An 'Assassin's Mace' in the Indian Ocean?

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Can India maintain its dominance in the Indian Ocean? The powershift in the Asia-Pacific demands that India's security establishment not only address this question with extreme urgency, but also examine the strategic options available and design a fleet, arsenal and technology profile, both on land and sea, in accordance with the imperatives emerging out of the destabilizing shift in the military balance in and around this region.

The Indian Naval leadership emphasizes "India's quintessentially maritime character,"[1] and the Navy's security objectives require it, *inter alia*, "To develop requisite maritime force levels and maintain the capability for meeting India's maritime security requirements."[2]

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1 Admiral R.K. Dhowan, "Foreword," *Ensuring Secure Seas: India's Maritime Security Strategy*, Naval Strategic Publication (NSP 1.2), Indian Navy, October, 2015, p. i.

2 *Ensuring Secure Seas: India's Maritime Security Strategy*, Naval Strategic Publication (NSP 1.2), Indian Navy, October 2015, p. 12.

Among the most significant challenges to this perspective and objective is the reality that the "Chinese footprint in the Indian Ocean was getting bigger and will continue to expand even further in the future" even as the "Indian Ocean is increasingly playing an important role in Chinese efforts to establish a position as a leading maritime power in the region."[3]

Currently, despite Chinese forays into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), India's natural advantages are significant.

> India's central position in the IOR, astride the main International Shipping Lanes (ISLs), accords distinct advantages. It places the outer fringes of the IOR and most choke points almost equidistant from India, thereby facilitating reach, sustenance and mobility of its maritime forces across the region. India is, therefore, well positioned to influence the maritime space, and promote and safeguard its national maritime interests, across the IOR.[4]

Such advantages are, however, far from permanent as, "At the same time, India's vast coastline and maritime zones require significant resources and investments to ensure their security."[5] In particular, the establishment of a number of potentially dual-use bases in a 'string of pearls' encircling India, constitute an imminent threat to India's current and arguable dominance, even as a massive expansion of Chinese blue water capabilities is underway.

> It should come as no surprise to us if in the next few years PLA (Peoples Liberation Army) Navy ships and nuclear submarines are put regularly into harbours

3 Harsh V. Pant, "Sino Indian Maritime Ambitions Collide in the Indian Ocean," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, Volume 1, Number 2, 2014, p. 188.

4 *Ensuring Secure Seas: India's Maritime Security Strategy*, op.cit., p. 17.

5 Ibid.

> like Chittagong, Sittwe, Hambantota or Gwadar in our immediate neighbourhood. In pursuit of their grand design, the Chinese are planning or in the process of building container terminals in all these ports.[6]

China's expansionist intent is amply evident, the US Department of Net Assessment noted, as far back as in 2004,

> China is building strategic relationships along the sea lanes from the Middle East to the South China Sea in ways that suggest defensive and offensive positioning to protect China's energy interests, but also to serve broad security objectives.[7]

These 'broad security objectives' put Beijing in direct contest, if not immediate conflict, with the other established powers in the IOR, principally including India and the United States. There is, consequently, a clear convergence of interests between the latter two powers, and much is now made of a security partnership in the IOR comprehending India and the US, and extending to powerful US allies. The US Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022) thus explicitly states that the

> …intensifying American focus is due in part to the fact that the Indo-Pacific faces mounting challenges, particularly from the PRC (Peoples Republic of China). The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world's most influential power. The PRC's coercion and aggression spans the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific. From the economic coercion

6 Admiral Arun Prakash, "A Vision of Maritime India 2020," in Prakash Nanda ed., *Rising India, Friends and Foes*, Lancer Publishers, New Delhi, 2007, p. 137.

7 "China builds up strategic sea lanes," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 2005.

> of Australia to the conflict along the Line of Actual Control with India to the growing pressure on Taiwan and bullying of neighbors in the East and South China Seas, our allies and partners in the region bear much of the cost of the PRC's harmful behavior.[8]

Further, the US has expressed the commitment to a strong strategy of alliances and to develop warfighting capabilities to this end:

> Consistent with our broader strategic approach, we will prioritize our single greatest asymmetric strength: our network of security alliances and partnerships. Across the region, the United States will work with allies and partners to *deepen our interoperability and develop and deploy advanced warfighting capabilities* as we support them in defending their citizens and their sovereign interests.[9]

And further,

> The United States will defend our interests, *deter military aggression against our own country and our allies and partners—including across the Taiwan Strait*—and promote regional security by developing new capabilities, concepts of operation, military activities, defence industrial initiatives, and a more resilient force posture.[10]

Curiously, the Quad Leaders' Summit 2022 was strangely silent on the issue of military strategy or any planned response to PRC's aggression. Conflicting statements by President Joe

8 "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States", The White House, February, 2022, p. 5, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf.

9 Ibid., p. 12.

10 Ibid., p. 15.

Biden and the US State Department also indicate significant ambivalence with regard to the US response in case of Chinese military action to forcibly 'integrate' Taiwan with mainland China. President Joe Biden has, of course, made some bold statements on the issue, warning, "They are already flirting with danger right now by flying so close and all the manoeuvres that they are undertaking," and confirming that the US would intervene militarily if China were to invade Taiwan.[11] However, "It took the US State Department only minutes to start walking back Joe Biden's comments," indicating that there was no change in US policy on Taiwan, which does not require direct US military intervention.[12]

There are certainly great advantages to be gained from a deepening of relationships with the US and its Western allies – though it would be sheer folly if these come at the expense of India's traditional partners, particularly Russia. Crucially, any excessive reliance on extra-regional powers would be extremely unwise. "Friendly they may be, but one should never forget that they are in these waters, not for altruistic motives but specifically to safeguard their perceived national interests; economic and strategic."[13] Moreover, the idea that the US, the Quad or Western powers, or any subset thereof, will unite with the affected states to fight a war against PRC in case of aggression against Taiwan or India is quite delusional, given the record. Indeed, unequal partnerships with the US have left a trail of death, destruction and utter ruination in their wake, across the world and, after the entrapment and betrayal of Ukraine by the Western powers, it must be abundantly clear that India must prepare to stand on its

11 Tessa Wong, "Biden vows to defend Taiwan in apparent US policy shift," *BBC News*, May 24, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-61548531.

12 Ibid.

13 Admiral Arun Prakash, op. cit., p. 138.

own in case of any direct aggression on its territories, as well as to protect its strategic interests in the IOR. Any assistance it may receive from others would be unexpected bounty, but cannot be relied upon. Its alliances, both regional and extra-regional, may have some deterrent value, but are unlikely to survive the stresses of open war.

It is necessary, consequently, for India to evolve an architecture of Naval defence on its own, without presumption of dependence or aid in the event of Chinese aggression (particularly in an envisaged two-front war) or of a strategy of belligerent 'salami slicing' in the IOR. The evolution of India's Naval strategy and its priorities will define the mix of platforms, weaponry and technology that must be acquired or developed within a clearly defined time-frame. Such an exercise would certainly have been carried out by the Naval and defence leadership, though it naturally does not find space in publicly available documents on the Naval vision and strategy. Crucially, moreover, it is necessary to reconcile any such strategy and priorities, both with its clearly articulated objectives and with the available resources. Given onerous and growing resource constraints – particularly in comparison with China's defence and technology investments – this will require a selective or staged pursuit of objectives and priorities.

It is not the objective, here, to pretend to suggest any outline or detail of a Naval strategy for India, or even to examine a limited set of its components. Nor is anything below likely to be unknown to India's Naval leadership. What is attempted, here, is to examine the strategic development of the adversary – the PLA Navy – and determine whether it contains elements of a progression that India could learn from. Critically, China was also preparing itself, in stages, to defend its littoral interests against a far greater power, and subsequently, to evolve capabilities to deter, and eventually challenge that power far

from its own shores. In the first two of these objectives, the PLA Navy has been substantially successful; and it is working actively towards securing the last.

China: Rhetoric and Reality

China's official declarations have long been articulated in the rhetoric of a 'peaceful rise' or 'peaceful development.' China's President Xi Jinping has continued with this entrenched rhetoric, emphasizing 'peaceful coexistence' and 'mutual benefit' between nations, and has called for "consultation and cooperation instead of conflict and confrontation." Xi has also asserted that China seeks an international order where "the strong should not bully the weak", and Beijing has sought to project itself as a protector of the weak and of international laws, rules and norms.[14]

This rhetoric is, however, increasingly irreconcilable with China's actions, particularly in its own neighbourhood and, in some measure, across the world, as well as with the nature and scale of the military build-up of its various armed forces, including the Peoples Liberation Army Navy (PLAN or PLA Navy). China's recent transgressions across the land border with India, and probing transgressions by PLA Navy into the IOR, and into Indian waters, are part of a pattern of violations, of breach of promise and violations of treaties, of the incremental invention of territorial claims, and the entrapment of weak nations in patterns reminiscent of calibrated colonial encroachments in the guise of commercial activity and inequitable trade. Crucially, China has shown contempt, not only for treaty obligations and other national commitments, but for international law and international institutions, including the UN. Thus,

14 John Feng, "Xi Jinpeng sends strong message to Joe Biden in pointed Davos speech," *Newsweek*, January 26, 2021, https://www.newsweek.com/xi-jinping-sends-strong-message-joe-biden-pointed-davos-speech-1564421.

China has repeatedly reneged on its various tactical concessions or returned accommodation by others with eventual hostility or more expansive claims. This suggests that Beijing focuses more on interests and power than the question of whether its commitments remain credible—complicating efforts at "cooperation spirals" or grand bargains. When India recognized the CCP's control over China and accepted its claims of sovereignty over Tibet—a complicated concession for the Indian government to make at the time—the gesture did not preclude China's decision to initiate a conflict over the Sino-Indian border a few years later, nor did it stop Beijing from believing that New Delhi was too closely aligned to Washington and too expansionist. Other efforts at reassurance, including US efforts after the Global Financial Crisis to delay arms sales to Taiwan, a somewhat concessionary joint statement on China's "core interests," and a willingness to temporarily put aside human rights disputes, did not preclude a more assertive turn in Chinese foreign policy – instead, it may have encouraged it. Chinese suggestions that it would not build an aircraft carrier later proved unfounded; its promise not to build overseas bases were likewise belied by its acquisition of a facility in Djibouti (and plans for facilities elsewhere); its promises not to militarize the South China Sea were contradicted just months after they were made; and its agreement on cyber issues in 2015 later collapsed. [15]

15 Rush Doshi, *The Long Game,* Oxford University Press, Kindle Edition, 2021, pp. 307-308; see also, "The Elements of the China Challenge", US State Department, pp. 18-19*,* https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20-02832-Elements-of-China-Challenge-508.pdf.

Significantly, the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague found in favour of the Philippines, explicitly rejecting China's sweeping and ambiguous claims in the South China Sea, against the documented claims of Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei based, *inter alia*, on principles enumerated in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). China has simply ignored The Hague ruling and, indeed, accelerated its projects on the contested Spratly Islands, Mischief Reef and Subi Reef, among others. China ratified UNCLOS in 1992.[16]

Deception has traditionally been a core element of Chinese political and military thought, and is a key component of contemporary foreign policy and military planning. It is, moreover, at the very heart of China's current 'rejuvenation.' Chinese policy and military strategy documents repeatedly emphasize the importance – indeed, centrality – of deception and denial. The CCP's leadership maintains a tight control on the dissemination of *all* information, both domestically and externally, consistently manipulating and subordinating the narrative to its own policy goals. Research on deception and denial is an integral part of strategic and policy research and as well as of military manuals. As one recent and authoritative document notes,

> …strategic projection and strategic deployment should usually be carried out in a concealed manner, and measures such as strategic disguise, strategic deception, and strategic accompaniment should be taken to confuse the enemy and conceal one's true intentions and actions.[17]

16 Centre for Preventive Action, "Territorial disputes in the South China Sea," updated May 4, 2022, *CFR Global Conflict Tracker*, https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/territorial-disputes-south-china-sea.

17 Xiao Tianliang et. al., *Science of Military Strategy 2020,* National Defence University Press, translation by the In Their Own Words project, China

This factor becomes immensely more important since there is a steady stream of commentary advocating 'improved relations' between India and China, and particular the promotion of greater trade, as 'mutually beneficial' – despite mounting evidence, both, of Chinese malfeasance as well as of the devastating impact the 'dumping' of Chinese goods in India has had on Indian industry and the prospects of the manufacturing sector.[18]

In the Indo-Pacific region, in order to challenge 'US hegemony,' China has advanced a number of apparently benign concepts, including, for instance, the 'four nos': "no hegemonism, no power politics, no arms race, and no military alliance."[19] That its own actions militate against each of these has not deterred such advocacy, even as compulsions of the lesser powers in the region have forced them to, at least formally, accept the Chinese concepts and go along with the institutional frameworks offered by Beijing for their purported realization.

Crucially, therefore, an examination of China's specific actions, and their impact on various sectors and activities in India, the wider IOR, and the world, is necessary to decipher both Chinese intent and strategy. In the present context, China's choices in terms of Naval platforms, technologies and deployments are critical indicators of intent, and will prove far more decisive than the postures adopted by Beijing in international forums or in most publicly accessible documents.

Aerospace Studies Institute, Alabama, USA, January 2022, p. 221, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2022-01-26%202020%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy.pdf.

18 See, for instance, "Impact of Chinese Goods on Indian Industry", Parliamentary Standing Committee on Commerce, Rajya Sabha Secretariat, July 2018, http://164.100.47.5/committee_web/ReportFile/13/97/145_2018_7_13.pdf.

19 For some details of this advocacy, see, Rush Doshi, op. cit., pp. 124-126.

It is useful, consequently, to examine the trajectory of strategic thought and policy, as well as of the development of various weapons' platforms and their deployment, particularly, in the present context, of the PLA Navy.

Intent and Strategy

China's policy framework currently operates on the premise that the global order is in flux, and that unprecedented technological changes have transformed the international balance of power, creating a vacuum and opportunities for a rising Chinese power, even as the great powers of the West fall into what Beijing estimates is an inevitable and irresistible decline. As President Xi Jinping expressed it in January 2021,

> The world is in a turbulent time that is unprecedented in the past century… But time and momentum are on our side. This is where we show our conviction and resilience, as well as our determination and confidence.[20]

And further,

> The extensiveness of these opportunities and challenges is unprecedented but, all in all, the opportunities we face outweigh our challenges…[21]

In this calculated 'rise' and effort to displace the erstwhile 'hegemon,' identified, albeit obliquely as the US in numerous party documents and authoritative statements, commentators perceive a two-stage process:

> The first strategy is to blunt the hegemon's exercise of those forms of control, particularly those extended over the rising state; after all, no rising state can displace the

20 Kinling Lo and Kristin Huang, "Xi Jinping says 'time and momentum on China's side' as he sets out Communist Party vision," *South China Morning Post*, January 12, 2021.

21 Ibid.

> hegemon if it remains at the hegemon's mercy. The second is to build forms of control over others…[22]

The collapse of the Soviet Union and Tiananmen Square led the Chinese leadership to believe that the West, and the US in particular, were, on the one hand, in irreversible decline, and also that they were irreconcilably hostile to China and the ideology and vision of the CCP. The latter conviction was enormously reinforced by the sanctions and threats to trade that followed the Tiananmen Square massacre. The Chinese leadership understood, moreover, the risks of the growing dependence of the national economy on Western trade, capital and technology. A combination of these factors contributed to the consolidation of Deng Xiaoping's overarching strategy to 'hide capabilities and bide time' and 'maintain a low profile.'[23] Crucially, "This strategy requires more than just the cultivation of strategic patience. In Chinese literature, it includes the grudging acceptance of humiliation by a stronger adversary until one is ready and the time is right."[24]

In 1991, Deng Xiaoping had articulated his '24 Character Strategy' which counseled the country's leadership, *inter alia*, to "hide our capacities and bide our time."[25] This was the strategy China employed well into the 2000s in all principal policy spheres – most significantly, economic, military and technological – using every device, including technology theft, covert acquisitions, and dodgy financial transactions, to consolidate power till it had acquired sufficient capacities and

22 Rush Doshi, op. cit., p. 3.

23 Eu Yen Kong, *Deciphering Chinese Strategic Deception: The Middle Kingdom's First Aircraft Carrier*, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, 2013, p. 55.

24 Ibid.

25 For a discussion, see, *Military Power of the People's Republic of China 2008*, Office of the Secretary of Defence (USA), p. 8, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2008/2008-prc-military-power02.htm.

capabilities to openly declare its intentions and challenge the prevailing world order.

Shashoujian: The Assassin's Mace

Wary of US intent, committed to its policy of the 'reunification' of Taiwan and fearing that the US would intervene to protect Taiwan, China adopted an asymmetric strategy in the Indo-Pacific region, described in Beijing's military literature as *Shashoujian*, or "assassin's mace." The objective of this strategy was to block or blunt any effort by the US to intervene on Taiwan's behalf, or to launch any effective attack against the mainland. PLA Navy experts closely studied ongoing wars, including US interventions abroad, to identify the most effective tools to block or blunt what was, at that time, an overwhelming US military power, including Naval power in the Asia Pacific. As a US Department of Defence report noted in 2005,

> China's leaders appear to recognize the PLA's deficiencies relative to potential adversaries in the region and may have concluded that the PLA is presently unable to compete directly with other modern military powers. We assess that this conclusion might have given rise to a priority emphasis on asymmetric programs and systems to leverage China's advantages while exploiting the perceived vulnerabilities of potential opponents – so-called Assassin's Mace (sha shou jian) programs.[26]

And further,

> Preventing foreign military intervention, particularly along China's coast, has been a goal for Beijing

26 *The Military Power of the People's Republic of China*, 2005, Annual Report to Congress, https://nuke.fas.org/guide/china/dod-2005.pdf, p. 26.

> throughout history, reinforcing the geostrategic value of Taiwan for China's security planners. As the Soviet threat ebbed in the late 1980s, China's concern about its 9,000 mile coastline rose. China's concept of sea denial in the Western Pacific subsequently broadened beyond the independent use of naval assets to multi-dimensional defence using air, surface, and subsurface elements. Reflecting the emphasis China appears to be placing on anti-access strategies, most of the capabilities believed to fall under the Assassin's Mace program are designed to blunt adversaries' military advantages or deny entry into the theater of operations.[27]

In its pursuit of this 'blunting' strategy, China drew critical lessons from an incident in the NATO campaign in Serbia, when a Nighthawk F-117A aircraft – the cutting edge of Stealth technology – was taken down by an enterprising Serbian air-defence unit "equipped with early 1960s outdated Soviet era equipment" (an S-125 Neva/Pechora surface-to-air missile) using "innovative tactics."[28] "The strike stunned the world: one of the world's stealthiest aircrafts long considered virtually invisible had been downed by one of the world's most dated air defence systems—a system not at all dissimilar from China's own at the time."[29] Commenting on the incident, Zhang Wannian, then Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission, observed, "the forces of Yugoslavia have provided a useful reference point for our army on the question of *how an inferior equipped force can defeat a superior-equipped force under high-tech conditions*."[30]

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27 Ibid, p. 33.
28 Rush Doshi, op. cit., p. 68.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., p. 69, emphasis added.

A second and valuable lesson came the US experience in the Iraq war (1991), where it was noticed that "mines were a way weak states could repel strong ones and that American mine countermeasure (MCM) capabilities were demonstrated by Iraq to be 'relatively feeble.'"[31]

From this point onwards, the PLA Navy focused on a 'sea denial' strategy "focused on preventing the US military from traversing, controlling, or intervening in the waters near China."[32] This was, in essence, an asymmetric strategy that recognizes clearly that China could not compete head-to-head with the technologically and militarily advanced powers of the world. Instead, the Military Strategic Guidelines of 1993 noted, "We must proceed from our country's conditions and cannot compare everything with advanced international standards…"[33] The then Chairman of the Central Military Commission emphasised, that they would "do some things but not other things, catch up in some places but not others places."[34] The PLA's General Zhang Wannian declared,

> Our funds are limited, our time is constrained, and we cannot do everything. If we do everything, then we will do everything badly, so we must prioritize, distinguish between primary and secondary [investments], and prioritize those that are urgently needed and develop them… *The general idea is that what the enemy is afraid of, we develop that*.[35]

The Chinese leadership, including a succession of PLA Navy leaders, did have plans, indeed, ambitions, to acquire cutting edge technological platforms, particularly including

31 Ibid., p. 88.
32 Ibid., p. 11.
33 Ibid., p. 78.
34 Ibid., p. 78.
35 Ibid., p. 79, emphasis added.

aircraft carriers that focused on projecting national power [an elaborate and protracted campaign of deception attended China's acquisition of the *Varyag*,[36] a process that commenced in 1992 and culminated in the transfer of the carrier to the PLA Navy in 2002]. Nevertheless, these aspirations were deferred, and the *Shashoujian* arsenal was built principally on three platforms – submarines, mines and missiles – thought to be the most effective platforms for denial or blunting. "Beijing then built the world's largest mine arsenal, the world's first anti-ship ballistic missile, and the world's largest submarine fleet—all to undermine US military power."[37] At the same time, there was a "contemporaneous underinvestment in carrier aviation, anti-submarine warfare, anti-air warfare, mine countermeasures, and amphibious warfare…"[38] Rush Doshi notes,

> China already exceeds [US submarine production] five times over" and the seventy-five or more Chinese submarines in the Pacific will be able to counter a far smaller US force… anti-ship cruise missile offers it both greater range relative to torpedoes (4–10 times more) as well as speed (generally supersonic) in targeting enemy surface vessels. In 1990, none of China's submarines could launch anti-ship cruise missiles; now well more than 64 percent have this capability – virtually every submarine built or acquired since 1994. The US Office of Naval Intelligence argues that China's submarine-launched anti-ship cruise missiles – including the Russian SS-N-27 Sizzler and the indigenous YJ-18 – are world-class… the Office of Naval Intelligence finds that "China has a robust

36 Eu Yen Kong, op. cit., esp., "The Liaoning Deception: Crossing the Ocean without Heaven's Knowledge," pp. 63-87.

37 Rush Doshi, op. cit., p. 11.

38 Ibid., p. 82.

> mining capability," with 50,000 to 100,000 sea mines, as well as a "robust infrastructure for naval mine-related research, development, testing, evaluation, and production."[39]

China had, in effect, secured its objectives of blunting or sea denial of the technologically superior US force in the Asia Pacific region. Indeed,

> In tabletop exercises with America as the "blue team" facing off against a "red team" resembling China, Taiwan's air force is wiped out within minutes, U.S. air bases across the Pacific come under attack, and American warships and aircraft are held at bay by the long reach of China's vast missile arsenal.[40]

Indeed, Peter Beinart notes, "the US commitment to Taiwan is 'insolvent'."[41] Short of total war, with the possibility of apocalyptic nuclear escalation, US capacities to confront Chinese misadventures in the region have been effectively 'blunted.' Chinese action in Taiwan is unlikely to attract any overwhelming US response.

Regional Dominance & Global Ambitions

Chinese naval force posture and, indeed, overall defence strategy underwent a radical transformation after 2008, as confidence grew that the US could no longer effectively counter Beijing's rising ambitions. America's strategic incoherence,

39 Ibid., pp. 85-87.

40 Dan De Luce and Ken Delanian, "China's growing firepower casts doubts on whether U.S. could defend Taiwan," *NBC News*, March 27, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/china-s-growing-firepower-casts-doubt-whether-u-s-could-n1262148.

41 Peter Beinart, "America Needs an Entirely New Foreign Policy for the Trump Age," *The Atlantic*, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/09/shield-of-the-republic-a-democratic-foreign-policy-for-the-trump-age/570010/.

the disastrous and mismanaged interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, the ability of relatively minor powers to thwart US intent, Washington's inability to sustain military operations in distant theatres, and Beijing's own growing capacities to frustrate the US, certainly within a hundred miles of China's shores, convinced the Chinese leadership that the US was no longer capable of retaining global leadership. It was, however, the global financial crisis of 2008 that eventually convinced China that the West was destined for collective suicide, and that a new regional – and possibly global – order with a 'Chinese character,' could be constructed.

> "Hide and bide" ended with the 2008 financial crisis. Most analysts now agree that Beijing interpreted the crisis as the beginning of the end of U.S. supremacy and evidence of the superiority of its own political and economic system.
>
> Since then President Xi has made repeated calls for problems in Asia "to be solved by Asians," and for the U.S. alliance system to be dismantled, calling it a Cold War relic – even though China greatly benefitted from the regional stability it provided. Since the financial crisis, the Party has also rejected international law in settling disputed maritime borders and pursued rapid militarization in the South China Sea.[42]

The role of the PLA Navy, in these changing circumstances, was to be expanded vastly from the blunting strategies of offshore defence.

> Under the conditions of the new era, the Navy must accelerate the transition from offshore defence to

42 Srdjan Uljevic, "What happened to China's 'peaceful rise'?" *Eurasianet*, November 12, 2020, https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-what-happened-to-chinas-peaceful-rise.

> far-sea defence in accordance with the strategic requirements of offshore defence and far-sea defence, and improve strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime mobile operations, maritime joint operations, integrated defence operations, and comprehensive support capabilities, and strive to build a powerful modern navy.[43]
>
> …Maintaining national security requires expanding the depth of maritime defence, which can form an effective deterrence and strike capability against powerful naval forces in the ocean far away from the country.[44]

The PLA's Science of Military Strategy 2020 also envisages "The use of carrier-based UAVs" to "bring revolutionary changes to surface warship operations;" and the development of unmanned warships that can

> …take up the missions of reconnaissance, mine-laying and mine-clearing… also expand the commander's observation range and control area of the battlefield. Unmanned ships carrying long-range missiles can also assault enemy naval aircraft carrier formations and attack enemy-occupied islands and reefs…[45]

Unmanned submarines would add to this projection of power, adding to the range of the "unmanned intelligent weapon equipment platform that uses submarines or surface ships as support platforms and can autonomously and remotely navigate underwater for a long time."[46]

An increasing proportion of this floating arsenal is intended for the IOR. China's global proclamations are that it needs to

43 Xiao Tianliang et. al., op. cit., p. 362.
44 Ibid., pp. 360-61.
45 Ibid. p. 361
46 Ibid.

project naval power to protect its sea lines of communication (SLOC) and growing international 'interests.' Thus,

> The expansion of national interests and the protection of sea passages require the navy to go to the open sea and complete diversified military tasks. Therefore, the development of aircraft carriers, large destroyers, strategic nuclear submarines, large ocean-going supply ships, long-range carrier-based aircraft, etc., will become an important trend in the construction of naval equipment.[47]

As the 'belt and road' initiative expanded and as China's massive growth increased the demand for imports, particularly fuel, especially from the Gulf region, there was increasing emphasis on protecting 'China's overseas interests.' In 2014 Xi Jinping stated, "The maritime channel is China's main channel for foreign trade and energy imports. Safeguarding the freedom and safety of maritime navigation is of vital importance to China."[48] Protecting the SLOC was a principal strategic task of the Navy.

There is little to quarrel with here. Every state has the right to protect its interests, to the extent that such 'protection' does not impinge on the sovereign interests of other states. The "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,"[49] however, envisages much more. China seeks to displace the 'declining' US power and establish a dominant position across the world. In 2013, shortly after he became President, Xi Jinping declared, that the national objective was to "lay the foundation for a future where

47 Ibid.

48 Cited in Rush Doshi, op. cit., p. 188.

49 See, for instance, Allison, Graham "What Xi Jinping Wants," *The Atlantic*, May 31, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/what-china-wants/528561/.

we will win the initiative and have the dominant position."[50] Xi envisages the creation of a "community of common destiny for mankind," under a "new type of international relations," implicitly under Chinese leadership. While there is much talk of "win win cooperation,"[51] this new global order would have 'Chinese characteristics,' and would be based on the divergent treatment of a 'big country' (China) and 'little countries.'[52]

Militarily, China "must more actively promote the resolution of international and regional hot-spots related to China's core interests, and regarding the issues concerning our core interests, we must strengthen our strategic planning, make more *offensive moves*, and actively guide the situation to develop in a *favourable direction*."[53] Doshi notes, "This assertive language essentially called for taking the initiative and resolving disputes on China's terms."[54]

The PLA Navy's mandate, within this framework, is critical. Xi Jinping declares, "On the journey of the new era, in the struggle to achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, the task of building a powerful People's Navy has never been so urgent as it is today."[55] The power projection sought is "not just to deal with traditional maritime security threat," but, further, "From the perspective of power utilization, the navy

50 Tanner Greer, "The Challenge of Ideological Insecurities," Lowy Institute Rules Based Order Project, September 23, 2020, https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/china-rules-based-order/articles/ideological-insecurities/.

51 Zhao Xiaochun, "In pursuit of a community of shared future," *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, Volume 4, Number 1, 2018, p. 23, https://www.worldscientific.com/doi/pdf/10.1142/S23777400185000 82.

52 *The Elements of the China Challenge,* op. cit., p. 34.

53 Rush Doshi, op. cit., pp. 179-80, quoting Hu Jintao.

54 Ibid. p. 180.

55 Xiao Tianliang et. al., Science of Military Strategy 2020, op. cit., p. 358, citing "Build the People's Navy into a world-class navy in an all-round way," People's Liberation Army Daily, April 13, 2018, first edition.

must not only have the ability to win maritime wars, but also have the ability to deter wars and shape the maritime security environment."[56] Doshi notes,

> Beijing sought capabilities to more effectively deal with its neighbors in the Indo-Pacific so it could create the military foundations for regional hegemony—all as part of a broader… grand strategy to build regional order.[57]

Further, abandoning a long-standing commitment to avoid overseas interventions and not to create overseas bases the Science of Military Strategy 2013 emphasised,

> …the need to structure overseas strategic branch points that rely upon the home territory, radiate to the periphery, and venture toward the two oceans [i.e., Pacific and Indian Oceans], in order to provide support for overseas military activities, or to serve as forward bases for the disposition of overseas military strengths, to bring about political and military influences on the relevant regions and form into a posture with the homeland territory strategic layout that considers both the internal and external, links up the distant with the approximate (*sic*), and mutually supporting.[58]

Such a push envisaged significant potential aggression, "We must grab hold [zhuā zhù] of the key channels, key nodes, and key projects… (and) build maritime public service facilities with countries along the route… The security of

56 Rush Doshi, op. cit., p. 359.

57 Ibid p. 185.

58 *Science of Military Strategy 2013,* China Aerospace Studies Institute, p. 320, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2021-02-08%20Chinese%20Military%20Thoughts-%20In%20their%20own%20words%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy%202013.pdf.

sea lanes is the key to sustaining the stable development of the Maritime Silk Road, and ports and docks are the highest priority for securing the sea lanes."[59]

Crucially, Doshi notes, "China's ambitions are not limited to Taiwan or to dominating the Indo-Pacific. The 'struggle for mastery,' once confined to Asia, is now over the global order and its future. If there are two paths to hegemony— a regional one and a global one—China is now pursuing both."[60]

Power & Projection

China, today, has the largest navy in the world, backed by the largest mine arsenal and the largest submarine fleet. Its battle force exceeds 355 frontline warships [and another 85 patrol combatants and craft that carry anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs)].[61] The number of frontline warships is expected to increase to 420 ships by 2025, and 460 ships in 2030. The US total in 2020 was 305 frontline warships. However, the sophistication and tonnage of the US force remains significantly greater. "At 4.5 million tons, the U.S. fleet displaces more than twice as much as the Chinese fleet does. Assuming reasonable weapons-loads, tonnage is a rough analogue of combat capability."[62] Further,

> As of 2020, the PLAN is largely composed of modern multi-role platforms. In the near-term, the PLAN will

59 Liu Cigui, cited in Rush Doshi, op. cit., p. 206.

60 Ibid., p. 5.

61 *Military and Security Developments involving the People's Republic of China*, Annual Report to Congress, Office of the Defence Secretary (USA), https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF, p. 49.

62 David Axe, "Yes, The Chinese Navy Has More Ships Than The U.S. Navy. But It's Got Far Fewer Missiles," *Forbes*, November 10, 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2021/11/10/yes-the-chinese-navy-has-more-ships-than-the-us-navy-but-its-got-far-fewer-missiles/?sh=190e9d1c61b6.

> have the capability to conduct long-range precision strikes against land targets from its submarine and surface combatants using land-attack cruise missiles, notably enhancing the PRC's global power projection capabilities. The PRC is enhancing its anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities and competencies to protect the PLAN's aircraft carriers and ballistic missile submarines.[63]
>
> The PLAN continues to develop into a global force, gradually extending its operational reach beyond East Asia into a sustained ability to operate at increasingly longer ranges, including a continuous presence in the Gulf of Aden. The PLAN's latest surface and subsurface platforms enable combat operations beyond the reach of the PRC's land-based defences. In particular, the PRC's aircraft carriers and planned follow-on carriers, once operational, will extend air defence coverage beyond the range of coastal and shipboard missile systems and will enable task group operations at increasingly longer ranges. The PLAN's emerging requirement for sea-based land-attack systems will also enhance the PRC's ability to project power.[64]

China also possesses a rocket force of 2,250 missiles, including 150 ICBMs, 300 IRBMs and 600 MRBMs that could play a role in any naval confrontation in the Indian Ocean, in addition to the relatively shorter-range missiles that may be mounted on naval platforms.[65]

By comparison, the Indian Navy boasts a fleet of 150 frontline ships, with another 50 ships and submarines currently

63 *Military and Security Developments involving the People's Republic of China*, op. cit., p. 48.
64 Ibid., p. 83.
65 Ibid., p. 163.

under construction. With a home advantage in the Indian Ocean, and proximate access to land and air support, India would currently be capable of holding off any significant Chinese naval action in the IOR region, particularly in view of the fact that China cannot significantly draw down its deployments in the Pacific without jeopardizing its coastal defence eastward.

However, given the rapidity of Chinese naval expansions and the adoption and evolution of a wide range of new platforms, including unmanned surface and submarine craft and China's large and expanding arsenal of missiles, the future is far more uncertain. Crucially, China's naval power must not be assessed in isolation, as any disadvantages can quickly be countered by exerting disproportionate pressure on India's land borders.

China's overwhelming economic and technological advantages must also be factored into any medium to long-term calculus, as must its far greater investments in defence and its emphasis on Naval dominance.

There is sufficient reason to believe, moreover, that China intends to raise a dedicated Indian Ocean Fleet and "multiple Chinese sources have started to articulate an emerging Indian Ocean strategy for the PLAN… Beijing is actively laying the groundwork for such a fleet both in terms of potential bases and logistical centers, as well as naval hardware."[66] This has been acknowledged in the official discourse as well, and the Science of Military Strategy 2013 (Academy of Military Science, Beijing) notes,

> Because our at-sea sovereignty and interests have frequently come under intrusions, while intensification in the crises may very possibly ignite conflicts or war,

66 Christopher Colley, "A Future Chinese Indian Ocean Fleet?" *War on the Rocks*, April 2, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/a-future-chinese-indian-ocean-fleet/.

> we need to form into a powerful and strong two oceans layout in order to face the crises that may possibly erupt. [67]

The "potential bases and logistical centres" are what has long been referred to as the 'string of pearls' in the Indian strategic discourse. It is significant, in this context, that China has already established a presence – principally civilian but potentially military – in Pakistan's Gwadar and Keti Bandar (Karachi) ports, Sri Lanka's Hambantota port, Bangladesh's Chittagong port, the Maldives's Feydhoo Finolhu Port, Cambodia's Sihanoukville Port, Myanmar's Kyaukphyu Port and Thailand's Laem Chabang Port. Far in the Western periphery of the Indian Ocean, a full-fledged Naval Base has been established at Doraleh, Djibouti. The base is sufficient to harbour China's largest Liaoning Aircraft Carrier as well as nuclear submarines.[68] Significantly, while the naval facilities established at Doraleh are vastly in excess of the requirements of any such objective, China's justification was that they were needed for anti-piracy operations.

The trajectory of the Djibouti Base is significant, as it started as a commercial and logistics base in 2017, but the pressure of debt forced Djibouti to allow the establishment

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67 In their Own Words: The Science of Military Strategy 2013, Chinese Aerospace Studies Institute, Montgomery, USA, p. 310, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2021-02-08%20Chinese%20Military%20Thoughts-%20In%20their%20own%20words%20Science%20of%20Military%20Strategy%202013.pdf?ver=NxAWg4BPw_NylEjxaha8Aw%3d%3d.

68 Michael Tanchum, "China's new military base in Africa: What it means for Europe and America," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 14, 2021, https://ecfr.eu/article/chinas-new-military-base-in-africa-what-it-means-for-europe-and-america/#:~:text=In%202017%2C%20in%20the%20middle,of%20the%20Horn%20of%20Africa.

of a military base. China's 'debt trap' strategy, compounded by Beijing's rising military power, is likely to force many of the weaker states in the region to eventually concede similar facilities. With a USD 400 billion deal with Iran signed in March 2021, and alarms raised about Teheran being ensnared in a potential debt trap,[69] Beijing may also, eventually, secure multiple berths at Iran's ports, potentially hemming in the Chahbahar Port developed by India.

China's rampaging 'belt and road' and 'maritime silk road' projects sharply underline the fact that any assessment of China's naval power and strategy must also take into consideration China's rapid growth and global economic influence, as well as the inevitable consequences of these in terms of military, diplomatic and international institutional influence. Graham Allison observes in *The Atlantic*,

> Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, who before his death in 2015 was the world's premier China-watcher, had a pointed answer about China's stunning trajectory over the past 40 years: "The size of China's displacement of the world balance is such that the world must find a new balance. It is not possible to pretend that this is just another big player. *This is the biggest player in the history of the world*."[70]

China's power and potential are, of course, yet to be fully realized, and multiple counters to their consolidation are already in play. But if this 'displacement' is to be effectively confronted, particularly in the Indian Ocean, this power and potential must first be recognized and then strategically tackled.

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69 Behnam Gholipour, "Iranian Think-Tank Raises Alarm Over 'Debt Trap' Chinese Contracts", *Iran Wire*, February 14, 2022, https://iranwire.com/en/features/11304.

70 Allison, Graham "What Xi Jinping Wants," op. cit.

India: The Seeds of a Strategy

Given the wide and widening gap between India and China on economic, technological, defence investment and military parameters, no purpose can be served by a head-to-head competition – ship for ship, port for port, base for base – against the PLA Navy. India simply does not have the economic muscle to compete directly, nor is it presently developing its scientific and technological capabilities at a sufficient pace to keep up with China's technological and military investment, and modernization.

We must, consequently, begin with the acceptance that, at this point in history, China has become, by far, the greater power in Asia. If its attempts to secure dominance or control in the Indian Ocean (or, indeed, along India's land borders) are to be effectively thwarted, we can take a lesson right out of the Chinese workbook – to adopt *Shashoujian* or the 'assassin's mace' strategies, platforms and tactics; asymmetric measures that would simply drive up the costs of adventurism beyond the Chinese calculus of gain. In order to secure these objectives and effectively deter China, we must understand the key elements of China's Naval (and military) strategy, and to adapt it to our own objectives.

Toshi Yoshihar and James R. Holmes explicate China's Maritime strategy, emphasizing that it is based on Communist China's traditional way of war, and on Mao's notions of protracted war.[71]

The Chinese strategic orientation in the *Shashoujian* phase focused on blunting or sea denial, and was informed by Mao Zedong's concept of Active Defence "the essence

71 The descriptive in this section is based on Toshi Yoshihar and James R. Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific,* Second Edition, Naval Institute Press, 2018, Kindle Edition, esp. pp. 180-219.

of the [CCP's] military thought."[72] This involves the use of offensive tactics and operations to weaken a stronger foe while you remain on the strategic defence yourself. You can gather your resources for battle, you can harness new resources you can try to get the opponent to divide its forces, or you can try to break your opponent's alliances to weaken him. Over time, the weak will make themselves the stronger contender, go on the strategic offensive, and win. Mao talks about allowing the adversary to exhaust its energies and weaken itself, even as it does what it can to weaken the adversary. He noted that the Red Army could be stronger than the enemy at a particular place on the map at a particular time, even while it remained weaker on the whole. Thus, the objective is to seek out opportunities to encircle and annihilate isolated enemy forces. This is compounded by what contemporary Chinese strategists call *systems destruction warfare*, striking at the systems that hold the enemies forces together, and then closing in on isolated enemy units one by one.

China's active defenders don't deceive themselves that they can block US Forces from entering regional waters or skies altogether. Instead, Active Defence is intended to raise the price of entry into the Western Pacific, higher than any US President would pay, and thus deter America from keeping its alliance commitments. Failing that, it seeks to slow the US Forces down, so that it can finish what it starts, before the main adversary force can reach the scene of battle and make a difference in the outcome of the conflict. Successful Active Defence would thus compel the US to undo a done deal, and to dislodge the PLA from whatever it had seized, whether it is Taiwan, whether it is the Senkaku Islands. Since Tactical defence is the strongest form of warfare, military logic would be an ally for China in this contest.

72 Ibid., p. 181.

In putting this strategy into practice, the PLA Navy renews two old concepts. The first comes from Admiral Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), the idea of the Fortress Fleet. Mahan was critical of a Navy that operated almost solely under cover of shore-based firepower at a time the range of a gun was less than 10 miles offshore. Fleets could accomplish little while remaining within the range of supporting coastal artillery. Today, however, coastal artillery and missiles can target moving fleets at sea hundreds, even thousands, of miles off-shore. Such a Fortress Fleet can roam across vast expanses, while still enjoying the support of the coastal artillery. Precision long range coastal artillery is precisely what the PLA has fielded with manned aviation and a family of anti-ship and cruise missiles. Coastal sites today can strike more than 5,000 kilometres out at sea – a tremendous manoeuvring space for the PLA Navy surface fleet. Ultra-long-range coastal artillery provides fire support to the fleet, while weakening any enemy Forces' thrust into the region.

The second was the French Navy's *Jeune École* ("Young School") concept developed during the 19th century, which advocated the use of small, heavily armed vessels to combat larger battleships. In its modern Chinese interpretation, small super-empowered submarines and surface craft with heavy-hitting new weaponry threaten battleships and other capital ships. If all a coastal state cares about is to deny a global navy access to its waters, a fleet of inexpensive small craft can do the trick. Earlier, it was torpedo boats and torpedo armed diesel submarines. Today, it's submarines, small and unmanned crafts sporting torpedoes, cruise missiles and other exotic armaments. *Jeune École* crafts fan out between the main fleet and the coastal artillery, inflicting crippling damage on the adversary. If the Active Defence strategy works in practice, then the PLA Navy can remain in reserve till very late in the

conflict, as the coastal artillery and small craft soften the enemy up as a precursor to a major engagement.

Further, "The PLA's increasing ability to integrate surface, subsurface, and aerial warfare into a defensive thicket against seaborne threats to China is remaking the strategic environment in maritime Asia…"[73] In the Active Defence of the South China Sea,

> PLA forces will integrate weapons systems, new and old, into joint "orthodox" and "unorthodox" attacks, executing offensive actions to attain strategically defensive goals. They will not depend on any single method or system, or solely on aerial, surface, or subsurface warfare. Multiple axes of attack, multiple weapon types, and preparedness to shift nimbly between the main and secondary efforts will represent hallmarks of China's way of naval war.[74]

In all this, fixating on particular weapons systems or platforms is not what provides the key to the PLA Navy's strategies and tactics in any potential confrontation with a technologically or numerically superior adversary. The entire PLA strategy is underpinned by the rejection, articulated by Mao Tse-tung in his lecture *On Protracted War*, of the theory that weapons decide everything, "which constitutes a mechanical approach to the question of war and a subjective and one-sided view. Our view is opposed to this; we see not only weapons but also people. Weapons are an important factor in war, but not the decisive factor; it is people, not things, that are decisive."[75]

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73 Ibid., p. 185.

74 Ibid., p. 188.

75 Mao Tse-tung, *On Protracted War*, May 1938, *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm.

India's Strategic Response

Every adversary, however strong, has weaknesses. The world focuses constantly on China's strengths; China focuses on the vulnerabilities of its adversaries. This is the equation that needs to be turned on its head.

There must be clarity of purpose and a strategy that is tailored to a particular stage of development and equation of power. Despite blue water ambitions and a perception at the highest level that that battlefleets built around aircraft carriers were of utmost importance if China was to emerge as a marine power, these objectives were long deferred. Instead,

> …Beijing declared it would "catch up in some areas and not others" and vowed to build "whatever the enemy fears" to accomplish it—ultimately delaying the acquisition of costly and vulnerable vessels like aircraft carriers and instead investing in cheaper asymmetric denial weapons. Beijing then built the world's largest mine arsenal, the world's first anti-ship ballistic missile, and the world's largest submarine fleet.[76]

This is not to suggest that India must replicate the process and stages of evolution that China followed. Rather, that India's *strategic priorities* must be clearly defined in terms of a reality-based assessment of threats and resources. Crucially, the Chinese experience demonstrates that success is primarily a function of strategic will and persistence.

The question of the Chinese presence in the IOR is, moreover, not a question of naval power alone. It is a question of comprehensive power projection. If the economic and technological gap between the two countries continues to widen

76 Rush Doshi, op. cit., p.11.

at the present pace, there is no configuration of attainable naval power that can maintain India's dominance in the IOR.

China is, however, not yet in a position to effectively challenge India's naval dominance in the Indian Ocean. Its focus has overwhelmingly been on coastal protection the issue of 'reunification' – the seizure of Taiwan – and other territorial ambitions in the South China Sea. There have been evident forays into the South East Asian region and a rising belligerence against all proximate neighbours over dubious territorial claims. Its far seas capabilities of projection are also hampered by the failure to develop or acquire aircraft suitable for its carriers – though this may be a problem now close to resolution.[77] At the present stage of development of its "strategic strong points" and "maritime stations" in the IOR, the PLA Navy would be unable to counter India's geographical advantages.

Nevertheless, China has established a permanent naval presence in the IOR on the grounds of preventing piracy, its 'string of pearls' strategy is a glaring work in progress and its naval arsenal is expanding rapidly. India has a limited window to frame an effective counter – a decade, perhaps two. A comprehensive defence strategy and a naval component aligned with such a strategy is, consequently, an urgent necessity. While it cannot be the purpose, here, to frame such a strategy – this is a task that would require greater experienced naval and expertise – some issues can be flagged for systematic evaluation:

i. Could developments in missile technology, including ASBMs, and unmanned intelligent systems put a

77 Sakshi Tiwari, "After J-20 Fighters, China's Aircraft Carrier Battle Group Starts 'Combat Patrols' In The Western Pacific," *The Eurasian Times*, May 4, 2022, https://eurasiantimes.com/after-j-20-fighters-chinas-liaoning-battle-strike-group-starts-combat-patrols/.

question mark on the future utility of a carrier centred battlefleet?

ii. Would a focus on *Jeune École* platforms – small, heavily armed vessels to tackle enemy battlefleets – produce disproportionate advantages, at least at the present stage, as compared to carrier centred battlefleets, or as complements to the latter?

iii. What proportion of the focus and resources should be committed to weapons of sea denial – *Shashoujian* weapons such as mines, shore-based sea and air defence systems, undersea strategic deterrent forces, etc. – as against platforms of sea dominance.

iv. India has significant achievements in rocketry and missile technology. What measure of priority should the mass production and strategic deployment of missiles be given? It is useful to reiterate, here, that the PLA has already established a Rocket Force separate from traditional artillery units. However, the quality and range of missiles cannot suffice without the capacity to locate and target the adversary with precision. This would require the further development and dedication of a range of surveillance platforms, including AWACs and space-based systems.

v. The strategies and tactics of active defence in the IOR need to be examined, crystallized and deployed.

vi. What strategy of alliances, disruption and diplomacy can be evolved to undermine the further development of China's 'string of pearls.' Without access to dispersed bases across the IOR, China would fail to consolidate its strategic position in the region. China's heavy-handed approach to its neighbours as well as its 'partners' in the 'belt and road' as well as the 'maritime

sea road' provides opportunities for India and its allies to counter the rapid expansion of the Chinese footprint over the past decade. The turn Belt and Road projects and the trajectory of the Chinese debt trap have taken in the recent past in several countries has created new opportunities and has, indeed, put the Chinese strategy in significant jeopardy. A sober assessment of these opportunities and a considered, long-term strategy of response are now urgently needed to reconfigure relations in India's neighbourhood.

vii. Taiwan's autonomy is at acute risk at present. Were China to overrun or otherwise gain possession of Taiwan (possibly by 'selling' the 'one country two systems' myth to the US and Western powers who have no stomach for a military confrontation), this would free up enormous marine and financial resources for redeployment into the IOR. The impact on India's security and the implications for force posture and deployment require urgent assessment.

viii. The development of suitable weapons and platforms must also be complemented with the "increasing ability to integrate surface, subsurface, and aerial warfare into a defensive thicket against seaborne threats."[78] Further, while hi-tech solutions and modernizations are certainly imperative, the possibilities of integrating new and old weapons systems, and to mix multiple axes of attack – aerial, surface and subsurface – must also be explored. It is important, in this context, to recognize that Indian Forces have, in the past, often prevailed against superior technologies though sheer grit and tactical innovation.

78 Toshi Yoshihar and James R. Holmes, op. cit, p. 185.

ix. Crucially, what is the nature of the threat from China? Most assessments tend to examine the Chinese threat in Clausewitzian terms of a decisive confrontation, but the likelihood is that China will, in fact, seek to establish strategic dominance, avoiding all but marginal confrontations, within its established traditions of 'protracted war.' It is significant that Beijing has exercised calibrated aggression in the South China Sea, as well as along India's land borders, creating 'facts on the ground' and 'salami slicing' bits of territory, without provoking adequate conventional retaliation to reverse China's gains. It is necessary to understand that what China likely seeks – both in the South China Sea and eventually in the IOR – is not massive confrontation, conquest, or outright victory in open war, but rather strategic dominance that leaves its adversaries with diminishing room for manoeuvre. The approach to Taiwan is a case in point. While there are continuous provocations that test the will of the leadership both of Taiwan and its allies, China has gradually created the capacities for a strategic encirclement that the West is unlikely to contest; to reiterate, it's "commitment to Taiwan" has been rendered "insolvent."[79] Over time, Taiwan's options are being sealed off. A protracted strategy of compellence is in play, even as Taipei's alliances are undermined by a complex of stratagems that, at once, deter, seduce and bribe the West to concede Beijing's objectives. While the world continues to 'game' a massive Chinese military operation to overrun and forcibly integrate Taiwan, a calibrated strategy continues to narrow down Taipei's choices. If

79 Peter Beinart, "America Needs an Entirely New Foreign Policy for the Trump Age," op. cit.

this pattern of graduated strategic dominance is what Beijing seeks to push into the IOR, how would this impact on the Indian Navy's objectives, force posture and composition? And what are the available patterns of effective retaliation that can block off Beijing's calibrated aggression without unacceptable risks of escalation?

Directly countering China's naval power at present is neither possible – given the size of India's economy and defence budgets – nor sufficient, as China would simply shift the competition to other theatres or spheres – land, air, covert or unconventional strategies, cyber or space dimensions, disinformation and diplomacy, etc. A strategy of denial in conventional defence, and of low-cost competition across the widest possible spectrum, within a coherent strategic framework, is the one approach that can make Chinese adventurism too expensive for Beijing to risk. Deterrents will also have to be evolved for Beijing's lesser forays at establishing a strategic dominance that can potentially prove even more devastating to Indian interests and sovereignty, and which are likely to be far more difficult to counter, given China's duplicitous approach.

It is useful to remind ourselves, moreover, that "The PLA Navy is not some superhuman force. It remains a relative newcomer to naval warfare."[80] China's gains at sea have largely gone uncontested, as Beijing's provocations have been calibrated to provoke limited responses, and the world has chosen to rely overwhelmingly on (often ineffectual) diplomacy, rather than military confrontation. China's strategic focus and commitment, and the lack of a comparable focus and commitment in China's adversaries, is what has created

80 Ibid., p. 208.

a significant advantage in terms of the PLA Navy's capacities and (untested) capabilities. While available timeframes for India are limited, these are obstacles that can still be overcome though enduring acts of strategic will.

SOUTH ASIA TERRORISM PORTAL

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