

# China's Global Maritime Expansion: Between Its Grand Dream and External Trends

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China's dream to become a global maritime power is a controversial element of China's global growth. Its expansion of maritime lines has been shaped by internal needs and external trends. The expansion has alarmed the world and raised the uncertainty about China's potential to become the world maritime power in mid-21st century. Despite the continuous debates on the risks associated with China's global maritime expansion, little attention was paid to the Chinese literature and understanding of being a global maritime power. This paper analyzes China's thinking, planning, and constructing of its maritime power. It looks at the geopolitical, commercial, and military application of China's maritime strategy to become a world power with its celebration of 100 Anniversary of the PRC. Internal needs, such as sovereignty threats, energy security, and growing population, have pushed China to expand its maritime lines and achieve its grand dream. However, external trends such as destabilized commercial lines, great power competition, and external perceptions hindered the process of achieving its dream. Borrowing from the Mahanian and Harmonious schools of thought is helpful when looking at the Chinese global maritime accounts. Whether China has been categorized as a No. 2 or a No. 1 Sea Power, it has focused its ambitions on achieving a speedy maritime power's growth. It aims to construct a new modality of increasing involvement overseas, expanding deterrence lines, and securing wider oceanic checkpoints.

*Keywords:* maritime security, China's rise, external trends

## Introduction

The blue expansion of great powers over the past centuries continues to be of great attraction to researchers. How great powers enhance their sea capabilities and maritime security strategies are key to the study of contemporary history of great powers' rise. In national plans, protecting sea lines and exploiting sea resources are not limited to securing the coastal lines and nations' food and energy supplies. Exploring new waters is essential for securing national economies and enhancing maritime security. When a researcher evaluates the intentions and strength of a great power's maritime security, the study is not limited to the assessment of maritime strength at the national borders. It is important to look at how the rise of a new maritime power may bring changes to the international structure. It is also key in this task to deeply explore how great powers' maritime views differ from each other when comparing and contrasting strength with other maritime powers.

China's ambition to become a global maritime power is a highly debated element of its global comprehensive rise. Its extension of maritime lines and influence has been driven by internal requirements and external trends as a growing global power. The speedy expansion has alarmed the world and other great maritime

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powers. There is a general ambiguity about China's motivations to become a global maritime power in the decades to come. Nevertheless, there is an underestimation of what the Chinese mindset, literature, culture, and understanding of its approach to maritime power may offer when studying China's maritime power. The plethora of Western alarming interpretations that are more centered towards China's "Threat Theory" limits one's understating of China's maritime power from the Chinese standpoint. Many Western skeptics associate China's global maritime ambitions with the view of China as a "Dragon Slayer" and thus 2049 is the maritime dominance year by the Chinese "Dragon" (Wearden, 2010).

Many studies looked at the contemporary maritime powers in comparison to the traditional American and British colonial maritime power. For centuries, the United States and the Great Britain have dominated the seas. The dominant form of their maritime expansion was through wars and colonial actions, supported by a favorable environment to adopt this form of maritime rise. Their maritime narrative was shaped by a different path of China's current maritime rise. The Chinese path is designed under different circumstances and motives. The Chinese maritime narrative suggests that China's maritime rise should not follow the American or the British maritime trajectory. China current position and ambitions are shaped in different regional and international dynamics of US's or Great Britain's' at the time of their rise. Chinese officials hold the view that China's maritime rise should not have militaristic characteristics. It must maintain a peaceful and developmental path with Chinese attributes, away from emulating the colonial maritime history. From China's standpoint, its maritime rise should be projected as a contributor to the global maritime stability by introducing fairer and sustaining choices to the global maritime and the third world states (Bo, 2020).

This paper explores the Chinese approach to constructing its national maritime power and in its involvement in the global maritime security. It borrows from the traditional main school of thoughts (Mahanian School) examining sea power and the relevant Chinese stream (Harmonious School) to the study of China's maritime expansion. The paper looks at China's national maritime strategy evolution to address its internal concerns, such as coastal protection, then, exploring how China has elevated its maritime capabilities to position itself as a global maritime power compatible with its China's rise strategy. However, the journey to build China's global maritime power faces considerable limitations to its rise. On the one hand, global changing trends pose obstacles to the elevation of Chinese maritime power. On the other hand, some global opportunities are advantageous to the Chinese Navy to further its global involvement in maritime security. The paper concludes that harmonious school of thought is more relevant in studying China's involvement in the global maritime security of the 21st century.

### **The Main Schools of Thoughts on Sea Power**

China's global maritime power expansion has been highly debated in the recent scholarly discussions. Some scholars, such as Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes (2010), looked at China's sea power through the Mahanian approach in relation to the increasing naval sea-lines and permanent checkpoints overseas. This stream holds that the Chinese navy adopted an assertive strategy, especially in South China Sea. Moreover, China has shown assertive actions in addressing the regional disputes. When it comes to the far seas, it has exercised global influence to dominate the seas. This side of the debate is driven by the beliefs developed by Alfred Mahan on constructing sea power in the 20th century. The other side of the debate, such as Edward Chan (2021), finds the harmonious stream a sufficient approach to comprehending China's current maritime rise especially when evaluating its development path of the 21st century. This is not to imply that the Mahanian approach is irrelevant to China's maritime expansion; it remains a key stream for researchers and policy makers. Yet, it is significant

to widen the scope of analysis by borrowing from the thoughts that the harmonious school introduces to frame a comprehensive picture and a more relevant understanding of China today. This is because limiting the study of China's sea power to the traditional lens of navy's size prevents a researcher from exploring multidimensional framework of diplomatic, economic, and global governmental efforts that China incorporates in its building of sea power.

Mahanianism holds that when a sea power expands its sea capabilities, it aims to control the most important sea lines. The core belief behind big powers expansion of new waters is to gain more influence. In this regard, the naval elevation of power is the most suitable form of accomplishing the aimed control (Jamison, 2022). China has increased its naval territorial and influential outreach over the past decades. Chinese state affiliated companies own and/or operate 96 ports in 53 countries, in all continents (except Antarctica) (Kardon, 2023). However, acquiring a blue navy equivalent to the American navy was not the main mode of expansion of the People's Liberation Army Navy (中国人民解放军海军) (PLAN). The Chinese navy has not grown yet in a parallel degree of its global economic size. China's military strategy (The State Council, 2015) states that the far-seas protection is key to China's development, but it should not be implemented through maritime dominance. The increasing external trade and growing Chinese exports through shipping lines worldwide necessitate establishing bigger escort capabilities in the sea lines of communications, according to the strategy. However, China gray-zone operations in some maritime disputed areas remain suspicious even if the Chinese official writings stress on that the operations are only to preserve the national rights and are part of natural expansion. "Over the past decade, China employed nearly 80 different gray zone tactics across all instruments of national power", according to research analysis conducted by RAND researchers (Lin et al., 2022). In addition, they find the Chinese activities as a tool to impose more pressure on other countries to serve China's interests overseas and thus enhance greater domestic economic, security, and political objectives.

Studying China's maritime expansion in terms of traditional blue navy and gray zone capabilities is insufficient. The Chinese navy has exhibited more cooperative activities, which makes the Chinese approach to national and global maritime growth incomparable to the British or American sea expansion in the past centuries. Edward Chan (2021) believed that researchers underestimate the diversity of China's maritime approach that makes the Mahanian approach insufficient in explaining China's sea expansion (p. 39). That said, what is the more relevant stream of evaluating China's contemporary maritime growth! As the current Chinese officials pay huge attention to the non-traditional maritime issues (as stressed by the Military Strategy of 2015), the harmonious school supports that China can enjoy a great maritime strength beyond the traditional military policies. Edward Chan (2021) provided an explanation of this stream. The harmonious school suggests that China has the potential of promoting harmony in the near and far seas, and among other sea powers. The reason behind this belief is that Chinese global maritime activities go beyond the simple understanding of protecting its interests overseas. It has carried out considerable global maritime initiatives that are not looked at by Mahanian believers. Harmonists provide a better alignment among: (a) the harmonious school; (b) the contemporary understanding of China's development path; and (c) China's maritime activities. The Chinese grand dream of the 21st century presents China's modern perception of global maritime security that is not limited to traditional naval capabilities (pp. 42-45). The non-traditionality that Chinese officials promote in the policy thinking emphasizes the need for non-military forms of maritime arrangements, such as: diplomatic, legal, and economic dimensions. This thinking explains why Chinese approach seems to be ambiguous when analyzed by traditional frameworks.

### **China's National Maritime Strategy and Global Involvement**

China's maritime power has elevated through several phases. Takeda Jun'ichi, a foreign policy and national defense journalist, identifies these phases in the following: (a) the primary footing of China's maritime conception following the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949; (b) incorporating the market component to the national maritime policies, inspired by China's opening up to the world market in the 1980s; (c) the growing global interconnectedness that resulted in a clear shift toward protecting China's interests worldwide; and (d) the current elevation of Chinese naval capabilities construction (2014). When Mao Zedong founded the People's Republic of China, almost all aspects of the Chinese nation-state had been revived in a way or another, including the maritime power. Mao Zedong introduced the early inspiration of a modern China and maritime infrastructure. The Chinese navy adopted modern policies to develop marine transportation, shipbuilding, ports establishment, scientific research, and other essentials to China growth. The Chinese government established new bodies relevant to China maritime growth to promote maritime research, marine technologies, and others. Ten years later, marking the 10th anniversary of the foundation of the PRC, China planned to extend the sea routes; they expanded up to 12 nautical miles from all borders, including its islands (Kumar, 2022). In the Chinese standpoint, the expansion serves security purposes to address regional risks and concerns. Several colleges and academies followed to equip the Chinese officials with needed knowledge and expertise.

The Deng Xiaoping's China integrated the economic element of the nation-state in all aspects of China's development during its opening to the world. The maritime expansion was no exception; it was highly orientated towards the greater economic interests. Prior to the PRC foundation, the coastal activities were limited to the near shore (近岸). With the opening phase and the regional destabilization within East Asia, the PLAN was reformed. Liu Huaqing (刘华清) inspired the reform of the naval policies as he was promoted to the PLAN's Commander in 1982. His strategy put huge emphasis on the need to manage surrounding waters that are shared with other regional neighbors. He stipulated that PLAN should secure access to these sea lines. Subsequently, Liu contributed to shifting the focus on coastal lines and near shore to extend the maritime operation to the far-seas (远海). Moreover, he promoted the early thinking of co-shouldering the regional responsibilities of addressing the surrounding maritime challenges. Prior to this thinking, the Chinese Army and naval policies were targeted towards conflict management and addressing security and political concerns during war times only. Little attention was paid to the significance of the regional waters and how the state may benefit from the huge wealth and commerce during peace times. With Huaqing's inspirations, the PLAN realized the importance of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs). The PLAN encouraged a coherent change accordingly to gain political and security influence and to exercise further commercial and communication activities through the seas (Sun & Payette, 2017). Wang Shuguang (2004), the former director of the States Oceanic Administration, states that China's maritime power ought to be advancing the marine economy, aiming to contribute to more than 10% of China's GDP. This objective safeguards China's economic interests abroad accordingly. The marine strategy serves a sustainable economic development domestically and internationally and enriches China's grand strategy. These new objectives gained a higher value besides the traditional maritime security essentials to equip China with the maritime strength and proactivity for its opening to the world.

In the early 21st century, the Communist Party widened the focus of its naval strategy by producing a cohesive national framework as the country's position and challenges changed. These specific concerns should

be taken into consideration when analyzing great powers' maritime expansion. Chinese oil imports and product exports pass through two key oceans. In 2005, the PLAN introduced the "Two Ocean" Strategy (双海战略) to re-gain its surrounding waters. The core geographic focus of the strategy covers the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. A very early version of the strategy focused on China's coastal lines, Tianjin in particular. Years later, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) facilitated the implementation of the Two Ocean Strategy (Sun & Payette, 2017). Chinese officials had to secure these two passages for external markets and increase its market resilience. After all, possible war blockades or embargoes are key obstacles to China's survival. Growing piracy is another problem that China addresses in the Two Ocean Strategy. The piratic activities destabilize China's fleets operations and thus it is in China's best interest to have a point of operation that would ensure the smoothness of ships routes. From the Chinese perspective, the protection of these two oceans stabilizes the region and, thus, the world. The strategy enhances maritime security and freedom of navigation away from any disruption.

Moreover, the global economic influence of China contributes to shaping its bilateral and multilateral maritime relations with other countries and units. For three decades, China grew, at the rate of 10 percent annually, marking the miracle growth of China's contemporary history (Wearden, 2010). Even when China's economic growth slowed, its global economic interactions remained significantly large. Considering this growth, Naughton (2020) examines two key policy initiatives through which China sought a wider economic influence: Renminbi (RMB) Internationalization (人民币国际化) and the BRI (一带一路). Besides increasing lending to developing countries, these policies strengthened domestic economy, promoted the creation of new markets abroad, enhanced the economic interconnectedness of states with China, and contributed to its prestige as a global maritime power.

The internationalization of the RMB was an ambitious policy to increase China's international financial influence. This new status as a global power needed a cornerstone financial policy. It stems from China self-image of its financial strength and from the need to address the domination of the US dollar. The policy promotes China as a strong candidate to play with new financial cards internationally. It gained strong support from the Communist Party. Between 2009 and 2020, China signed bilateral currency swap agreements with 41 countries, with total amount exceeding \$554 billion (Tran, 2022). In October 2016, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) launched the new Special Drawing Right (SDR) valuation basket that included the Chinese RMB (IMF, 2016). The internationalization of the RMB has contributed to China's maritime involvement in other regions.

The BRI is another initiative that China has advocated to achieve its grand dream and enhance its maritime strength. Announced in 2013 and shaped by President Xi's thinking, this initiative was designed to promote China internationally. It is described as Jinping's foreign signature (Gries, 2020). The initiative started with infrastructure constructions lines and then expanded to other means of cooperation, such as maritime linkages, communication infrastructure, service, and hardware production. As of March 2022, 146 states and 32 international organizations had officially joined the BRI (Green Finance and Development Center, 2022). Many scholars describe the initiative as the practice of infrastructure diplomacy (基础设施外交) (Naughton, 2020) leading to higher maritime presence worldwide. However, these projects have raised concerns and suspicions, especially in the manner China is tying other countries. China has been blamed for hurting oceans and coasts worldwide. To support the initiative, China has established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (亚洲基础设施投资银行) in 2016. By the end of 2020, it had 103 approved members (AIIB, 2023). It was viewed as another hegemonic strategy in that China controls 30% of the fund and can impose its policy on member states.

Others believe that the initiative with its supporting bank reflects China's desire to become a regional power (Yuriko, 2015).

The growth of China's maritime power was also coincided with a military growth. The Chinese government empowered its People's Liberation Army (PLA) (人民解放军) as it recently became a regional power of East Asia. China currently has the second largest defense budget in the world following the United States. To understand the PLA's policies, it is essential to comprehend where it has been positioned in China. Unlike the common structure of countries, the PLA is viewed more of an armed wing of China's Communist Party rather than an independent state military. This allocation of the Chinese military grants an efficient protection of national security as well as an enhanced military expansion abroad. As such, state diplomacy combines the Party Diplomacy (党的外交) and the Military Diplomacy (军事外交) (Zhao, 2020). This structure allows tighter control of the military by the state party and subsequently more consistent external behavior. To further strengthen the structure, some military officers took part in the Politburo Standing Committee (政治局常委). In doing so, both state diplomats and military officers represent China's interests with one consolidated voice overseas.

In coordination with the PLAN, scientific teams also expanded their activities. They carried out polar observation missions such as the China's Antarctic Program. China established its first research station, called the Great Wall Station on 1985 (Wang, 2019). Soon, with the increasing number of observation missions, China was able to introduce observation bases, such as Huanghe Station on Norway's Svalbard Island (Jun'ichi, 2014). In 2001, the International Seabed Authority granted China the right to widen its exploration to the Pacific and Southwest Indian Ocean. These explorations raise the likelihood of China being the maritime power of the future. Marine exploration requires a cooperative framework. Widening the scale of the exploration requires a huge allocation of money, employees, technological advancement, and resources. China alone cannot be at the top of the exploring powers. With the growing economic interdependency and China's external economic strength, it can be a global economic maritime power. The economic foundation and the export of goods, services, and human resources open new floors for China's exploration. It is, thus, destined to be a global sea power.

When looking at what the abovementioned schools of thoughts offer in understanding China's maritime power, Chinese policy makers hold a different understanding of being a global maritime power from that of the West. Maritime security is thematic area in which there is clear difference in perception and projection of China's self-image from traditional hegemonic narrative. Western powers have warned the world that China is taking over maritime power through its gradual expansion. In particular, the United States has convinced other regions that China's ulterior motive is to build an upper hand over maritime routes. This understanding is driven from the American belief in the zero-sum game; thus, the rise of China as a maritime power will result in the loss of Western powers. According to the Navy League of the United States (2020), two-thirds of global container traffic flow through Chinese owned or invested ports worldwide, a fact that stems from China's strength as the world's largest trading nation and exporter. The increasing number of China's logistics nodes abroad raised concerns that these nodes are clear manifestations of China's attempt to control the world and the freedom of international trade.

From the perspective of Chinese officials, there is nothing to hide in their pursuit of maritime power; after all, historically, Chinese leadership has announced maritime goals in various Communist Party's meetings and official white papers. In the 18th National Congress, the Communist Party stated that making China a maritime power is a means to enhance the marine economy and marine ecological environment. This directive serves and

defends China's rights and interests as a maritime power. The director of the Oceanic Administration clarifies the Chinese standpoint of being a maritime power. The acquisition of maritime strength is a requirement for China's development. Maritime power provides China with protection and management of its surrounding sea as a global power (Jun'ichi, 2014). In 2012, the Chinese government announced to its own citizens and the world that its maritime policy and strategy seeks to embody objectives in its external interactions with states and seas. Furthermore, China intends to develop its marine industry, capacity building, oil and gas resources, and manufacturing to widen its maritime presence and serve national needs (China Ocean Development Report, 2012). Becoming a maritime power goes beyond the limited and traditional understanding of the typical Mahanian maritime expansion.

Both sides of the debate on China's maritime security engagement with the world are polarized. China's explanation of its maritime endeavor is to introduce a harmonious approach to global maritime security through safeguarding a peaceful collective economic development as a national right. Readers outside of China overemphasize the Mahan-dominant roadmap away from the Chinese win-win approach. In both narratives, China's pursuit of international power—whether through economic maritime power or security dominance—remains a key feature of its projected power. Regardless of how China presents its rationale on national development and win-win cooperation, its maritime activities are linked to the global distribution of power. The Chinese perspective has also to be defined in an association with global maritime patterns and dynamics.

### **External Trends: Opportunities and Obstacles to China's Global Maritime Power**

The trending pivot to the East has accelerated China's global maritime expansion. Pakistan and Sri Lanka enabled China to utilize Gwadar and Hambantota Ports to conduct commercial activities. Their contracts involved terms and conditions that allowed China to protect regional trade and maritime security respectively. The Persian Gulf States and Iran also realized China's concern to protect the national and global passages of products and energy supplies. With the growing investments of mutual interests, China extended its maritime security footprints through its commercial lines. Likewise, in Africa, African countries have benefited from China's development projects and commercial activities. Therefore, China had to safeguard its activities in Africa. In fact, China's Djibouti operation base was later turned into a military base; from there various Chinese anti-piracy operations provided China with a higher security access internationally.

The external commercial activities have played a key role in enabling China to become a global maritime power. Analysts categorize Chinese economic and commercial activities into two categories: soft and hard activities (Ljuslin, 2021). Soft economic activities are conducted with China's trade deals, currency swap agreements foreign direct investments, and others. These activities later resulted in a harder narrative of commercial exercises. It enabled a more consolidated and tougher practice of commerce through physical commercial infrastructure, bigger trade volumes, and a monopoly of Chinese goods in foreign markets. This strategy constituted an interface for the PLAN to gradually expand its footprint to protect Chinese SLOCs and to establish more economic/military support points, adding to the road element of the BRI.

Regional trends within East Asia have also constituted challenges/opportunities to China's maritime expansion. Regional attitudes and perceptions of China's maritime expansionist plans have also constituted a challenge/chance to achieve a linear growth. The regional and international intolerance—mainly the United States and its East Asian allies—restricts China's maritime plans. Chinese officials have sought new alignment of national plans with other countries to correct this selective perception through promoting joint development

objectives rather than utilizing growing maritime power. Regional actors, such as India, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam, as well as international powers, particularly United States, have pushed China to adopt a hardline approach to face their challenges. Regional neighbors enjoy strategically geographic positions that make China's position unfavorable. The surrounding environment littered with negative attitudes towards China's rise constitutes a key driver behind the Chinese government's building of its sea power. Regional powers, in return, have shown more suspicions and resistance to China's maritime rise.

The growing maritime terrorism and piratic activities have also posed challenges to China's maritime expansion. China's Sea Lines of Communications (SLOCs) are subject to a high degree of piracy. These lines are mainly concentrated in the Gulf and the Gulf of Aden, East Africa and the Red Sea, the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia. Great powers take relevant measures to ensure the protection of the shipping lines and the deployment of larger numbers of escort ships. Yet, the issue of pirate activities has not been fully addressed by the international community. Naval deployment in such locations acts as a deterrent mechanism against any blockade or conflict, and China has implemented many naval assignments to protect its shipments beyond the First Island Chain. China has been criticized in that it gathers intelligence information as well as counter piracy. China's national security strategy urges the need to execute more protection in key locations of the shipping paths. It also believes in sharing global responsibility, alongside other great sea powers, stemming from its dual role in international affairs.

Recently, China has shown a collective active defensive deployment, especially in cases of crises and incidents. It has the experience of evacuating citizens (Libya), escorting vessels (Gulf of Aden), chemical weapons transportation (from Syria), international maritime investigations (attacks on Fujairah Port), search operations (Malaysian Airlines Plane), and some other cases. These incidents reflect China's determination to maintain the international safety of the seas through collaborative actions. In these cases, it projected some military sea power. On the military material basis, Chinese Navy provides active large-scale service of 052D destroyers and Type 054A frigates, along with other wide oceangoing vessels. These capabilities are also supported by the Y-20 large air freighter from the Chinese Air Force (Bo, 2020). Nevertheless, the PLAN has not yet deployed adequate defensive forces equivalent to its growing maritime economic rise. In theory, it lacks the compelling high-scale plan outside its mainland and First-Island Chain when compared to the United States and the United Kingdom. It could be that China presents a different understanding of overseas defensive forces. It is evident that China is still in its journey to exercise more military capabilities globally through a comprehensive armed forces package. Nevertheless, China is not yet well experienced in combating large, hostile terrorist groups that are transnational in scope. Such a threat demands China to widen military exercises of its overseas troops by showing hard power rather than be limited to peacekeeping missions and reliefs. In this aspect of maritime security, China has to show more military obligations towards international maritime security.

### **Conclusion**

Although the commercial expansion of maritime checkpoints of great powers may not be a highly controversial issue, the commercial/military conversion raised growing global concerns over China's speedy global maritime expansion. When studying China's maritime expansion, the Harmonious school of thought is more relevant to the imagined China's global maritime power of the 21st century than limiting the understating to the Mahanian stream. China maritime power elevated from defending the coastal lanes to sustaining China's interests overseas to involving in the global maritime governance. However, global trends have laid out the floor



for new opportunities and/or limitations to China's aimed global maritime power. The discussion on China's real motives and intentions remains of great interest to contemporary researchers.

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