia,” *Fairbank Center Blog*, 8 September 2017.; <https://medium.com/fairbank-center/understanding-chinas-third-sea-force-the-maritime-militia-228a2bfbbedd>

<sup>48</sup> See Figure 1. As well as Meia Nouwens and Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, “Xi looks to China’s private sector as he pursues a slimmer, smarter PLA,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies: Military Balance Blog*, 23 February 2018; <https://www.iiss.org/en/militarybalanceblog/blogsections/2018-f256/february-1c17/china-private-sector-smarter-pla-811d>

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Lyle Morris, “China Welcomes Its Newest Armed Force: The Coast Guard,” *War on the Rocks*, 4 April 2018.; <https://warontherocks.com/2018/04/china-welcomes-its-newest-armed-force-the-coast-guard/>



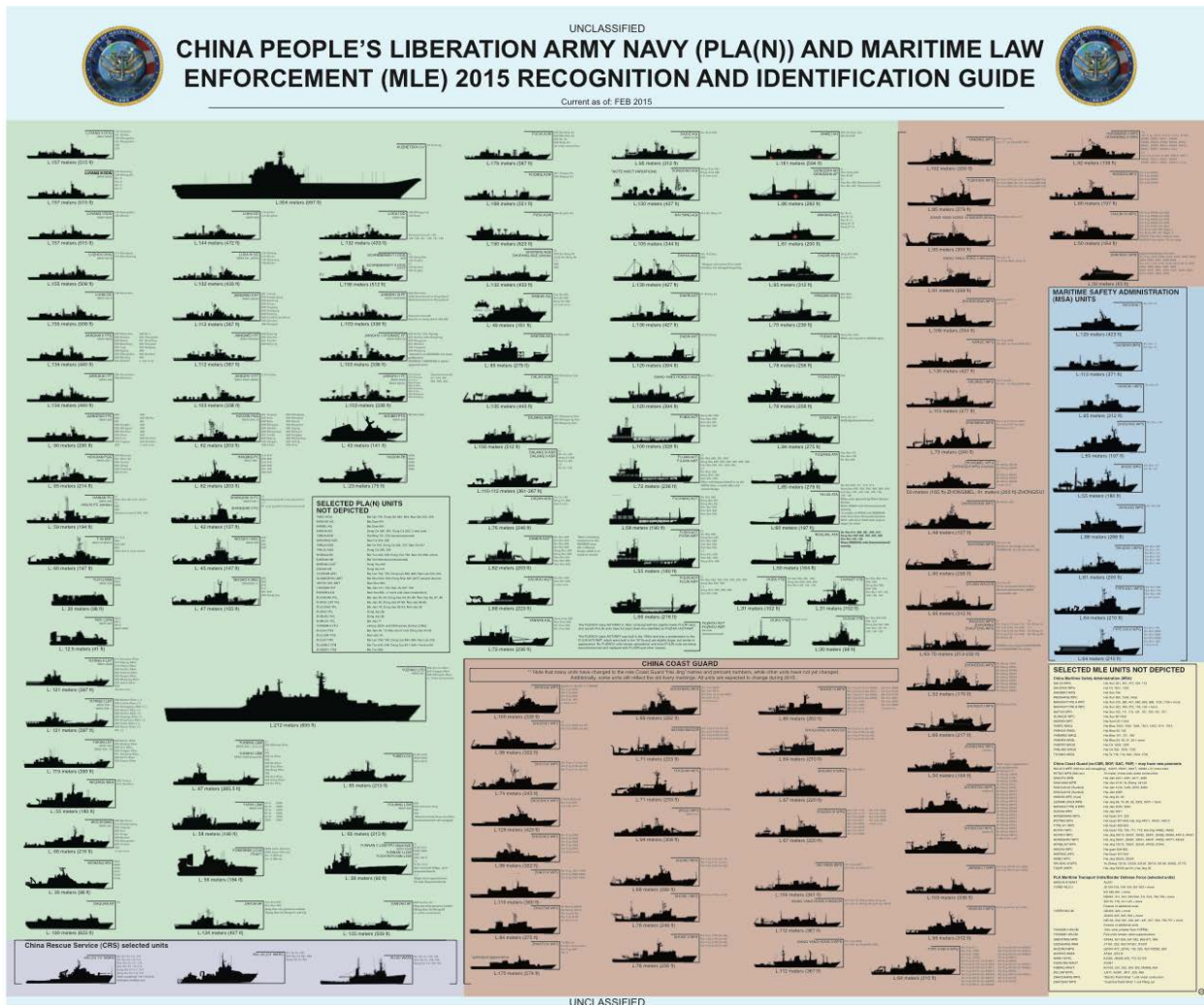
Figure 1: PLAN Maritime Militia Organization



Source: Andrew Erickson, "China's People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia Organization" *Fairbank Center Blog*, 8 September 2017.



Figure 2: People’s Liberation Army Navy ID Guide



Source: Office of Naval Intelligence, “China People’s Liberation Army Navy (Pla(N)) And Maritime Law Enforcement (MLE) 2015 Recognition And Identification Guide” (Washington, D.C.: ONI, 2015).

Implementing joint operational exercises and command/control reforms reflect the CMC’s desire to bolster force capability and mobility. As the US Department of Defense China Power Report notes, “this modernization aligns with China’s ongoing shift from ‘near sea’ defense to a hybrid strategy of ‘near sea’ defense and ‘far seas’ protection, with the PLAN conducting operational tasks outside the so-called ‘first island chain’ with multi-mission, long-range, sustainable naval platforms that have

robust self-defense capabilities.”<sup>50</sup> American defense officials, recognizing a number of operational features in common with US military functionality, are beginning to ask whether or not China should be assessed as a global military power that could significantly undermine US national interests and grand strategic objectives. As former Navy surface warfare officer James Holmes pointed out in 2014, “impressive ships, aircraft, and weaponry can make an outsized impression on lay audiences—potentially skewing the results of a peacetime showdown in favor of the lesser contender. To wit, China. Should China’s navy square off against America’s, moreover, it could prevail by threatening to do massive damage—even in a losing cause.”<sup>51</sup> Reminiscent of Tirpitzian risk theory, the Chinese do not need to seek naval parity with the US. Rather, the PLAN, as the German fleet undermined the British Royal Navy at the Battle of Jutland during the First World War, only need to establish a “fleet in being,” or a deterrent capability to assure the Americans that the marginal utility gained in launching a naval attack is less than one.<sup>52</sup> Such tactics are clear in PLA anti-access, area denial capabilities such as anti-ship ballistic missiles and deployment of weapons systems on islands constructed in the South China Sea. Thus, ideational and historical precursors incite heightened degrees of uncertainty and drive militarization in contested zones such as the South China Sea, Taiwan, and in other parts of the Pacific.

The US Navy’s “Report to Congress on the Annual Long-Range Plan for Construction of Naval Vessels for Fiscal Year 2017” make clear an American imperative to recalibrate its maritime force through a 355-ship fleet construction goal to be obtained over the course of 30-years, displaying a new emphasis on naval capacity to box out Chinese influence in the Pacific.<sup>53</sup> As naval analyst, Ronald O’Rourke states, the US Navy’s FY2019 budget “submission includes proposed increases in shipbuilding rates,”

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<sup>50</sup> United States Department of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2017,” (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2017), p. 24;

[https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017\\_China\\_Military\\_Power\\_Report.PDF](https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2017_China_Military_Power_Report.PDF)

<sup>51</sup> James R. Holmes, “China’s Navy Is Already Challenging the US in Asia,” *The Diplomat*, 16 October 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Patrick J. Kelly, *Tirpitz and the Imperial German Navy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> U.S. Senate, Committee on Appropriations, “U.S. Navy’s Report to Congress on the Annual Long-Range Plan for Construction of Naval Vessels for Fiscal Year 2017” (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2016); <https://news.usni.org/2016/07/12/20627>

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consisting of funding for “the procurement of 10 new ships, including two Virginia-class attack submarines, three DDG-51 class Aegis destroyers, one Littoral Combat Ship (LCS), two John Lewis (TAO-205) class oilers, one Expeditionary Sea Base ship (ESB), and one T-ATS towing, salvage, and rescue ship.”<sup>54</sup> The number and specific weapons systems classifications are indicative of an American response to ongoing Chinese PLAN expansion. However, given US budgetary commitments to ramping up naval presence around the Chinese littoral, the PLAN can now justify modernization objectives as purely defensive, in turn maximizing power projection capabilities for offensive purposes as well. Militarization on the high seas incites a performative cycle, which the Chinese can harness for strategic objectives.

During the 19th Communist Party Congress, held in late 2017, Xi reiterated the goals of the 2015 White Paper on Defense, maintaining that China will “develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security and development interests.”<sup>55</sup> PLAN research and development (R&D) procurement, as well as an increase in military defense spending reflect Xi Jinping’s will to obtain extended military dominance.<sup>56</sup> Weapons and systems research intended for China’s maritime force such as heightened nuclear attack submarine capabilities fitted with anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM), sub-based nuclear deterrents, shipborne electromagnetic rail guns, land based anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM), unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV) swarms, hypersonic weaponry and numerous other maritime warfighting capabilities indicate a desire for heightened lethality on the open seas.<sup>57</sup> The Chinese are also adapting quantum technologies to reinforce communication lines, radar sensors,

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<sup>54</sup> Ronald O’Rourke, “Navy Force Structure and Shipbuilding Plans: Background and Issues for Congress,” *Congressional Research Service* (Washington, D.C.: CRS, 2017); <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/RL32665.pdf>. Emphasis the author’s own.

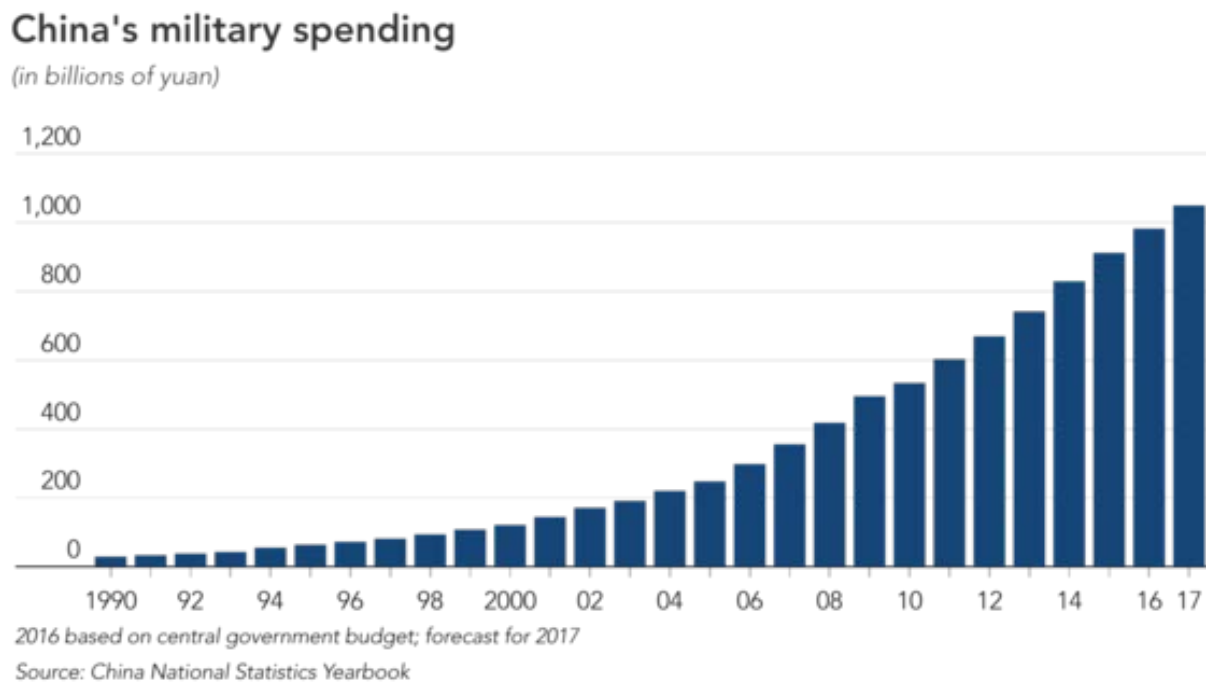
<sup>55</sup> Cited in Lim Yan Liang, “19th Party Congress: China to have world-class military by 2050,” *Straits Times*, 18 October 2017; <http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/19th-party-congress-china-to-have-world-class-military-by-2050>

<sup>56</sup> See Fig. 3, Joyce Ho, “‘Foreign interference’ has China spending 1tn yuan on military,” *Nikkei: Asian Review*, 4 March 2017; <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/China-s-annual-congress/Foreign-interference-has-China-spending-1tn-yuan-on-military>

<sup>57</sup> See DOD China Power Report; Figure 4. Erika Solem and Karen Montague, “Chinese Hypersonic Weapons Development,” *The Jamestown Foundation: China Brief*, 21 April 2016. <https://jamestown.org/program/updated-chinese-hypersonic-weapons-development/>

navigation, and for counter intelligence encryption.<sup>58</sup> Emerging PLA operational and strategic foci (战略前沿) are telling of a willingness to utilize force.<sup>59</sup>

**Figure 3:** China’s Military Spending, 2016.



Source: Joyce Ho, “‘Foreign interference’ has China spending 1tn yuan on military,” *Nikkei: Asian Review*, 4 March 2017; <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/China-s-annual-congress/Foreign-interference-has-China-spending-1tn-yuan-on-military>

Moreover, with layered continental, land-based support in the form of the People’s Liberation Army Rocket Force (PLARF) and expansive island building in the South China Sea, the PLAN seeks to deny access to the Chinese littoral through reinforcing regional defenses and incremental naval expansion. With a clear sense of

<sup>58</sup> See thorough report by Elsa Kania and Stephan Armitage, “Disruption Under the Radar: Chinese Advances in Quantum Sensing,” *The Jamestown Foundation: China Brief*, 17 August 2017. <https://jamestown.org/program/disruption-under-the-radar-chinese-advances-in-quantum-sensing/>

<sup>59</sup> Keith Crane et al., *Modernizing China’s Military: Opportunities and Constraints* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2005), p. 192.

what former US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel termed America's "Third Offset Strategy," the PLA is asymmetrically countering US strategic and operational capacity in the Pacific.<sup>60</sup> The US Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force, for example, put forth numerous plans such as the Air-Sea Battle Concept (ASB) and Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment (LOCE) to pierce Chinese lines of defense through an integrated, joint operational capacity, containing the evolving, irregular PLA threat.<sup>61</sup> Central to both operational plans are incorporating regional partners in the Indo-Asia-Pacific to conduct joint exercises in contested environments while ensuring capacity building between allies for "layered-defense." Nonetheless, such battle concepts and plans simply play into Chinese justifications for PLA modernization and expansion. As commentator Gideon Rachman notes, "in their more reflective moments, American officials recognize that an emerging confrontation between the United States and China is not simply the product of a new mood of nationalism in Xi Jinping's China. It is also a result of an almost instinctive American response to the rise of a great new power."<sup>62</sup>

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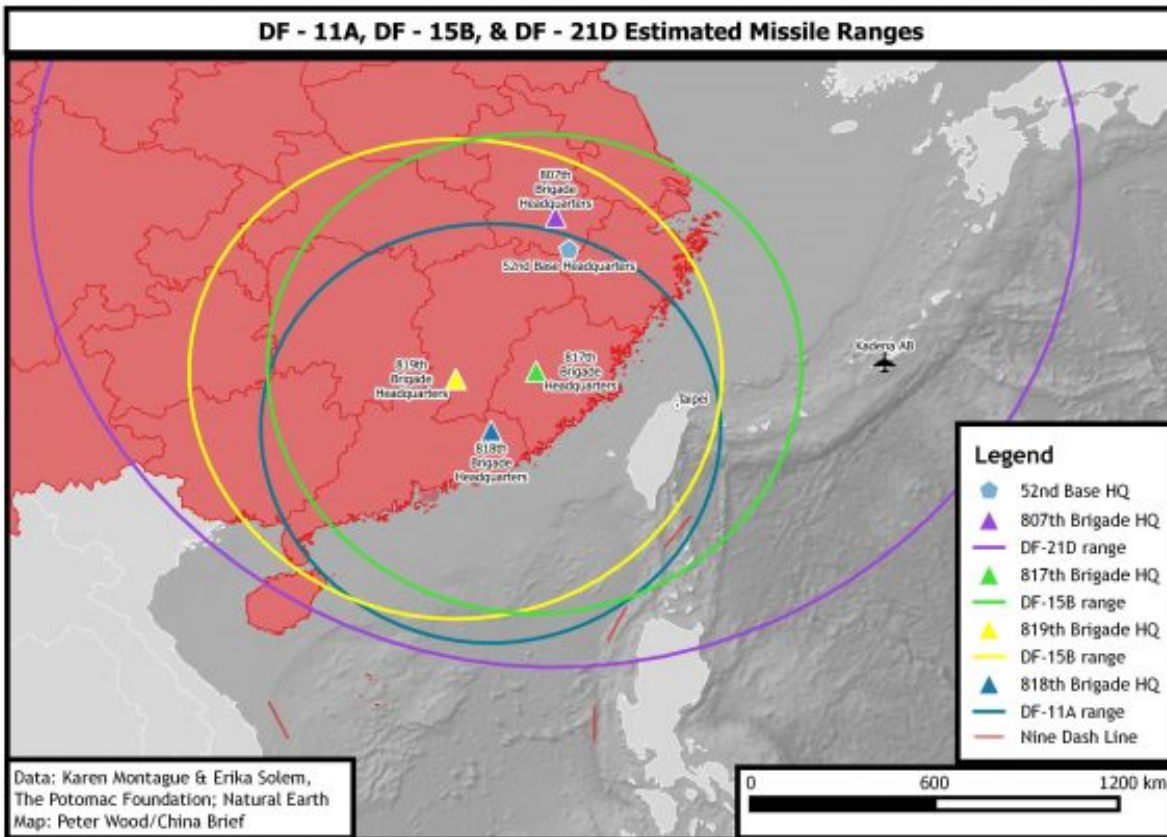
<sup>60</sup> Chuck Hagel, "Reagan National Defense Forum Keynote," U.S. Department of Defense, 15 November 2014 (Washington, D.C.: DOD, 2014); <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech-View/Article/606635/>. Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work defined the Third Offset as seeking "ways in which to offset our potential adversary's advantages" either through technological innovation or through asymmetry, avoiding spending on pound for pound military assets.

<sup>61</sup> US Department of Defense, "Air-Sea Battle" (Washington, D.C.: DOD, 2013); <http://archive.defense.gov/pubs/ASB-ConceptImplementation-Summary-May-2013.pdf>  
US Marine Corps, "Littoral Operations in a Contested Environment Concept," (Quantico: USMC, 2017); <https://news.usni.org/2017/09/26/document-marine-corps-littoral-operations-contested-environment-concept>

<sup>62</sup> Gideon Rachman, *Easternization: Asia's Rise and America's Decline From Obama to Trump and Beyond* (New York: Other Press, 2016), p. 69.



**Figure 4:** PLARF Missile Ranges/ Command Control



Source: Erika Solem and Karen Montague, "Chinese Hypersonic Weapons Development," *The Jamestown Foundation: China Brief*, 21 April 2016. <https://jamestown.org/program/updated-chinese-hypersonic-weapons-development/>

## Conclusions

Under the Trump administration, US grand naval strategy in the Indo-Asia-Pacific is undergoing a process of reassessing geopolitical ends and means to develop a coherent China policy. Recognizing the growing insolvency of American military dominance while realizing the PLAN is no longer the backwards force it once was, officials seem to favor the rebuilding of US naval forces over time. PLAN modernization provides an observable incentive to recalibrate, rearm, and forge a new American fleet capable of suppressing Chinese destabilizing and aggressive military posturing. The blue-water naval rivalry thus challenges American military readiness,

inducing a new focus on a deterrent capability toward China. Brands summarizes the situation well, stating that, “regardless of how America responds to the Chinese challenge, however, its policy must be rooted in reality. Preventing an increasingly confident great power from remaking the East Asian order, and perhaps challenging U.S. interests globally, will be the defining challenge of American statecraft in the twenty-first century.”<sup>63</sup> The PRC, it seems, observes US retrenchment as a go-ahead for overtaking a declining power.

Though China’s naval modernization seems to be a key indicator for intelligence and security analysts in the US, many scholars and officials also point out that China is not yet a “military super power” in its own right. M. Taylor Fravel, for example contends that observable implications such as Chinese military bases, nuclear weapons development, and global operational capacity seem to suggest that China is not yet a military superpower.<sup>64</sup> He makes this claim given that the PLA is not currently a globalized military capable of fast, actionable strikes worldwide. As Taylor states, “a military superpower is a country that can project military power around the world to defeat or dominate another country...by this criteria my argument would be that China is not yet a military superpower and may not be one for quite some time.”<sup>65</sup> Ian Easton also points out that, beyond comparative quantitative assessments of PLA capabilities, qualitative investigations depict a Chinese military force fraught with corruption, inexperience, and lacking human capital with no formal or meaningful allies.<sup>66</sup> Though Fravel and Easton’s observations may be true, Chinese strategic culture remains unchanged as a key endogenous framing mechanism. War fighting capabilities indeed reflect salient geopolitical objectives that span outside of Chinese traditional spheres of influence and sovereignty.

Following Sun Zi’s stratagem, the PLA seeks to counteract US military dominance through asymmetric means, intellectual property theft and force expansion. The CMC and Xi Jinping continue to justify an apparent shift in strategic

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<sup>63</sup> Hal Brands, “The Chinese Century?” *The National Interest*, 19 February 2018; <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-chinese-century-24557>

<sup>64</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, “Is China a Military Super Power,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies: China Power Project*, 19 February 2016.; <https://chinapower.csis.org/is-china-a-military-superpower/>

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Easton, *The Chinese Invasion Threat*, p. 254



command/control doctrine by claiming a defensive response as a necessary reaction to US naval activity and the emergence of new Chinese national interests abroad. Xi Jinping stated in 2017 that, “no one should expect us to swallow bitter fruit that is harmful to our sovereignty, security or development interests.”<sup>67</sup> US military officials and political elites are finding it difficult to understand what is entailed in Xi’s definition of “development interests,” which may expand beyond China’s green water.

China now appears intent on militarizing the entire South China Sea and to perhaps resolve “reunification” issues such as the Taiwan contingency by force. Andrew Scobell’s “cult of the defensive” argument seems to be playing out. A recent article in *The Diplomat* pointed out that, “after years of counter-accusing the United States of militarizing the region while maintaining that its man-made islands were ‘necessary defense facilities,’ Chinese officials are using a recent transit by a U.S. warship to lay the groundwork for deploying real force projection capabilities to its outposts.”<sup>68</sup> The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) spokesperson Lu Kang also maintained in response to the USN missile destroyer passage off the coast of China that the PLA will take “necessary measures to firmly safeguard its sovereignty.”<sup>69</sup>

Given the observable operational and strategic expansion of the PLAN as well as recent rhetoric deployed by CMC, MOFA, and PLA officials, Chinese bifurcated strategic culture is favoring the realpolitik strand reminiscent of legalist philosophers such as Guan Zhong (管仲) and Shang Yang (商鞅). Lord Shang (338 BCE), made clear that, “he who succeeds in making people delight in war attains supremacy.”<sup>70</sup> Today, General Secretary Xi Jinping echoes Lord Shang, demanding a rekindling of Chinese warrior spirit (wushidao-武士道). In China, “all thoughts must be put on combat, and all work should focus on combat so the military can assemble, charge forward and win

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<sup>67</sup> Cited in Li Jiayao, “China Focus: ‘Be ready to win wars,’ China’s Xi orders reshaped PLA,” *Xinhua*, 1 August 2017.; [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/armyday/2017-08/02/content\\_7702812.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/armyday/2017-08/02/content_7702812.htm)

<sup>68</sup> Steven Stashwick, “China Signaling it May Finally ‘Militarize’ the South China Sea Officially,” *The Diplomat*, 25 January 2018; <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/china-signaling-it-may-finally-militarize-the-south-china-sea-officially/>

<sup>69</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China (中华人民共和国外交部) “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lu Kang’s Remarks,” 20 January 2018 (Beijing: MOFA, 2018); [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/t1527341.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1527341.shtml)

<sup>70</sup> Cited in Colin Green, *History 484 Lecture 2*, 25 January 2018.

wars any time the Party and the people need them to.”<sup>71</sup> Such words seem out of character for a leader whose strategic preference is pacifism. The PRC has incrementally dropped peace loving strategic rhetoric in favor of a more assertive, yet still ostensibly defensive military posturing, allowing for the burden of war to rest on the action of any state who challenges Chinese “developmental interests.” As Scobell summarizes, “in the twenty-first century, Chinese leaders will likely continue to view the world in Realpolitik terms while at the same time perceiving Chinese strategic culture as Confucian or pacifist and defensive minded.”<sup>72</sup> Observing American responses to Chinese assertiveness in the maritime domain, it seems reasonable to conclude that military praxis will ratchet up the likelihood of war between the two powers.

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<sup>71</sup> Cited in Li Jiayao, “China Focus: ‘Be ready to win wars,’ China’s Xi orders reshaped PLA,” *Xinhua*, 1 August 2017.; [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/armyday/2017-08/02/content\\_7702812.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/armyday/2017-08/02/content_7702812.htm)

<sup>72</sup> Scobell, *China’s Use of Military Force*, p. 193.

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