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Towards naval normalcy: ‘open seas protection’ and Sino-US maritime relations

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ABSTRACT
On May 26th, 2015, China published its 10th Defense White Paper which integrated ‘open seas protection’, along with ‘offshore waters defense’, into its naval strategy. This shift in naval strategy, albeit largely anticipated, raises a series of important questions about China’s maritime ambitions. This article seeks to analyze the causes, nature and challenges of China’s latest shift in naval strategy, and its implications for Sino-US maritime relations. The article argues that China’s latest shift in naval strategy is a logical corollary of the tension between China’s expanding global interests and its asymmetric approach to sea power, and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) provides the necessary stimulus and justification for such a shift. China’s new naval strategy, the paper contends, denotes that it will develop a Mahanian blue-water navy and a basic network of overseas bases in the years ahead. Those two developments are expected to pose a series of significant challenges for China’s foreign policy. The article argues that China’s new naval strategy presents both challenges and opportunities for China and the world. To accomplish ‘open seas protection’, China will probably have to modify its policies on a range of issues, and moderate its competitive stance in the near seas. Although China’s new naval strategy need not be interpreted in a competitive framework, it does present China with a stark choice: either it pursues more friendly attitudes towards its maritime ambitions by modifying its current policy, or it will be increasingly confronted by a coalition of hostile states.

KEYWORDS Offshore waters; open seas; sea power; China’s navy; Sino-US relations

Introduction
On May 26, 2015, the Chinese government released its 10th Defense White Paper (DWP) entitled “China’s Military Strategy.” In this DWP, China announced a new policy shift in naval strategy: China’s navy “will gradually shift its focus from ‘offshore waters defense’ to a combination of ‘offshore waters defense’ and ‘open seas protection’” to develop a modern maritime
force capable of defending national security and global interests. Corresponding to this shift, the maritime environment is listed as the first of four “critical security domains” – along with cyber, space and nuclear – prioritizing force development necessary to achieve and protect national’s interests in these arenas. To allay potential international concerns, it was also declared that in the future China will “shoulder more international responsibilities and obligations, provide more public security goods, and contribute more to world peace and common development” (State Council Information Office, 2015).

The 2015 DWP does not mark a distinct shift in China’s naval priorities. This shift has been reflected in the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)’s acquisition, training, and operations over last two decades. Nevertheless, China’s 2015 DWP merits close attention in two points. First, it decisively elevates the maritime domain in China’s strategic thinking by asserting that the traditional mentality that land outweighs the sea must be abandoned. Second, it confirms unequivocally the longtime speculation made by some international observers that China is setting out to build up a Mahanian blue water navy and a rudimentary network of overseas bases. China’s latest shift in naval strategy, albeit largely anticipated by a number of analysts and pundits, raises a series of intellectually intriguing and strategically important questions. What is the nature and dynamics of China’s latest shift in naval strategy? What does China’s new naval strategy imply for its naval development and foreign policy in the future? What implications does China’s latest shift in naval strategy have for the strategic stability of Sino-US maritime relations in the near and far seas? (Cronin, Rapp-Hooper, Krejsa, Sullivan, & Doshi, 2017; MacDonald, 2016, 2017; McDevitt, 2016; Tobin, 2018; Yoshihara & Holmes, 2017).

This article seeks to analyze the causes, nature and challenges of China’s latest shift in naval strategy, as well as its implications for the strategic stability of Sino-US maritime relations. The author argues that China’s latest shift in naval strategy, in essence, is a logical corollary of the tension between its globally expanding national interests and peculiar asymmetric approach to sea power, while the newly unveiled BRI provides the necessary stimulus and justification for such a shift. This shift indicates that China is setting out to build up a Mahanian blue-water navy and a rudimentary network of overseas bases in the years ahead. Those two developments are expected to pose significant challenges to China’s foreign policy. The author contends that China’s new naval strategy presents both challenges and opportunities for China and the world. Most importantly, to accomplish the mission of “open seas protection,” China will probably have to modify its current policies on a range of issues, and mitigate its highly competitive, even hostile, stance towards the United States and some of its maritime
neighbors in the near seas. Although China’s latest shift in naval strategy need not be interpreted in a competitive framework, it does present China with a stark choice.

This article proceeds as follows. The first section focuses on clarifying China’s national interests and maritime strategic goals, the tension imposed on the PLAN, and two approaches for China to develop sea power. The second section scrutinizes China’s asymmetric approach to sea power, thereby illustrating why the “offshore waters defense” strategy is no longer sufficient to serve China’s national interests. The third section examines the driving forces behind China’s latest shift in naval strategy, that is, the tension between the global expansion of China’s national interests and its peculiar asymmetric approach to sea power, and the stimulus and justification provided by the BRI. The fourth section investigates two possible developments of China’s naval capabilities in light of its latest shift in naval strategy, and the potential challenges that those developments will pose to China’s foreign policy. The final section focuses on clarifying the strategic implications of China’s latest shift in naval strategy for Sino-US maritime relations, not only in the open or distant seas, but also in the near seas.

National interests, Maritime strategic goals and approaches to sea power

China’s naval strategy has undergone two major changes since the foundation of the PLAN (MacDonald, 2016, pp. 4–5). The first major change was in 1993 with the introduction of “offshore waters defense” (also known as “offshore (active) defense” or “near seas (active) defense”). The PLAN’s commission, as a result, shifted from coastal defense towards warfare competency in the near seas. The second major change was in 2015 when China publicly introduced “open seas protection,” alongside “offshore waters defense,” into its naval strategy. The PLAN is thus tasked with the mission of defending China’s expanding national interests globally (Huang, 1994; Lai, 2016; Li, 2009). In geographic terms, offshore waters (near seas) refers to the body of water between China’s coast and the first island-chain. The body of water falling within this area includes three East Asian littorals (near seas in the Chinese terminology): the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea (ECS) and the South China Sea (SCS). By comparison, open seas (far seas) has never been clarified by the Chinese government. Nevertheless, in view of China’s national interests and naval activities over last two decades, open seas should refer to the body of water between the first and second chains in the Western Pacific, and the Indian Ocean region beyond the Malacca Strait (Li, 2009, pp. 150, 160; Liu, 2004, pp. 432–437).1
China’s national interests that drive its naval strategy are national security and economic development. Beijing’s primary maritime security concern is homeland defense, which includes defending its extensive and most prosperous coastland, seeking reunification with Taiwan, and defending its maritime rights and interests in the near seas. Beijing’s major economic concern is the sustainable development of its national economy. That demands the safety and security of vital Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs) so that China can enjoy unimpeded access to overseas sources of energy and materials as well as global markets. In accordance with its national interests, Beijing has developed two maritime strategic goals over last decades. The primary goal is to defend China proper. This includes defending China from its various maritime rivals, developing necessary capabilities to maintain maritime territorial and economic interests and rights, and supporting potential contingencies against Taiwan. The secondary goal is to protect its development interests which are expanding globally. Those interests include enhancing capabilities to protect vital SLOCs and strategic chokepoints, countering piracy threats, and protecting Chinese citizens working and studying abroad if and when necessary (Sharman, 2015, pp. 6, 8. See also: Dixon, 2014; Lim, 2011).

China’s two maritime strategic goals are inadvertently imposing a severe challenge to its navy: the PLAN must constantly improve its capabilities to defend national security in the near seas, while simultaneously conducting a wide range of maritime missions that will divert naval resources to the far seas (Lai, 2016, pp. 198–209; Peifer, 2011, p. 130; Kaplan, 2010, pp. 37–38; Holmes, 2010, p. 126; Lei, 2008, pp. 141–142). This tension can be broken down into two elements. First, “offshore waters defense” requires China to treat the United States Navy (USN) as the primary adversary in light of its superiority in the East Asian near seas. However, “open seas protection” presumes that, given the USN’s global superiority and presence, China could maintain a political rapprochement with the United States, and the PLAN could develop a passable working relationship with the USN. Second, “offshore waters defense” requires the PLAN to prioritize sea-denial over sea-control and power projection capabilities, and pay little attention to overseas military bases. Nevertheless, “open seas protection” requires the PLAN to pursue a more balanced development of sea-denial, sea-control and power projection capabilities, and devote much effort to developing at least a rudimentary network of overseas military bases along its vital SLOCs (Holmes, 2010; Kaplan, 2010; Lei, 2008).

As a continental power, China confronts a choice between two approaches, symmetric and asymmetric, in developing its sea power. The symmetric approach means that China could copy the USN model and build up a Mahanian blue water navy and a wide network of overseas

military bases. Such a blue water navy and wide network of overseas bases would allow the PLAN to compete face-to-face with the USN for command of both near and far seas, as Louis XIV’s France or Wilhelm II’s Germany once did with the Royal Navy. This scenario, if fully realized, would simultaneously remove the tension imposed by China’s maritime strategic goals on the PLAN in one stroke. The asymmetric approach comprises two dimensions. First, China could exploit its comparative advantages in some modern military technologies to develop such asymmetric weapons like anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities to neutralize the superiority of the USN. Second, China could circumvent the superiority of the USN by improving its geo-strategic position vis-à-vis the USN as it has been doing over recent years with its large-scale land reclamation in the SCS. Nevertheless, the asymmetric approach, if pushed to the extreme, would inadvertently exacerbate, rather than mitigate, the tension imposed by China’s maritime strategic goals on the PLAN.

Over the last two decades, China’s turn toward the sea is very much a reality. This reality is underwritten by two developments. First, since the end of the Cold War, continental pressures on China have diminished, while strategic pressures from the sea have become more and more salient at the same time. Second, China’s integration into the global economy and the expansion of its overseas interests have made maritime interests much more significant for its economic development and regime security (Glosny, Saunders, & Ross, 2010, pp. 161–163). China’s turn toward the sea, although there are various evaluations, is primarily predicated on the dazzling development of its national economy, especially the global expansion of its national interests, over the last two decades. Nevertheless, this precondition has inadvertently imposed two potential restraints on China’s ongoing maritime pursuit. First, a major economic or financial crisis, plus the ensuing political upheavals and massive grass-root protestations, could force China’s maritime pursuit to an unexpected halt. Second, given the highly asymmetrical interdependence between China and the United States, the constant deterioration of Sino-US relations also will cripple China’s ambitious maritime pursuit (Cronin, Rapp-Hooper, Krejsa, Sullivan, Doshi, 2017, p. 10).

Today, China boasts three favorable conditions for building up a Mahanian blue water navy and a wide network of overseas military bases. First, since the end of the Cold War, traditional threats emanating from land have been much reduced, if not eliminated, and Beijing has settled down territorial disputes with almost all of its land neighbors except for India and Bhutan. In spite of multiple challenges, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) today has enjoyed better border security than any time in history, and firmly controls all of its land border. Its geopolitical environment closely
resembles that of insular Great Britain and continental United States. Second, with the “Reform and Opening” policy since 1978, China has experienced miraculous economic growth over last four decades. It now has become a booming market for most major multinational corporations, and successfully transformed itself into a famous “world factory.” China today is an economic giant second only to the United States. Its spectacular economic development not only proliferates global interests that are calling for a blue-water navy to protect, but also provides commensurate budgetary resources to realize this goal (Ross, 2017; see also: Erickson & Goldstein, 2009; Ross, 1999, 2009). Third, China’s large, cost-efficient shipbuilding industry, dredging fleet, and logistics networks offer significant capacity for naval buildup and port development. In spite of a variety of potential deficiencies, those impressive capacities combined, in a fundamental sense, have laid a solid foundation for China to realize its maritime aspirations in the years ahead.

Notwithstanding those favorable conditions, China, as a continental power with extensive land and sea frontiers, cannot afford to prioritize building and maintaining a USN-style blue water navy and global network of overseas bases in the long term (Lord, 2009). First, China today, albeit experiencing better border security than any previous time, still faces a range of tricky challenges. China has fourteen land neighbors, and four of them with nuclear weapons. Furthermore, many Chinese border regions are occupied by disaffected minorities that have constantly sought independence. Accordingly, China’s vast hinterland requires large land forces to maintain the domestic stability. Such demands would surely divert resources away from naval development (Ross, 2017). Second, to construct and defend a Mahanian blue water navy and a global network of military bases, China must not only expend great effort in naval buildup, but also press ahead with space, air, cyber capabilities. This tremendous development requires time, resources, strong will, good luck, and prodigious budgets. Such comprehensive efforts would put insufferable burden on China’s national economy which has been slowing down over last few years (Kostecka, 2012; Lei, 2008). Given China’s endowments, the only chance for the PLAN to compete with the USN lies with the asymmetric approach, that is, with developing A2/AD capabilities and improving its geostrategic position.4

**Naval strategy with Chinese characteristics**

Throughout modern history, despite the prevailing influence of Alfred T. Mahan’s theories of sea power around the world, continental European and Asian navies are always faced with a simple choice in developing sea
power: either to create a balanced fleet to engage another balanced fleet and defeat it in decisive sea battles, or to take asymmetric approach, creating an unbalanced navy or circumventing the superiority of the adversarial navy, to prevent it from achieving sea control and to keep it from one’s vital SLOCs (Tokarev, 2014, p. 61. See also: Røksund, 2007; Wegner, 1989). This is also true of China today. Over last two decades, China has been showing no interest in immediately acquiring a mature blue water navy and a global network of overseas bases at all costs, instead concentrating on the asymmetric approach to neutralize or circumvent the absolute superiority of the USN in the Western Pacific. Thus, there has been significant variation in the PLAN development over last two decades despite its overall progress across platforms and capabilities. This variation is most vividly manifested in the PLAN’s strategy, operational doctrines, selective development of naval capabilities, and land reclamations in the SCS (Horta, 2012; Lim, 2011).

At least since 1993, near seas (offshore waters) defense has been dominating China’s naval strategy. Though the concept of far seas operations was advanced by the China leadership as early as the 1990s (Li, 2009, p. 160), the near seas enjoyed clear priority over the far seas in the PLAN’s strategy. This priority stems from both China’s strategic necessity and perceived security environment (Dixon, 2014, p. 394). Home to all of China’s maritime sovereignty disputes, including those over the Diaoyu and Spratly Islands, the near seas are also directly related to China’s drive for reunification with Taiwan, and border China’s most prosperous coastal regions which ranks high in its security concerns. Thus, the PRC’s attention and resources have been naturally focused on the near seas. Since its population and wealth are overwhelmingly located in the coastal regions, China views the actions of the United States and its allies and partners as potential threats. As America reconfirms its regional ties by unveiling its “Rebalance” in 2011, backing Japan’s revival of its military power, and continuing to sell advanced weapons to Taiwan, Beijing fears that Washington is forming a containment along its maritime periphery (Cole, 2010, 2016; Lim, 2014; Yoshihara & Holmes, 2010).

In concert with the priority of the near seas over the far seas, the PLAN has developed the doctrines of “offshore defense” and “limited area denial” in the past decades (Horta, 2012; see also: Cole, 2010; O’ Rouke, 2010). “Offshore defense” aims to make the PLAN capable of extending its area of operations, and more specifically, to make it capable of obtaining effective control of the seas, within and beyond the first island chain. This chain stretches from Japan through the Philippines all the way down to Singapore, and ends in the most westerly islands in the SCS (Horta, 2012, p. 394). “Limited area denial” aims at limiting access to the waters in question
to any external navy in time of open hostilities. It requires the PLAN to acquire the ability to deny a powerful navy access to the waters within 200 miles of the Chinese coast. It is slowly evolving to encompass the entire near seas, especially the ECS and the SCS (Horta, 2012, p. 394). Those two doctrines, over last decades, have simultaneously pushed the PLAN to selectively develop its naval platforms and capabilities, and improve its geo-strategic position vis-à-vis the USN, to neutralize or circumvent the nearly absolute superiority of the USN in the Western Pacific, especially within the first island chain (Horta, 2012; Lim, 2011).

The doctrines of “offshore defense” and “limited area denial” constitute the backbone of what the Pentagon has dubbed China’s A2/AD strategy, which has the objectives of keeping hostile forces at bay by attacking them far from China (A2) or, if hostile forces are already within striking range of China, attempt to deny them freedom of operational actions (AD) (McDevitt, 2016, p. 35). In accordance with those two objectives, the PLAN has prioritized sea-denial over sea-control and power projection capabilities in its development over last two decades. This unevenness connotes that each of the three capabilities - sea-denial, sea-control, and power projection – is actually pursued with different intensities in spite of the overall progress of the PLAN. To be specific, China has given a higher priority to reinforcing its ability to deny command of the seas to potential adversaries. Though the need to protect its SLOCs seems increasingly important, the pace of change has been less rapid. Finally, the power projection capability, albeit indispensable for potential contingencies over Taiwan, has been least developed (Lim, 2011, p. 114; see also: Horta, 2012; Lim, 2016).

The backbone of any navy whose main objective is to keep command of disputed areas is its submarine forces. Submarines have been the weapon of choice for weaker naval powers that wish to contest a dominant naval power’s control of the seas or its ability to project power ashore from the sea (Côté, 2003, p. 1). In this sense, the swift move from an obsolete submarine fleet to a modern one that has characterized China’s naval modernization over the past decades brings home its strong interest in building up a navy that would be capable to keep at bay a stronger adversary by denying it command of the near seas (Horta, 2012; Lim, 2011). The impressive advancement of China’s submarine forces over last decades is not an isolated trend, but rather a major aspect of its overall efforts to build up its A2/AD capabilities (Kostecka, 2012; Lei, 2008). This also explains why China has shown no interest in quickly acquiring a full-fledged blue water navy with aircraft carrier strike groups (CSGs) at its core. The PLAN’s surface combatants are not likely to play a significant role in operations or campaigns characterized by A2/AD capabilities (McDevitt, 2016, p. 36).
In addition to A2/AD capabilities, China has been seeking to improve its geostrategic position vis-à-vis the USN, by which the PLAN could expect to circumvent the nearly absolute superiority of the USN in the Western Pacific. This aspiration is most vividly manifested in China’s land reclamation in the SCS since 2012 (Buszynski, 2012). From a geostrategic perspective, China’s land reclamation in the SCS have much to do with East Asia’s maritime geography. The first island chain, in effect, is a “Great Wall in reverse” that serves as a guard tower to monitor and fortifications to block the PLAN’s free access to high seas. This reality constrains the PLAN’s ability to be a blue-water navy (Yoshihara & Holmes, 2010, p. 20). Unlike the United States, whose major bases are fully open to the Pacific Ocean, all of China’s naval bases are located in the Yellow Sea, the ECS and the SCS – save for its base in Djibouti. This means that the PLAN’s major fleets are contained in a body of water that are semi-enclosed by the first island chain (Koda, 2017). By comparison, the SCS is probably the ideal place for the PLAN’s fleets to break through the first island chain.

Given the USN’s current deployment, the PLAN enjoys comparative superiority in the SCS, thus enjoying more freedom of maneuver. The SCS is also proximate to the Luzon and Malacca Straits, both of which are guarded by smaller states, the PLAN, therefore, could get easier access to open seas in time of necessity or war (Buszynski, 2012, p. 147). In addition, command of the SCS would also grant China two further strategic advantages. First, command of the SCS would allow China to possess or deny others the ability to protect or disrupt the SLOCs through the SCS region, thereby helping to consolidate its near seas defense. This command would enable China to deter other East Asian states by threatening to harass, disrupt or blockade their sea-borne trade in time of war. Second, command of the SCS would facilitate the PLAN’s expeditionary or power projection operations in the Indian Ocean where China’s economic interests are mounting year by year. Considering China’s lack of overseas bases, command of the SCS would improve the PLAN’s capability to conduct a range of missions in those open or distant seas (Buszynski, 2012; Saito, 2017).

Asymmetric approach, the belt and road initiative and open seas protection

The PLAN fleet that prioritizes near seas defense and sea denial capability, in essence, is a modern version of what Alfred Mahan termed a “fortress fleet,” a navy that operates solely under cover of shore-based fire support. Although Mahan relentlessly criticized this defensive mentality for limiting the fleet’s radius of action, cramping its freedom of maneuver, and stifling initiative among its commanders, advances in military technology seem to
have made his critique less and less relevant. Today, modern weaponry systems such as missiles, mines and submarines increasingly enable a coastal state like China to hold a superior navy like the USN at risk within the near seas. Nonetheless, one element of Mahan’s critique stays: a fortress fleet cannot exercise sea power effectively in open or distant seas. In other words, sophisticated shore-fired weaponry today, in combination with sea-denial naval assets, may allow China to influence events along its maritime periphery with increasing impact. However, at the same time, mounting interests are beckoning the PLAN’s attention toward the Indian Ocean region and beyond (Holmes, 2010; see also: Kaplan, 2010; Peifer, 2011).

Likewise, despite generating splashy shocks in media coverage, China’s land reclamations in the SCS is overstepping the mark and backfiring on itself. Those movements not only complicate existing maritime disputes, but help to catalyze precisely what China has been trying to avoid (Huxley & Schreer, 2015). With China’s land reclamations, Southeast Asian states, especially those having maritime disputes with China, have been alarmed over its long-term intentions. This has pushed those states to usher in an American presence to neutralize China’s pressure, and prodded them to procure asymmetric A2/AD capabilities to complicate its actions. Besides, China’s A2/AD capabilities and the concern created by its assertiveness in the SCS region have encouraged a reaction by Washington directed towards Beijing. Although China’s A2/AD capabilities are supposed to be defensive, the desire of the USN to maintain its freedom of navigation means that it may react to those deployments by intensifying its own deployments. This would aggravate the sense of insecurity in China that led it to develop A2/AD capabilities (Le Mièr, 2014, pp. 139–156. See also: Nie, 2016; Wei, 2017).

China’s fortress fleet and land reclamations, in view of its effects, have intensified, rather than alleviated, the tension between its maritime strategic goals and asymmetric approach to sea power. On one hand, China “seems intent on denying US vessels unfettered access to the near seas in times of crisis or conflict; on the other, the PLAN is still incapable of protecting its vital SLOCs in distant seas. This contradiction would make any attack on the USN in the near seas futile since the USN could simply cut off China’s vital SLOCs by blockade in the high seas (Kaplan, 2010, pp. 37–38; see also: Collins, 2018; Mirski, 2013). In other words, China’s fortress fleet and land reclamations may enable it to transform the near seas into a no-go zone for the USN, but those two measures are of little utility for defending China’s global interests. It is in this sense that China’s latest shift in naval strategy from “offshore waters defense” to the combination of “offshore waters defense” and “open seas protection”, to a large degree, is a logical corollary of the tension between China’s global interests and its
increasingly obsolete asymmetric approach to sea power (Kaplan, 2010, pp. 37–38; see also: Cole, 2016; Dyer, 2014).

While the tension between China’s national interests and its asymmetric approach to sea power constitutes the internal driving force for China’s latest shift in naval strategy, the BRI, especially the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI, BRI’s maritime branch), provides the most significant stimulus and justification for such a shift. Unlike the near seas where the PLAN had specific issues like maritime territorial disputes and Taiwan independence to deal with, the far seas had been geographically remote and strategically irrelevant to China proper (Li, 2009, p. 164; see also: Holmes & Yoshihara, 2010; Yoshihara & Holmes, 2005). As a result, far seas operations, albeit advanced as early as the 1990s, seems to lack concrete objectives that can guide the PLAN’s modernization and development. That also explains why it has never been integrated into China’s naval strategy. From this perspective, the unveiling of the MSRI supplies the PLAN with a precious loadstar for its modernization and development in the decades ahead (Cronin, Rapp-Hooper, Krejsa, Sullivan, Doshi, 2017; Glosny, Saunders, Ross, 2010; Yung, Rustici, Devary, Lin, 2014). To comprehend the significance of the MSRI for Beijing’s latest shift in naval strategy, two points need to be clarified in advance: first, the paramount importance of economic development for China today; second, the inherent advantages of sea routes over land routes in the BRI design.

With the rapid economic development over the last four decades, the foundation and legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s domestic ruling position has shifted accordingly. Today, economic development is not merely concerned with Chinese political and social stability, but becomes an essential pillar, ranking with sovereign independence and territorial integrity, for regime security in China as well. This shift is largely irreversible in some sense. That is why successive China’s top leadership since Deng Xiaoping have unexceptionally put economic development high on their policy agenda. In spite of its potential multiple purposes, the BRI was primarily designed to enable China’s national economy to surpass its current limits and bottlenecks by providing access to new markets and securing supplies of energy and raw materials for its booming industry. This reality is underlying the linkage between the unveiling of the BRI (more specifically, the unveiling of the MSRI) and Beijing’s latest shift in naval strategy. Such a linkage could be vividly discerned through the observed correspondence among China’s overseas investment, diplomatic moves and naval activities over the last few years. This shift in naval strategy, to be exact, was primarily designed to ensure the safety, security, and ultimate success of the MSRI projects in the Indian Ocean region and beyond (Dargnat, 2016, pp. 63–76; see also: Lee, 2015; Zhang, 2016).
The BRI roughly consists of six overland corridors and one maritime corridor. Though Beijing has never publicized its policy preference, China’s latest shift in naval strategy indicates that the maritime corridor (the MSRI) may enjoy some priority over the six overland ones (the SREB) in the Chinese decision makers’ mind. This is so primarily because China has invested heavily in many port facilities and infrastructure along the maritime corridor over last two decades. With low costs and efficiencies of scale in cargo shipping, it is hard to justify railway building and the required long-term maintenance and security efforts associated with them (Fallon, 2015). Besides, all six overland corridors envisaged by the BRI, to various degrees, fall into Russian or Indian spheres of influence, and some of them directly contradict Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) project and India’s intense sovereignty claim over Kashmir. Given Moscow’s observed reluctance and Delhi’s declared opposition towards the BRI design, the economic and political prospects of the six overland corridors are largely uncertain in the foreseeable future. Finally, some of the overland corridors, if completed, would inadvertently strengthen the connectivity between some ethnic minority groups inside China and their ethnic brethren beyond the border. This outcome will probably incur unexpected risks for China’s internal stability and security (Brewster, 2017; Clarke, 2016).

With the unfolding of the BRI over the last few years, the advantages of sea routes over land routes are becoming increasingly manifest, and Beijing’s focus of attention seems to have shifted accordingly. This shift could be discerned through two series of events. First, among the six overland corridors, two most important ones – the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and the China–Indochina Peninsula Corridor – have either encountered severe financial problems or been cancelled due to a variety of difficulties, while the other four ones seem to have stagnated to varying degrees in the last few years. Second, China’s recent diplomatic activities, especially President Xi Jinping’s high-profile state visit to South Africa in July 2018, seem to indicate that Beijing intends to extend the MSRI to both Northern and Southern Africa. Against the backdrop of setbacks and stagnations in overland corridors, this posture seems to signify Beijing’s new thinking about how to advance the BRI. The BRI has been widely declared, and even written into the CCP’s Party Constitution. It is thus impossible for Beijing to allow it to stagnate indefinitely or fail outright without severe consequences. In view of this harsh reality, the most sensible option for China to press on with the BRI is to concentrate its effort and resources on the most promising branch (the MSRI) in the years ahead.

The extent to which China’s economy relies upon the Indian Ocean region is staggering, and those interests are expected to grow as China invests in the Horn of Africa and looks to strengthen its economic
connectivity to Europe. Considering this, Beijing’s new naval strategy seems to indicate that the PLAN will be moving into the Indian Ocean and beyond to protect its expanding national interests there (Cronin, Rapp-Hooper, Krejsa, Sullivan, Doshi, 2017; Glosny, Saunders, Ross, 2010). This move does not necessarily mean that China’s blue-water navy should be regarded as an unwelcome or threatening development. Under Mahan’s theories, the foundation for comprehending sea power was “the necessity to secure commerce, by political measures conducive to military or naval strength. This order is that of actual relative importance to the nation of the three elements – commercial, political, military” (Mahan, 1902, p. 246; see also: Holmes & Yoshihara, 2007; Yoshihara & Holmes, 2010). In other words, a navy is built to protect a nation’s commercial or economic interests, thus only a means to an end. In this sense, the unveiling of “open seas protection” signifies that the PLAN is gradually straying from its distorted asymmetric approach to sea power, and returning to a state of naval normalcy.

**Blue water navy, overseas bases and challenges for China’s foreign policy**

More than words or slogans, “open seas protection” is underwritten by China’s concrete actions, especially its prodigious investment in naval build-up over recent years. Although the Chinese government has never released a long-term naval shipbuilding plan, official US public sources reveal that the PLAN has already surpassed Britain, France, Russia, and Japan to become the world’s second largest navy by total number of ships. Furthermore, many analysts strongly suggest that the PLAN will be quantitatively on par with the USN by 2030, while others predict that China may have a larger naval order of battle than the US then. In addition, it was widely estimated that China’s navy will not be far behind the USN with respect to some key capabilities by 2030. The most symbolic one is CSGs. China will have two operational CSGs in the near term, anchoring a blue-water navy that at least initially resembles a mini-version of US blue-water force structure in capabilities and vessel classes. Besides, China has been investing steadily in logistics support ships, modern multi-purpose destroyers and frigates, nuclear attack submarines and other hardcore vessels that a comprehensive carrier group requires (Cronin, Rapp-Hooper, Krejsa, Sullivan, Doshi, 2017; McDevitt, 2016).

For any navy to operate in regions far from homeland, proximate bases are indispensable. In this respect, the unlimited access to overseas bases across the globe has been a real enabler of the USN global supremacy around the world today. Over last two decades, China has been acutely
aware of this deficiency, and trying to compensate for it by proactively exploring a number of alternatives such as the “Dual Use Logistics Facility” model and the “String of Pearls” model (Yung, Rustici, Devary, Lin, 2014). However, China’s recent activities seem to indicate that such an exploration has fallen short of Beijing’s expectation. Realizing that overseas military bases may be irreplaceable in some sense for a real blue-water navy, Beijing, over last few years, has started to tentatively deviate from its rigid position regarding overseas military bases by construction of a dedicated military base in Djibouti. In view of China’s maritime ambitions, this attempt should be just the first step towards a rudimentary network of overseas bases along its vital SLOCs in the Indian Ocean region (Kostecka, 2011; Tangredi, 2011). With the growth and maturity of the PLAN’s blue-water fleets, China, in the years ahead, is expected to seek more overseas military bases like Djibouti in the Indian Ocean region.

China’s efforts in building up blue-water capabilities and overseas military bases have sparked a wealth of commentaries by policy analysts and military experts around the world (MacDonald, 2016, 2017; McDevitt, 2016; Tobin, 2018; Yoshihara & Holmes, 2017). In spite of professional and intellectual integrity, those commentaries, official and nonofficial alike, usually left out one crucial dimension: the potential challenges posed by the missions relevant to “open seas protection” to China’s foreign policy. To be specific, the mission of “open seas protection” would pose at least three interrelated challenges to China’s current foreign policy. First, what is China going to do with its long-held noninterference principle as its fleets move into other regions? Second, how would China balance its assertive behavior in the near seas and cooperation with other players in the far seas? Third, what attitudes should China take on towards the international maritime order in carrying out its blue-water missions? Those three challenges, if left alone, would not only call into serious question China’s strategic intention over the international maritime status quo, but also cripple the PLAN’s capabilities to carry out a range of missions in the far seas as well.6

The policy of noninterference has been a core principle of China’s foreign relations. At least since 1954, this principle has served a number of China’s core interests, especially limiting possible interventions from other countries that could foment domestic instability or undermine CCP’s rule. However, as China’s overseas interests are growing, so do its stakes in the stability of the host countries. With more at stake around the world, what happens in other countries is increasingly important to the leaders in Beijing (Ratner, Colby, Erickson, Hosford, & Sullivan, 2015). The basic rationale behind China’s naval buildup is to protect its expanding interests and citizens abroad. As the PLAN achieves more capabilities and greater endurance, Beijing will have more capacity as well as scope for interventions to
stabilize distant crises that would jeopardize its interests and citizens (Glosny, Saunders, Ross, 2010). Given time, this reality is expected to push China to reconsider its current doctrinaire adherence to the principle of noninterference, and come to embrace at least part of the international norms on humanitarian interventions. Over the last decade, China has exhibited a sense of pragmatism in handling a series of cases in Third World countries. This seems to indicate that China is trying to moderate its rigid adherence to the principle of noninterference (Aidoo & Steve, 2015; Davis, 2011; Verhoeven, 2014).

Compared to the noninterference principle, the observed divergence between China’s assertiveness in the near seas and cooperation in the far seas is a more immediate challenge. Over last few years, China appears focused on showing its assertiveness in maritime East Asia so that its economic and military clout could make it the dominant player, while actively contributing to the maritime security order in the high seas, seeking greater influence in the process but not challenging US leadership at the same time (MacDonald, 2016, p. 9). Such a divergence has not only poisoned Sino-US relations, but has also alarmed East Asian maritime states, pushing them to move away from China politically and economically. Furthermore, this divergence has called into question China’s peaceful intention regarding the international maritime status quo, thereby stimulating, even justifying, some countries’ reservation and opposition towards the MSRI, even though this initiative is mutually beneficial in some sense. Such a divergence, if left alone, will likely exacerbate China’s political isolation, compress its diplomatic space, and restrict the PLAN’s freedom of carrying out a range of missions in the far seas (MacDonald, 2017; see also: Nie, 2016; Wei, 2017).

China’s assertiveness in the near seas, combined with legal ambiguities about its maritime claims, has naturally led to serious uneasiness in its maritime neighbors and the United States over its attitudes towards the international maritime order (Bekkevold & Till, 2016). This is particularly manifested in growing Sino-US contention over the freedom of navigation (FON) in the SCS (MacDonald, 2017). To Washington, FON includes the right to conduct unarmed reconnaissance and research activities in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) without coastal state permission. Beijing, by contrast, argues that those American operations abuse the right of FON in order to gather sensitive information or intelligence. Such actions prejudice China’s security, and thus are forbidden even in the EEZs. China’s restrictive interpretation of the right of FON, to be precise, is specifically designed to counter US military reconnaissance activities around the near seas. However, such a restrictive interpretation, combined with its unique sovereign and territorial conception of maritime domain, inadvertently calls into
question China’s general attitudes towards the existing international maritime order (Cole, 2010, Chapter 2; see also: Manicom, 2014; Mastro, 2011; Valencia, 2009). Although the United States is not a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), its FON operations in the SCS are conducted under the provisions of the UNCLOS. In this sense, those FON operations in the SCS, albeit controversial, are actually pushing China to clarify its attitudes towards the maritime regime underwritten by the UNCLOS.

With the PLAN blue-water fleets moving into far seas, those three challenges to Beijing’s foreign policy are expected to become increasingly acute. The possible shift of China’s attitudes on those issues would simultaneously have a great impact on China itself. Such a shift will arguably alter China’s state identity in some sense, thereby transforming its conceptions of rights and interests. Specifically, the global expansion of its interests and the mission of “open seas protection” may push Beijing to embrace at least part of the international norms on humanitarian intervention, impel it to streamline its split policy in the nears seas and far seas, and clarify its general attitudes towards the international maritime order. At least since 1978, China’s continued profiting from seaborne trade, which lies at the root of its economic miracle today, has occurred largely because the USN has almost single-handedly ensured the safety and security of the global commons. Thus, China possibly will acknowledge the importance of the free movement of goods through the global commons if it is serious about becoming a maritime great power (Cronin, Rapp-Hooper, Krejsa, Sullivan, Doshi, 2017; see also: Nohara, 2017; Silva, 2015).

‘Open seas protection’ and Sino-US maritime relations

Beijing’s latest shift in naval strategy, in general, presents both challenges and opportunities in the far seas. The emergence of China as a maritime power in its own right, one with blue-water capabilities and overseas bases, is profoundly reshaping the regional and global politics, and affect the interests of the United States as well as its allies and partners. With China’s rise in maritime realm, the United States’ uncontested naval supremacy will not be taken for granted, and a global PLAN will become a fundamental fact of international politics that must be taken seriously by any players. Nonetheless, in view of the uncertainties and difficulties that the PLAN may encounter in sustaining a naval presence in the far seas, Beijing, instead of assuming a competitive stance, may seek certain forms of collaboration with the United States and other regional players. In other words, China’s blue-water navy is not inherently a threat to American interests in the far seas. Instead, there may be opportunities to leverage China’s blue-water
assets into a partnership with other relevant players for addressing issues of mutual concern (Cronin, Rapp-Hooper, Krejsa, Sullivan, Doshi, 2017, Chapter 3).

Notwithstanding opportunities for cooperation in the far seas, China’s blue-water navy may have subversive ramifications in the near seas. As it matures, this far-ranging force will simultaneously improve the PLAN’s ability to conduct near seas defense missions. Its aircraft carriers, amphibious vessels, cutting-edge surface combatants, and avant-garde submarines can transfer directly to fulfill a variety of operations in the Taiwan Strait, the SCS, and the ECS. This hypothetical scenario lies at the core of American concern with China’s improving blue-water capabilities (Cronin, Rapp-Hooper, Krejsa, Sullivan, Doshi, 2017, Chapter 4). This concern, in some sense, is justified considering China’s recent assertiveness in the near seas. However, this concern is largely exaggerated under close scrutiny. Such an exaggeration, to be exact, has much to do with three interrelated factors: redundant calculation of China’s capabilities in the near seas; almost total ignorance of the tension between “offshore waters defense” and “open seas protection,” as well as its implications for the PLAN; and severe underestimation of East Asian regional powers’ potential for offsetting and neutralizing the PLAN’s superiority (Beckley, 2017; Biddle & Oelrich, 2016; MacDonald, 2017; Silva, 2015; Yoshihara & Holmes, 2017).

For the United States, China’s blue-water fleets are unable to constitute a serious threat in the far seas because the PLAN, without the protection of the A2/AD shield, would face significant challenges in conducting high intensity warfare against the USN in the far seas (McDevitt, 2016, pp. 35–36). However, when employed in the near seas, the PLAN blue-water fleets and their manifold missiles, under the cover of the A2/AD shield, would pose truly formidable challenges to American naval dominance in East Asian littoral seas, thereby constituting a grave threat to a variety of interests of the United States as well as its East Asian allies and partners (Cronin, Rapp-Hooper, Krejsa, Sullivan, Doshi, 2017, pp. 20–21). In spite of its plausibility, this calculation is somewhat redundant because the real threat to American naval dominance in the near seas lies with China’s A2/AD capabilities, rather than with its blue-water fleets. To be specific, if the United States proves to be able to penetrate China’s A2/AD shield, the PLAN’s blue-water fleets would be unable to pose real challenges in both the near and far seas. However, if the United States proves to be unable to penetrate China’s A2/AD shield, with or without blue-water fleets, the PLAN will constitute a truly grave threat to American naval dominance in the near seas (Biddle & Oelrich, 2016; Lim, 2011, 2016; Montgomery, 2014).

In addition to redundant calculation, existing analyses, in general, have ignored one critical dilemma faced by the PRC today: the tension between
the “offshore waters defense” and “open seas protection,” as well as its implications for the PLAN. Simply put, “offshore waters defense” requires the PLAN to treat the USN as the primary adversary, and prioritize sea-denial over sea-control and power projection capabilities, while “open seas protection” requires the PLAN to develop basic cooperation with the USN in the far seas, and seek a more balanced development of naval capabilities (Holmes, 2010, p. 126; Kaplan, 2010, pp. 37–38; Lei, 2008, pp. 141–142; Peifer, 2011, p. 130). Given this tension, China is actually faced with a stark choice in the future: either it persists with its current assertive policy in the near seas, thereby imperiling its increasingly important far seas operations; or it has to bridge the gap between its near seas assertiveness and far seas cooperation. To be specific, the USN’s unrivalled superiority in global commons creates a profound vulnerability for the PLAN today. This vulnerability, in the long term, would probably push China, in spite of itself, to strike at least a reasonable balance between its assertiveness in the near seas and cooperative behavior in the far seas in the coming years (MacDonald, 2016, 2017; Ross, 2017).

The probability for China, in the years ahead, to smooth out the gap between its near seas assertiveness and far seas cooperation is underwritten by two facts. First, the UNCLOS is an organic entirety, indivisible in itself. It is thus impossible for China to exempt itself from certain rules and regulations in the near seas, while simultaneously hoping other players to respect its rights and interests enshrined by the UNCLOS in the far seas. Second, given China’s increasing dependence on the global maritime commons, China’s assertiveness in the near seas will also grant the USN or other navies a convenient excuse to obstruct China’s law-based operations in others’ home waters. To be sure, a softening of China’s assertiveness in the near seas will not automatically secure a similar approach on the USN immediately. However, this shift will benefit China in two ways. First, it will bring China’s rights and interests in both the near and far seas under the protection of the UNCLOS. This will not only improve China’s international image, but also better protect its overseas interests. Second, it will help to mitigate or freeze up the constant escalation of the Sino-US competition in the near seas, thereby laying a foundation for the improvement of Sino-US relations in the future.

American concern also underestimates regional powers’ potential for neutralizing the PLAN’s superiority because those regional powers hold two advantages over China in the near seas: geographic and asymmetric.7 East Asian first island chain, like a selectively tightened straitjacket, may restrict the PLAN’s freedom of maneuver, particularly during times of crisis or conflict. For the PLAN to proceed into the open seas, it must pass through choke points like Japan’s southwestern islands chain, the waters between
Taiwan and the Philippines, the waters between the Philippines and Indonesia, and the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok straits. All of which are guarded by US allies and partners (Buszynski, 2012; Erickson & Wuthnow, 2016; Koda, 2017; Yoshihara & Holmes, 2005). Besides, China’s assertiveness in the near seas has prodded many East Asian maritime states to emulate its model at least partially by deploying asymmetric A2/AD capabilities to complicate the PLAN’s actions. With the spread of A2/AD capabilities, there is an emerging balance of military power within the near seas. This military balance will be further consolidated in the years ahead given American assistance, while China, at least in the foreseeable future, has no effective way to outmatch the A2/AD capabilities deployed by its maritime neighbors (Beckley, 2017; Heginbotham & Heim, 2015; Krepinevich, 2015; Yoshihara 2015; Yoshihara & Holmes, 2012).

Just as China’s far seas capabilities will have consequences for the near seas, so too does the situation in the near seas directly affect China’s ability to fulfill a wide range of missions in the far seas. To be specific, “open seas protection” presumes that China could stabilize the situation in the near seas with relative ease. However, if China proves to be unable to stabilize its maritime periphery in the near future, it will not have much extra resources to fulfill the mission of ‘open seas protection’ in the far seas. In a similar vein, even if the PLAN could employ its blue-water assets in the near seas, thus fulfilling the American nightmare, China, before doing so, will have to consider whether it could afford to forfeit its increasingly valuable overseas investment and other interests which are expanding globally now. In other words, the USN may be unable to penetrate China’s A2/AD shield, however, the USN, in combination with allies and partners, is highly capable of containing the PLAN’s blue-water fleets within the first island chain, and crippling any elements that could break through (Hammes, 2012; Holmes & Yoshihara, 2011; Kelly, Gompert, & Long, 2016).

**Conclusion: maritime great power and its policy implications**

In sum, China’s assertiveness in the near seas is eroding rather than consolidating the legitimacy of its declared maritime ambitions in the 21st century. A favorable geopolitical environment, plentiful resources and first-rate shipbuilding capacity may presage that China has the potential to realize its maritime aspirations. However, the slowly escalating competition between China and the United States, as well as between China and some of its maritime neighbors, over the near seas, will inhibit China from realizing its maritime dream, and prevent the PLAN from deploying its blue-water assets to the far seas. From this perspective, to fulfill the mission of “open seas protection”, China, in the years ahead, will have to seriously consider how
to stabilize the simmering tension along its maritime periphery. In view of this, China will have to take two interrelated steps towards that direction in the near future. First, China may have to make great efforts to pacify the anxiety of its maritime neighbors over its ultimate intention regarding the East Asian maritime status quo. Second, China may have to seriously consider how to substantively de-escalate, if not eliminate, the slowly escalating Sino-US competition and rivalry over East Asian littoral seas.

Because of geographic proximity, China’s maritime neighbors, especially those engaged in a variety of maritime disputes with it, are particularly sensitive to its maritime policy shift. In spite of smaller size, those states hold two aforementioned advantages (geographic and asymmetric) over China. In spite of its superior economic and military clout, China hardly has any effective means to neutralize and surmount those advantages soon. This harsh reality implies that, without those maritime neighbors’ friendly or at least neutral attitudes, the PLAN, in the foreseeable future, will possibly be tied down in the near seas, and thus unable to devote its attention and resources to the open or far seas. Among China’s near seas, the most prominent one is the SCS, which is both the pivot of China’s “Two Ocean Strategy” (namely, the Chinese counterpart of the Indo-Pacific Strategy) and one of the most significant chokepoints of international SLOCs (Buszynski, 2012; Le Mière, 2014; Yoshihara & Holmes, 2011). For China to pacify the anxiety of its maritime neighbors, the proper starting point is to reach a legally binding Code of Conduct (COC) with other claimants over the SCS status quo. This move, from whatever perspective, will help much to stabilize the simmering situation in the SCS.

To be specific, a legally binding COC will, first of all, contribute greatly to alleviating the anxiety of Southeast Asian nations over China’s ultimate intention regarding the status quo, thereby facilitating their friendly or neutral attitudes towards China’s maritime aspirations. Furthermore, a legally binding COC could deprive extra-regional powers such as the United States, Japan, Indian and other powerful maritime players of a convenient, or even justified in some sense, excuse for proactive and continuous intervention into the SCS situation (Le Mière 2014; Huxley & Schreer, 2015; Wei, 2017). However, to reach a legally binding COC, China is faced with a tricky challenge: should Beijing allow Washington a proper role in the negotiating process and final pact? This challenge is tricky in two points. First, given the huge power gap between China and Southeast Asian states, a legally binding COC is insufficient to stabilize the situation if it cannot get credible guarantee from the United States. Second, the United States and other players have their own interests in the SCS, and those interests are independent of the territorial disputes. Even if all claimants’ interests are
satisfied, that does not mean that the interests of the United States and other players have changed.

Compared to maritime periphery, how to stabilize current Sino-US competition over the near seas is a more daunting challenge. Since Deng Xiaoping, China has been characteristically defining threats not as specific intentional agents, rather as unfavorably material or spiritual conditions that must be overcome so that it cannot be viciously exploited in case of emergency (MacDonald, 2017, p. 6). From this perspective, China’s recent assertiveness in the near seas is not intended to create a conflict with the United States, but to neutralize American security guarantees to its East Asian allies so that the United States will be unable to exploit China’s overall inferiority which is expected to last in the coming decades. By the same token, China’s declared maritime ambitions indicate, at least now, that Beijing considers its maritime inferiority vis-à-vis the United States as an unfavorable condition that must be overcome, rather that it wants to subvert or overthrow the international maritime order and ultimately replace it with a China-centric one (Friedberg, 2014a,b; Mastro, 2014). In spite of these reasons, China’s recent assertiveness and expansive maritime ambitions have elicited increasing backlash not only from its maritime neighbors, but from the United States as well.

As the dominant maritime power, the United States is not only China’s most significant maritime neighbor, but also the most influential guarantor of the international maritime order. In this sense, American empathetic, if not sympathetic, attitudes towards China’s maritime aspirations are largely a necessary prerequisite for China to realize those aspirations. To dissipate Washington’s increasing concern with its maritime aspirations, Beijing, in the years ahead, will not only need to reflect seriously on the contents of its maritime dream, fleshing it out with more specific details to show its essential match up with the existing international maritime order (Tobin, 2018; Yoon, 2015), but also need to take concrete steps to stabilize and mitigate the slowly escalating Sino-US maritime competition over East Asian littorals. In this respect, two concrete approaches deserve to be proactively explored in concert with the United States and other relevant states in the coming years. First, China needs to seriously consider how to bridge over the gap between its near seas assertiveness and far seas cooperative behavior. Second, China needs to proactively explore a range of practical possibilities to make a (at least temporary) working deal with the United States over its FON activities within China’s EEZs (MacDonald, 2016, 2017; Manicom, 2014).

In spite of systemic ripples and repercussions, the 21st century will witness China’s increasing activities in both the near and far seas. To be precise, the key to becoming a maritime great power lies in the hands of
China rather than others. To realize its cherished maritime dream, China will have to be careful not only with the specifics of such a dream, but also with the basic approaches that it is and will be employing to realize this dream. At least since 1978, China’s successive leadership have been proclaiming that China’s rise will not follow in the footsteps of other great powers, and reenact those old bloody tragedies, that is, to realize its ascendancy by means of war. From this perspective, how to fulfill its maritime dream will not only determine China’s future identity in the international community, but also present a precious litmus test for the credibility of such a stated policy. Beijing’s maritime dream, in essence, is an integral part of China’s peaceful development in the 21st century. To realize this dream, China will not only have to make great domestic efforts, but it also needs to win over as much international empathy, if not sympathy, as possible.

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Notes
1. The concept of far seas operations was advanced in China as early as the 1990s, however, there have been few discussions, at least up to now, on the implications of the far seas operations for the PLAN’s strategy and modernization. For the concept of far seas operations, see: Li (2009). For the PLAN’s increasing far seas activities over the last two decades, see: Allen et al. (2017); Yung et al. (2010, 2014).
2. For the symmetric approach to sea power, two most significant cases are Imperial Germany’s navy before World War I and Imperial Japan’s navy before World War II. Those two historical cases reflected vividly the great impact of Alfred T. Mahan’s theories of sea power. See: Dingman (1991); Herwig (1991). For further details of the symmetric approach to sea power manifested in those two cases, see: Asada (2012); Herwig (2016).
3. The two dimensions of the asymmetric approach to sea power also have historical precedents. The technological dimension was initiated by the French Jeune École school in the late 19th century, see: Reksund (2017). The geopolitical dimension was first proposed by Imperial German Vice Admiral Wolfgang Wegener in the early 20th century, see: Wegner (1989). The continental naval strategy and doctrines, for many years, have rarely received as much attention as the Anglo-American naval strategy and doctrines. For an obsolete but still useful review of the continental naval strategy and doctrines, see: Ropp (1952).
4. For the comparative advantages of sea power and land power in both ancient and modern history, see: Gray (1992). Also see: Dehio (1962); Mahan (1890). For the dilemma and difficulty faced by the land-sea hybrid powers located on the rimland in developing sea power, see: Spykman (1944). For discussions on Nicholas J. Spykman’s geopolitical thought and its contemporary significance, see: Gray (2015); Gerace (1991). For the prospects of China to develop blue-water sea power, see: Lord (2009).
5. The author wants to thank Professor Peter Dutton, Director of the China Maritime Studies Institute, Naval War College, for highlighting this point.
6. So far there have been few, if indeed any, serious articles and professional commentaries on China’s latest shift in naval strategy published in Chinese academic and policy journals. International articles and commentaries on China’s latest shift in naval strategy, in general, have usually left out the potential challenges posed by the
missions concomitant with “open seas protection” to Beijing’s current foreign policy. Such an ignorance also explains why so far few international scholars have touched on the potential bright side of China’s new naval strategy. Those articles and commentaries, to be exact, are suffering from the intellectual trap of linear reasoning, that is, to deduce China’s future policy and behavior in the far seas purely from its recent behavioral code in the near seas, rather than taking those counteracting or remediying factors into serious and careful consideration.

7. Over the last decade, most, if not all, of American comments and discussions on the growth of China’s naval capabilities as well as its strategic implications for Sino-US competition over East Asian littoral seas are almost solely focused on the comparison of both sides’ hard power alone, while inadvertently ignoring both sides’ soft assets like allies and partners. For a typical example of this calculation, see: Heginbotham (2015).

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