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Indo-Pacific naval geopolitics

## Indo-Pacific naval geopolitics

### Abstract:

The rise of China is transforming the regime of balances in force in Asia Pacific and has led to the naval rearmament of the countries in the area, while new alliances are being woven in their space. The United States is containing China in the region following an 'island chain' strategy that has its roots in the Cold War and whose key vault lies in Taiwan. The Indo-Pacific is a unique geopolitical space that houses multiple disputes. China outnumbers the United States in terms of naval units but not in capabilities because of America's technological advantage.

### Keywords:

Asia Pacific, United States, China, Navy, Taiwan, Straits of Malacca.

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"We sweep up the enemy like a mat is rolled up.  
Someone groans in disappointment.  
What good does a bastion at every turn?"  
*Mao Tse Tung*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

For Mahan, geopolitics is "the relationship between power and its distribution within a given area of influence". This power slips into the map over time and simultaneously allows for models of the past that can be relocated and even reused in a predictive way.

Thus, the term "Mediterranean" defines enclosed seas that enable cultural and commercial exchange and thus become the cradle of a civilisation. This indicates its geographical and cultural nature, i.e. that it is an integral whole.

The geopolitical centre of the world was initially located in the Asian Mediterranean, in the maritime area around China's coast and adjacent to the mainland. From there it would move to the traditional Euro-African Mediterranean space that gives its name to the concept; and, after the Discovery of the New World, the centre of gravity would shift to the Caribbean basin, which would act, in Mahan's words, as the American Mediterranean. From there it would return to China's maritime environment, which has once again become the world's leading economic hub. Such an evolution can take the form of a succession of coastal maritime strips located successively in the Pacific, the Mediterranean, the Atlantic and back to the Pacific.

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<sup>1</sup> Sun Tsu wrote: "military tactics are like water. Water in its flow avoids the heights and rushes downwards; the military tactic is to avoid the enemy's strong points and look for the weak ones. The water adapts its course to the layout of the terrain, military tactics mean establishing the enemy's plans to achieve victory based on the enemy's conditions". This mystique of water - through which the lack of principles and priorities is represented - presents the liquid element as the quintessence of the intrinsic adaptive values to the strategy which, lacking form, becomes the embodiment of the nonbe and the expression of the superiority of "the negligible, the invisible, things lacking a permanent being, always overcome that to which they remain identical" so that "an Army reaches perfection when it shows no flank, no formation to which the enemy is able to oppose", this idea is also considered by Lao Tse.

Mao, in 1930, escaped the pincer that Chiang Kai Check intended to close on him, by moving his forces at great speed, like a torrent of water, for 350 km parallel to his forces, thus gaining relative local superiority by attacking his units one by one and with great speed: "our strategy is to fight one against ten, our tactic is to fight ten against one". The poem serving as an introduction to the work corresponds to this period.

Measured in purchasing power parity, and according to IMF data, China has been the world's largest economy since 2018 (17% of world GDP), followed by the US (15.8%) and the euro area as a whole (11.9%).

The relationship between China and the United States has led to China's "peaceful rise", that is, an increase in its relative power. This has been done mostly without questioning the existing paradigm, the established order and with discretion, which has implied a passive attitude in the international arena. This is known as the "24-character strategy"<sup>2</sup>.

The game played in the Pacific takes place in three triangles. A framework linking Australia with the United States and Japan. A middle triangle linking Australia, Japan and India, which captures the entire "Mediterranean" of the Pacific; and an inner triangle, the hard core, with Vietnam as its vertex, runs through Singapore and rests on Malaysia, with its third vertex in the Philippines.

The issue is rooted in the struggle for control of what has come to be known as the Chinese Mediterranean, the China Sea, and legacy of the Cold War. This replicates to some extent the US strategy in the Caribbean throughout the 19th century, or, to be geographically closer, that of Japan from the Meiji period until the end of World War II, so that its supremacy in this sea can strengthen its regional position and guarantee the security of its immediate strategic environment, something that, in the Chinese case, both the US and regional actors, former vassal states, seek to avoid.

If China had the maritime power that would allow it to control its immediate environment, as well as guaranteeing its supply and security and consolidating its position as a regional power, it would be in a position to achieve the status of a global power, just as the United States did after occupying Cuba. In practical terms, this would be the same effect that the recovery of Taiwan would have on China because of its centrality.

The United States, in this scenario, would see its leadership challenged in military terms and even a principle that, in the British tradition, it has historically defended, namely freedom of the seas. Thus, for the Chinese, control of the China Sea, or at least negative dominance, i.e. its denial to third powers as a step towards positive control, is crucial for their security, regional consolidation and further hegemonic projection. It cannot see itself as a global power without control of its immediate space. It could then lose it and remain

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<sup>2</sup> In the words of Deng Xiaoping: "Observe calmly; secure your position; cope with affairs calmly; hide your capacities and bide your time; be good at maintaining a low profile; and never claim leadership".

so, as the United States also did with Cuba, but to be recognised as such and effectively complete its "peaceful rise" it needs to win it. In 2049, it will be 100 years since that rupture, an important moment in its political agenda.

As a result, in the Asia-Pacific region, the new century has seen a resurgence of navies parallel to its development; in fact, 90% of shipbuilding is concentrated in Asia, while 85% is concentrated in three countries, China (in recent years, annually, this country is launching a military tonnage similar to that of the entire Royal Navy), South Korea, and Japan<sup>3</sup> and to these, abroad, are added India and Australia.

The Chinese Mediterranean is defined by two seas. The South China Sea and the East China Sea. The South China Sea is a 3.5 million square kilometre expanse stretching from Singapore to the Taiwan Strait and incorporating hundreds of islands, with not a few of them disputed. This sea has numerous resources (mainly hydrocarbons and fisheries) and its neighbouring countries are experiencing significant growth and are also densely populated. This sea provides access to the Strait of Malacca, which links the Asia-Pacific with the Indian subcontinent. It is also vital for countries like Japan that need an oil or gas tanker to pass through every six hours to keep their economy running. Same story for South Korea<sup>4</sup>.

China's disputes with coastal countries (Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei) over maritime jurisdiction and over various islands and reefs, totalling 71 disputes, are worth mentioning. It is a struggle for territory and waters, but also for power and the international system, as well as for altering the balances regime in the region<sup>5</sup>, prior to the one intended to take place on a global scale.

And these countries in turn seek to involve Japan (which supports Vietnam and the Philippines) and South Korea (which supports the Philippines and Indonesia), because of their strategic dependence, but also India (which rivals China in the region and has

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<sup>3</sup> Economic and Commercial Office of the Spanish Embassy in Mumbai. "The shipbuilding market in India", *ICEX*, 2011. Available at: <http://www.icex.es/icex/cma/contentTypes/common/records/mostrarDocumento/?doc=4402103>

<sup>4</sup> LALINDE, Luis M. "China and the Geopolitical Importance of Dominating the Surrounding Sea" VIII International Electronic Symposium on Chinese Politics. *China Policy Watch*. March 2017. Available at: <http://www.asiared.com/es/notices/2017/03/viii-simposio-electronico-internacional-sobre-politica-china-7530.php>

<sup>5</sup> HAYTON, Bill. "Why China's Island Building is so Worrying?", *BBC*, 03.05.2015. Available at: [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/05/150503\\_islas\\_mar\\_china\\_meridional\\_disputa\\_men](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/05/150503_islas_mar_china_meridional_disputa_men)

established security ties with Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan and Australia, among others) and, by extension, always the United States.

Of particular significance is the one concerning the Spratley or Nan-sha Islands; these are a collection of 250 islands, reefs, cays and rocks (some are only visible at low tide) to which China claims historic rights, over a total area of only 9 km<sup>2</sup>, but spread over 180 000 km<sup>2</sup>. These would be further extended by applying the various rules of the Jamaica Convention, especially with regard to the Exclusive Economic Zone (200 miles)<sup>6</sup>.

There are also the Paracelsus Islands (occupied in 1974) and the Scarborough Reef, the acquisition of which China is seeking to gain strategic depth and expand its security perimeter. All of these justify a claim to sovereignty and rights that go beyond what is granted by international law, which many countries consider to affect even the freedom of the seas<sup>7</sup>. Such a claim was made in a dossier submitted to the UN on the basis of the so-called "nine-dash line" which serves to lay claim to around 80 % of the South China Sea, some parts of which still lie more than 2000 km from its shores.

Prior to this, and as part of its expansionary strategy, China created an Air Defence Identification Zone in 2013 and then occupied most of the disputed islands. Then, displaying great technical capacity, in barely two years, it built a veritable "sand wall" to turn habitable (with civilian and military presence) some reefs and islands that previously were not habitable, and in some cases it has militarised them<sup>8</sup>, turning them into advanced bases, veritable airport complexes, which it has additionally provided with a great projection capacity (up to 2900 m long airstrips), which is why they are called "unsinkable aircraft carriers".

This attitude responds to the strategy of counter-encirclement with which to overcome, in turn, the so-called "island chain strategy" mentioned below. The concept of "near seas" referring to the waters immediately around the country emphasises the need to achieve defensive depth and the room for manoeuvre that its eventual projection requires.

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<sup>6</sup> KLARE, Michael T. *Resource Wars*. Ediciones Urano, Barcelona, 2003, p.148.

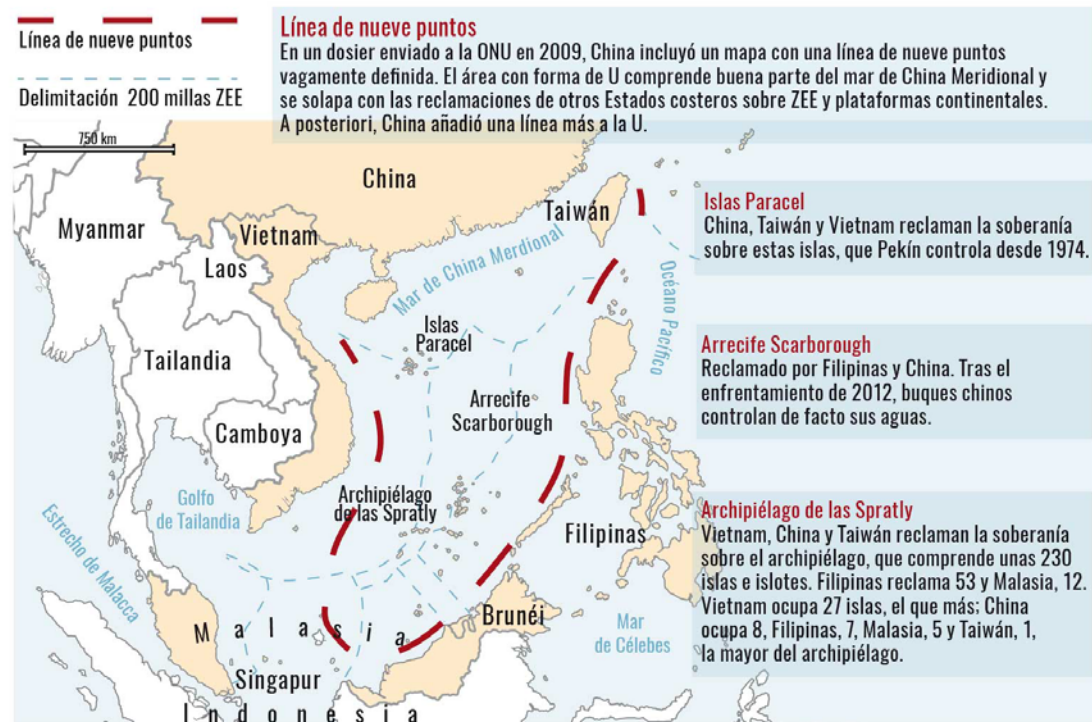
<sup>7</sup> HAYTON, Bill. "Why China's Island Building is so Worrying?", BBC, 03.05.2015. Available at: [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/05/150503\\_islas\\_mar\\_china\\_meridional\\_disputa\\_men](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/05/150503_islas_mar_china_meridional_disputa_men)

<sup>8</sup> NEILL, Alexander. "The Growing Undersea Nuclear Force Behind Beijing's Claims in the South China Sea", BBC, 12.07.2016. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-36767904>

The Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague at the request of the Philippines, ruled in 2016 against the Chinese claims, however, China does not submit to the jurisdiction of the Court, whose jurisdiction it does not expressly recognise<sup>9</sup>.

## Disputas en el mar de China Meridional

Muchas de las disputas se centran en los derechos marítimos, en especial reclamaciones sobre zonas económicas exclusivas (ZEE) y plataformas continentales que implican cuestiones no de soberanía, sino de jurisdicción (el derecho de los Estados a explotar los recursos de hidrocarburos, pesca, minerales). La Convención de la ONU sobre el Derecho del Mar está abierta a interpretación acerca de reclamaciones sobre territorios marítimos, islas y ZEE.



**Figure 1. Disputes in the South China Sea.** Source. ESTEBAN G. MANRIQUE, Luis. "India, China, the US and the Great Indian Ocean Game". Foreign Policy Review. 07.12.2020. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/india-china-y-eeuu-y-el-gran-juego-del-indico/>

The East China Sea covers an area of about 750,000 km<sup>2</sup> from the Taiwan Strait to the Korean peninsula, including the Yellow Sea. That is, surrounded and bounded by China,

<sup>9</sup> The area is not only relevant from a security perspective. According to the Institute of Marine Science and the Department of Ecology and Biodiversity of the University of Hong Kong, it may contain up to 1.5 billion barrels in the southern part of China and about 490 million barrels in the waters off the Philippines. As for natural gas, which accounts for 60-70% of the region's hydrocarbon resources, billions of cubic metres are expected to be in the area, according to a US Geological Survey report. "What Impact has the Hague Ruling Against Beijing on the South China Sea Dispute?" *BBC*, 12.07. 2016. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-36772380>

Japan and Korea. It is also rich in resources (including hydrocarbons and fisheries) and is central to Japan's access to the Strait of Malacca through the South China Sea. In addition, China and Japan have contentious island claims over the Senkaku (Diaoyu) archipelagos<sup>10</sup>.

In this context, the Strait of Malacca, "the fluid gap of the multipolar world of the 21st century" is key as it is a bottleneck for maritime traffic in the entire region. Indeed, Premier Hu Jintao himself coined the term 'Malacca Dilemma' in 2003, referring to the strategic vulnerability of hydrocarbon exports from the Middle East in transit through the region. Around three quarters of China's oil imports flow through this area, and the volume of oil imported by China continues to grow, even though it has managed to reduce it in percentage terms. In addition to half of the world's merchant fleet.

The 37 countries bordering the Indian Ocean account for a third of the world's population. This makes the Strait of Malacca, in the view of various authors, the world's centre of gravity, if only because of the size of the populations on both sides of the Strait of Malacca, which, to add insult to injury, depend on it.

To overcome this bottleneck and as part of the Silk Road Economic Belt infrastructure, China intends to change the strategic geography of South Asia by giving its southern and eastern provinces direct access to the Indian Ocean. This would take place via major infrastructure and through Myanmar and Pakistan which would act as real economic corridors providing a direct connection between China and the Indian Ocean and bypassing the Strait of Malacca, albeit at a cost overrun in terms of less profitable overland infrastructure<sup>11</sup>.

The eventual incorporation of the Taliban's Afghanistan, "the Saudi Arabia of lithium", along with Pakistan, into this project would not only reinforce the strategic perimeter and strengthen China's position in Central Asia by giving it access to an important raw material, but would also serve to consolidate and deepen the Silk Road Economic Belt. The cost is, as we will see it, a deepening rivalry with India.

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<sup>10</sup> LALINDE, Luis M. "China and the Geopolitical Importance of Dominating the Surrounding Sea" VIII International Electronic Symposium on Chinese Politics. *China Policy Watch*. March 2017. Available at: <http://www.asiared.com/es/notices/2017/03/viii-simposio-electronico-internacional-sobre-politica-china-7530.php>

<sup>11</sup> GARCÍA-SANZ, Daniel. "China: Grand Strategy and Seapower in the Xi Jinping Era", *URVIO. Latin American Journal of Security Studies*. No. 27, May-August 2020, pp. 57-72. Available at: <https://revistas.flacsoandes.edu.ec/urvio/article/view/4381/3385>

At the same time, and as part of the same purposeful initiatives, it plans to build a canal in the isthmus of Kra in Thailand so that its ships can bypass the Strait of Malacca. This is a parallel idea to the eventual construction of a Chinese canal in Nicaragua, in order to free itself from the servitude of an increasingly saturated Panama Canal and redirect its traffic to the Pacific.

In this situation and as a result of global warming, the foreseeable near-term navigability of the Arctic - which some sources put at around 2035 - means on the one hand an escape through the East China Sea and thus improved security of supply, and on the other hand a shortening of the effective distance to Europe by 30-40%<sup>12</sup>. All of which led to the publication in 2018 of a strategy for the region under the name China Arctic's policy in the context of which it defines the country as a 'quasi-arctic state'. In addition, it has increased cooperation with Russia in the North Pacific to boost its presence there.

Moreover, its alliance with Russia - with which it shares a 4,000 km border and a past fraught with disagreements; also, desert Siberia is the natural hinterland of an overpopulated China, and even more so as a result of global warming - and its presence in the area are explained by the geopolitical and commercial advantages derived from it. It is therefore perceived as short-term in nature.

This agreement with Russia is the opposite of the semi - or pseudo - alliance it maintained with the United States from the Nixon era onwards, which protected it from Russia. In any case, China's relationship with Russia protects itself in the North, in order to keep its hands free to pursue its ambitions in the South.

### **An extension of the Cold War: the island chain strategy**

The so-called "island chain" strategy is a strategic maritime containment programme initiated during the Cold War. This is what was a kind of geopolitical encirclement manifested through island cordons, set in motion by US Secretary of State Foster Dulles in 1951 on the basis of islands, reefs and islets of varying physical ownership: China, USA, Russia, Japan, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia. Overcoming this gap is essential for China to diversify its maritime routes.

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<sup>12</sup> VV.AA. *Security and Defence Documents 66 Arctic Geopolitics. Two Complementary Visions. Spain-Singapore*. Spanish Institute of Strategic Studies, 2014.



The whole of the China Sea is bounded by a strategic perimeter known as the "first island chain", a maritime buffer that starts in the Kuril Islands, follows the Japanese archipelago and ends in Borneo. It is made up of a group of islands and bases that can be seen as a sort of retaining wall, since it has the capacity to block continental maritime traffic and contain Chinese naval activities by controlling its oceanic access, according to the logic of encirclement and counter-encirclement prevailing during the Cold War.

As José Luis Fiori underlines with regard to this policy proposal: "the one with world power is not the one who directly controls the "heart of the world", it is the one who is able to encircle it, as the United States did throughout the Cold War and continues to do to this day. It is a space immediately adjacent to Spykman's *Rimland*, "the rim of basins", China's coastal strip, which is essential for the control of the "heartland".

The Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO), alive until the 1970s, was created by the Manila Pact in 1955 and covered this area, exercising such control. It is, as can be seen, a still valid idea whose natural logic is bound to be reproduced. In July, the US Secretary of State visited Vietnam, the Philippines and Singapore, thus making a new beginning in relations with the former, overcoming strategic divergences and revalidating fundamental agreements with the latter (Clark Air Base on the island of Luzon is the largest permanent station of the US Armed Forces abroad). And giving an account of the solidity of the relations with the third party; the principle of reality calls for the burying of the old Vietnam wound whose imaginary is the Afghan conflict (from which China benefits through Pakistan at the cost of assuming a less secure but American-free environment) seems to want to bring back.

The "first island chain" thus constitutes a sort of future last line of defence for some or a forward control position for others, the geostrategic expression of the US system of bilateral alliances in the Asia-Pacific and the main vehicle for US diplomatic and military projection in the region.

It is based in three countries with Security and Defence agreements with the United States: South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines. They are joined by Taiwan, also with a strong relationship based on the so-called "Six Assurances", and the now elusive Singapore.

In Singapore, the dilemmas of a time of transition come to the fore. On the one hand, because of its strategic importance, this country is also being courted by China, the new

rising power, with which it has even held joint exercises in 2021. On the other hand, the solidity of its relations has allowed it access to the most advanced US technology, while there is even speculation that it will eventually host a new fleet (the first) that obeys the geopolitical logic that makes the Indo-Pacific area a unique space, proving USA's commitment to the region, overcoming the imperatives imposed by the distance of the bases on the American continent and serving to attract India to an eventual coalition. This also provides it with guarantees and consolidates its relationship with it, which has become Washington's geopolitical pivot in the region.

In any case, China's first challenge concerns the defence of its coastal regions, a problem that is complicated by Taiwan, located some 100 miles off Fujian province and dividing China's sea front in two, interrupting naval movements between north and south<sup>13</sup>.

The key to the whole of the strip thus lies in the Taiwan Strait, as China claims the waters of the Strait as its territorial sea and property, and Western countries dispute this. So far, the different crises arisen as a result have so far been to the benefit of the US. China seeks to prevent US and regional allied forces from entering or operating within its nearby seas. France, the UK and Germany have sent ships to the area in 2021.

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<sup>13</sup> "China's Naval Modernisation: Is the Dragon Going Global?", *The Radar*. 10/06/2021. Available at: <https://www.elradar.es/la-modernizacion-naval-de-china-el-dragon-se-globaliza/>

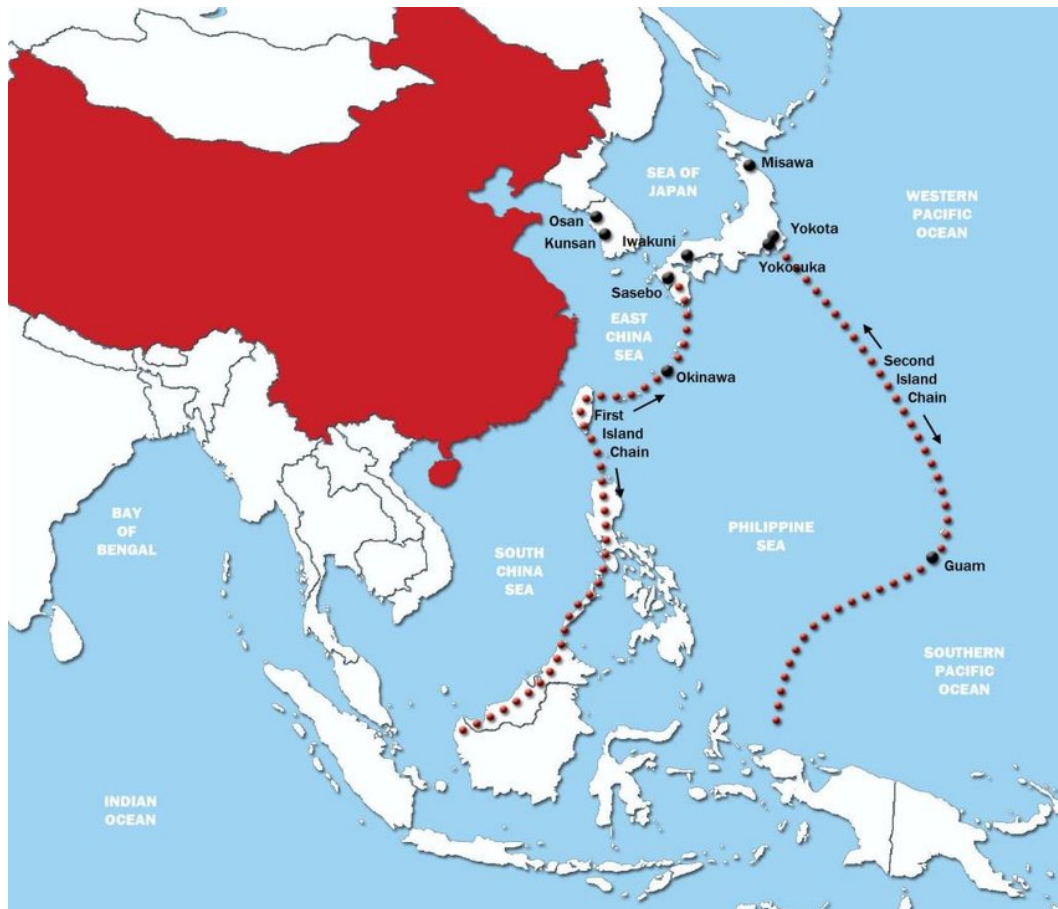


Figure 2. First and second island chains. Source. *Researchgate*. Available at:

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jan-Odrobinski-Staporek/publication/333663475/figure/fig5/AS:767535276363783@1560006078631/Overview-map-of-First-and-Second-Island-Chain-Source-Catama-2015.jpg>

Taiwan, a former Chinese province where the Nationalists took refuge after their defeat in the civil war, has a confusing political status in the international arena. Thus, issues affecting this area, in addition to their high strategic military value, have important political capital because they explicitly or implicitly refer to China's territorial integrity. The likely failure of the "one country, two systems" model that sought to modulate Hong Kong's return, in the view of various analysts, makes national unity even more difficult. Its control by mainland China would mean the dismantling of this containment strategy that makes this territory the centre of gravity of the "first island chain".

In response to this challenge, the resulting Chinese naval doctrine since 1949 has included as a cornerstone, and at the very least, the denial of maritime space, which explains the powerful development of submarine weapons (albeit far below the capabilities of the United States) in this country, which only in 2013 sought to equip itself with aircraft carriers.

There is also talk of a "second island chain" stretching from Japan (Bonin Islands), through the Marianas (US), to the Pacific Ocean (Japan) and the Pacific Islands (Japan), Guam (US). The Chinese navy's military forces in the US and the Carolinas provide a fall-back space in case the former is overwhelmed by the conversion of the Chinese navy into a deep-sea navy. In this sense, acting as a strategic rearguard for the United States, there would be a "third island chain" starting in the Aleutians, passing through the island of Hawaii, its central element and strong point, and ending in Oceania.

In response to this trench model, China has been trying to take over the "defence of the near seas" since the 1980s and, unable to exercise its control due to its clear lack of naval power, it has so far been content to develop *anti-access/area denial* (A2/AD) strategies and deprive the Americans of control.

But if we learned anything from the two World Wars, it is that the answer to the static model is the war of movement, the overflow of the existing framework, its flanking and ultimate overcoming that would render sterile such a military effort. This may have been achieved through the political use of economics, but also in the military field such a challenge has been taken up through the expansion of the framework.

Thus, in the 2015 Defence White Paper, it was stated that the Chinese Navy will gradually shift its focus from "defence of the near seas" to combining "defence of the near seas" with "protection of the far seas". This is a logical move to go beyond its elements of strategic constraint, as its control requires<sup>14</sup>.

As a result of the new military doctrine of "defence of the periphery by advanced force projection", the existence of an "island encirclement" is recognised, that is, of a "maritime containment" which is the result of "geography and politics" and which "would reduce the freedom of naval manoeuvre"<sup>15</sup>. The overcoming of these chains, in the opposite perspective, constitute geographical milestones, i.e. stages in the "salami-slicing geopolitics" that marks China's military-political development.

And in its 2019 White Paper it goes a step further and, while reaffirming that "overseas interests are a crucial part of China's national interests", it argues in line with other

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<sup>14</sup> GARCÍA-SANZ, Daniel. "China: Grand Strategy and Seapower in the Xi Jinping Era", *URVIO. Latin American Journal of Security Studies*. No. 27, May-August 2020, pp. 57-72. Available at: <https://revistas.flacsoandes.edu.ec/urvio/article/view/4381/3385>

<sup>15</sup> GARCÍA-SANZ, Daniel. "China: Grand Strategy and Seapower in the Xi Jinping Era", *URVIO. Latin American Journal of Security Studies*. No. 27, May-August 2020, pp. 57-72. Available at: <https://revistas.flacsoandes.edu.ec/urvio/article/view/4381/3385>

statements of expansive assertion that the Chinese Navy "is accelerating the transition of its tasks from defence in the near seas to protection missions in the far seas", thus confirming the more than obvious expansive expectations<sup>16</sup>.

### **The "far seas". The Indian Ocean**

The waters of the Indian Ocean, which encapsulate the strategic concept of "far seas", are, as we have seen, essential for the protection of the lines of communication linking Africa and the Gulf countries with China; they provide energy resources, food and raw materials, as well as trade. These lines (SLOCS) flow across the Strait of Malacca and explain the westward shift of the Asian giant, which is unable to maintain permanent control over the Strait of Malacca. In fact, since 2009, it has been escorting traffic in the Gulf of Aden.

The Indian Ocean is a sea where SLOCS incorporate long unsupported distances. The "string of pearls" is a strategy for protecting these lines initiated by President Hu Jintao and serves to designate a chain of maritime (bases and ports that provide logistics and military support) and political support that stretches from Sri Lanka to Djibouti and includes the ports of Hambantota (Sri Lanka, ceded for 99 years), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Sittwe (Myanmar) and Gwadar (Pakistan), the Maldives (which in 2017 broke its agreements with the United States to move closer to China) and Djibouti (which began to be built in 2015 and entered service in 2017 for the fight against piracy). Add the planned Kyaukphy Special Economic Zone in Myanmar, a key *hub* for China's direct access to the Indian Ocean; and even Malaysia.

A report to the US Congress spoke of the possibility of establishing additional bases in Thailand, Singapore (which has a significant Chinese colony, but also has a submarine capacity capable of closing the strait), Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, UAE, Kenya, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola and Tajikistan, thus contributing to the security of a growing number of nationals displaced to this area and of the investment and economic interests that the Silk Road Economic Belt is making increasingly relevant.

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<sup>16</sup> GARCÍA-SANZ, Daniel. "China: Grand Strategy and Seapower in the Xi Jinping Era", *URVIO. Latin American Journal of Security Studies*. No. 27, May-August 2020, pp. 57-72. Available at: <https://revistas.flacsoandes.edu.ec/urvio/article/view/4381/3385>

However, this network of bases does not yet make it possible to sustain the logistics that a continued conflict at sea would require. In fact, the "string of pearls" is not comparable to the network of bases that countries such as the United Kingdom, France or the United States have in this sea. These also act as a counter-balance to China's deployment in the Indian Ocean, which in turn is close to India. Political support must also be included in this effort, and not just in second place.

In any case, a perimeter has been closed around India, just as the "Burgundian heritage" once completed the encirclement of France under Francis I by Spain under Charles V. This is an immense land platform surrounded by a major power on land and sea at the same time, and which therefore perceives its security to be in jeopardy. This encirclement incorporates military components and is also carried out in an area that has been its traditional zone of influence and natural leadership due to its size and centrality in this area, even named after it. In fact, China uses its alliance with Pakistan and its ties with Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal and Bangladesh in its confrontation. With the same logic, China is strengthening its positions on both sides of the Siliguri Corridor, which connects the Indian subcontinent with Assam, thus threatening even its integrity with its strangulation<sup>17</sup>..

Relations between China and India are not easy because of the simultaneous status of giants, neighbours and regional leaders held by them both by virtue of their history, demography, geography and economy, which makes each of them, according to Huntington, even civilisational hubs. British and Americans are to China what Portuguese and Chinese are now to India.

Their proximity thus brings together important contradictions. If the complementarity of their economies and the size of their markets are anything to go by, the two powers could form the world's largest trading bloc; indeed, the Chinese, Indians and Russians belong to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. On the other hand, the problems they have with each other are neither few nor small. Thus, India does not belong to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a great Chinese success story of 2020 that brings together 20 countries (China and, among others, the 10 ASEAN countries, Japan, Australia, South Korea and New Zealand) created after the withdrawal of the United

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<sup>17</sup> ESTEBAN G. MANRIQUE, Luis. "India, China, the US and the Great Indian Ocean Game", *Foreign Policy Magazine*. 07.12.2020. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/india-china-y-eeuu-y-el-gran-juego-del-indico/>

States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Progressive Agreement, which left a space of power that China has occupied in view of the political gap that this withdrawal implied, signifying, once again, the need for commitments that, beyond gestures, make the USA's shift towards the Asia-Pacific credible.



Figure 3. Current borders. Source. *The Economist*.

Both countries share a 3,380 km border that is not fully defined as China, since the 1950s, has rejected the former British demarcations. As a result, the country claims 90,000 km<sup>2</sup> in the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. In 1962, India lost 4,000 soldiers and a territory the size of Switzerland to China in Ladakh. China's economy is five times larger than India's (which has a significant trade deficit with China) and its military spending is four times that of India, which has forced India to accept its terms<sup>18</sup>.

In June 2020, a border skirmish in Ladakh at an altitude of 4,500 m, involving stones and sticks, resulted in around 20 deaths when the Chinese military built infrastructure beyond

<sup>18</sup> ESTEBAN G. MANRIQUE, Luis. "India, China, the US and the Great Indian Ocean Game", *Foreign Policy Magazine*. 07.12.2020. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/india-china-y-eeuu-y-el-gran-juego-del-indico/>

the so-called "line of control" border, an area where the Yangtze, Indus, Brahmaputra, Mekong and Ganges rivers originate<sup>19</sup>. China, with a quarter of the world's population, has only 7% of the world's water resources, making water security a critical issue. In 2021, these incidents occurred again, but in the Sikkim area.

In any case, China's strategy to increase its influence in the Himalayas by expanding its presence in the Chumbi Valley clashed with India's determination to protect its interests and hegemony in Bhutan, which has put the brakes on Chinese moves into its territory. The Doklam conflict is not simply a territorial dispute, but is part of a geostrategic scenario in which both powers are vying for geopolitical hegemony in the Himalayas and to consolidate their influence in South Asia<sup>20</sup>.

Moreover, given the interconnectedness and similarity with Pacific dynamics, it seems logical to treat the Indo-Pacific space as a single space reaching practically all the way to Central Asia; it is not insignificant in this sense that, in 2018, the United States renamed its Pacific command the Indo-Pacific.

This seems to be confirmed by the fact that India has maintained a presence in the South China Sea since 2016 - when it deployed four frigates in the South China Sea; in July 2020, and in the context of the aforementioned border tensions, it sent a ship to the South China Sea and maintains a unified naval command in the Andaman Sea from which it could even effectively blockade its side of the Strait of Malacca, given the geographical location of these islands from which it is also possible to control the new ports that China has opened in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, making it an advance bastion of control of China's maritime expansion. At the same time, India expanded into its namesake ocean by opening new bases in Mauritius, Seychelles and Madagascar while signing an agreement with France to use its facilities in the Indian Ocean, while fostering collaboration with other countries in the region or the United States<sup>21</sup>.

India's tradition and even its historical leadership of the non-aligned movement, as well as its own status as a regional power, explain much of its reticent behaviour on the matter.

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<sup>19</sup> ESTEBAN G. MANRIQUE, Luis. "India, China, the US and the Great Indian Ocean Game", *Foreign Policy Magazine*. 07.12.2020. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/india-china-y-eeuu-y-el-gran-juego-del-indico/>

<sup>20</sup> PARDO DELGADO, José Miguel. "The India-China Border Conflict, Doklam. Geostrategic Implications". *Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies*, DIEEEA 038/2019. Available at: [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_opinion/2019/DIEEEA038\\_2019JOSPAR-frontera.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2019/DIEEEA038_2019JOSPAR-frontera.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> VILCHES ALARCÓN, Alejandro A. "Indian Army. The Powerful Unknown", *Armies Magazine*, 28.09.2012. Available at: <https://www.revistaejercitos.com/2018/09/28/armada-india/>



But in such a context, where it may feel its own security is at stake, it would not be surprising if it were to form a coalition of Indo-Pacific maritime powers with a view to restoring the balance of power and containing China's resurgence. In fact, this fear has brought it closer to the United States and has led it to sign agreements with Australia and Japan, and even to speculation about its eventual integration into the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which includes the United States, Japan, Australia and South Korea, and which could be considered in the logic of the counter-encirclement of China. This country is reportedly trying to respond with another Trans Himalayan Quad that would also include Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

But it has also resulted in the rearmament of India, which is, let us recall, a nuclear power. In 2010, its defence budget was \$38.4 billion (India was the world's largest arms importer that year)<sup>22</sup> which in 2019 would become more than \$60 billion, 4 per cent of the world total, behind only the US and China. This has been increasing by 10% per year, with 20% of it dedicated to the Indian Navy, which has built a large naval base in Goa and is to build a blue water port in the Andaman archipelago<sup>23</sup>.

India, as a result of such dynamics, is building up an ocean-going fleet. In this logic, in addition to a programme for the construction of an SSBN, it is boosting its naval aircraft capacity (it intends to have up to five aircraft carriers in the future; in 2022, it will launch its second aircraft carrier and already has plans to build a third), as well as the number, quality and offensive armament - based on Brahmos cruise missiles - of its destroyers and frigates<sup>24</sup>.

Moreover, in the second decade of the new millennium, and in pursuit of its strategic autonomy, it has become one of the world's main arms importers, diversifying the range of countries of origin and including the United States, which is now its second largest supplier and even supplies it with aerospace intelligence, which is evidence of the rapprochement efforts undertaken by both countries. China, on the other hand, is developing its own weapons technology.

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<sup>22</sup> Economic and Commercial Office of the Spanish Embassy in Mumbai. "The Shipbuilding Market in India", ICEX, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> ESTEBAN G. MANRIQUE, Luis. "India, China, the US and the Great Indian Ocean Game", *Foreign Policy Magazine*. 07.12.2020. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/india-china-y-eeuu-y-el-gran-juego-del-indico/>

<sup>24</sup> BAQUÉS QUESADA, Josep; ARRIETA RUIZ, Andrea. "The Expansive View of India's Geopolitics". *General Marine Review*, ISSN 0034-9569, Vol. 280, MONTH 4 (May), 2021, pp. 685-696. Available at: <https://iugm.es/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/La-vis-expansiva-de-la-geopolitica-de-la-India.pdf>

## Conclusions

A commonplace that has become firmly established in public opinion (geopolitical scholars have been talking about it since the 1920s) is the shift of the world's geopolitical centre to the great Pacific void. But this great void - only 0.25% of its 163 million square kilometres of sea area is land - is home to 4 billion people, two-thirds of humanity, and is expected to account for more than 50% of global GDP in the next 25 years than at any time since the 18th century. The Asian Development Bank raised this figure to 60 % before reaching the 50s. Already in 2012, Europe's defence expenditure was for the first time lower than that of the Asia-Pacific region<sup>25</sup>.

Some authors call this century the "Asian century". But Asia-Pacific is a geographically diverse space, culturally, ethnically, religiously, institutionally... asymmetrical and characterised by geographical distances; to this is added its closeness and inseparability from the Indian Ocean. As a political space it includes three members of the Security Council, six nuclear powers, three G-8 members and seven G-20 members.

Today, similar to the Anglo-German rivalry, there is a consensus among US elites to view China not so much as a competitor or a rival, but rather as a kind of enemy, which translates into a remarkably radical populist public rhetoric that, moreover, comes from top policy-makers.

This confrontation is visible in the naval field, which has components of a highly symbolic value, but approaching it from the perspective of naval power is insufficient, as it seeks the modification of the *status quo*, the replacement of the system of balance at the global and regional level through the recognition of singularities in the sea close to China and which redound to the country's maritime security, as well as the recognition of its new political status. China already has the capacity to 'prevent' as a regional power, but not to 'impose' as a global power. Yet, it is exactly the same for the United States. This is an imperfect multipolarity.

All these circumstances have given Taiwan a renewed geostrategic value, making it the keystone of the whole system, that is, an element whose fall would bring about the fall of

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<sup>25</sup> ALFONSO MEIRIÑO, Arturo. "The Multinational Approach to Military Capabilities", Spanish Defence Magazine, October 2012, p.18.

all the elements that make up the system, just as the pieces of a domino do. As well as recognising the new Chinese reality.

China is also projecting its power in the Indian Ocean with a view to securing the Strait of Malacca, which is crucial to its economy, and is confronting India, with which it has territorial disputes and whose maritime perimeter is close. We therefore see the presence, on land and at sea, of a country that does not belong to this strategic environment and that disputes India's role as a regional power in this environment and with which there are similar controversies. This creates a security dilemma for India that calls for expanding the framework of the conflict and seeking allies, something that runs counter to its historical character as non-aligned.

The US pivot to the Asia-Pacific is already being visualised in naval mode, however, the military terms must be matched by a political pivot and a search for allies among the many countries concerned about China's rise to power. In other words, the issue is not just about a military turn - which can spill over into other spheres, such as the economic - but must also be political and necessarily translated in terms of alliances that might be incomprehensible from a Cold War perspective.

However, in today's context, we must let go of the lack of priorities of the past. Thus, we cannot forget that it ended more than 30 years ago and the world is on the way to a new and different power composition.

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