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Naval rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

## Naval rivalry in the Indo-Pacific

### Abstract:

This paper tries to analyse the rivalry between China and the United States in naval terms. Such rivalry is not measured only at sea and, far from it, can be undertaken based on the number of ships, even though such figures betray a political intention. We are facing a confrontation of powers. The naval situation in the Pacific reveals how the peaceful and economic rise of China begins to move to the military sphere, thus signalling what seems to be the beginning of a geopolitical reorganization based on that geographical environment.

### Keywords:

China, United States, Indo-Pacific, Asia-Pacific, navy.

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“Do not despise the snake for having no horns,  
for who is to say it will not become a dragon?”  
*The blue border*

From a historical perspective and in order to understand what is happening in the Asia-Pacific, the British doctrine of 1889, with the rank of Law known as the *Two Power Standard*, which led the Royal Navy to try to surpass the sum of the two following navies in importance, alleging the security of the islands, can serve as an example. This policy, and the ensuing German reaction, ended up generating an inflationary tension in the military sphere that was at the root of the First World War, and ended up making those who, in principle, did not have to be enemies feel like enemies. War was not the continuation of politics by other means; in this case it was the apotheosis of irrationality. Politics lost control of the situation.

In fact, the German military class of the Second Reich was not warmongering, whereas parts of the intellectual class and the industrialists were<sup>1</sup>. In this connection, Bernard Brodie<sup>2</sup> asks “why did a whole generation of Germans, before 1914, believe that the building of a large fleet would tend to make Britain a passive partner rather than an enemy?” The same seems to be happening in the Indo-Pacific.

Ironically, however, China’s maritime strategy today is rooted in American geopolitical thinking, which in turn is inspired by the British model. The intellectual basis for such a strategy lies in Mahan’s *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660-1783*. It served to illuminate politically, at the dawn of the twentieth century, the rise of both the United States and Japan as world powers, giving doctrinal substance to an ongoing political development.

### **Chinese maritime power**

Power is an absolute concept, a concept that can only be conditioned and limited by surnames. Thus, Chinese power overflows Chinese maritime power. It incorporates elements such as economic and cultural power, among many others, that transcend it. And it goes beyond the framework that some vessels can offer, however much they may contribute to it; they may become inoperative or simply not exist or be deployed without

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<sup>1</sup> FRAGA IRIBARNE, Manuel. *‘Guerra y conflicto social’*. Gráficas Uguina, Madrid, 1962, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> BRODIE, Bernard. *‘Guerra y política’*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 1978, p. 28.

any useful result. They would be like those “bastions at every step”<sup>3</sup> of which a famous poem by Mao speaks that are overcome and overwhelmed by their static character. This is what may be happening in the so-called “first island chain” that is unlikely to be able to contain a global China<sup>4</sup>.

But there are also other elements that nourish it. For example, China’s ambitious space programme will undoubtedly improve its command, control and intelligence capabilities; and its highly developed cybernetic capabilities, as will be understood, may have direct consequences on the naval theatre of operations. This means that, in order to speak of Chinese maritime power, one must necessarily speak of Chinese power, without which it cannot be properly understood. The Machiavellianism of strategy always ends up simply confusing force with power, leading to unforgivable errors of appreciation. The Chinese concept of “unrestricted war”<sup>5</sup> places great emphasis on this issue. The plans for the confrontation are not only military.

Finally, in 2020, the five countries with the highest military expenditure were the United States, China, India, Russia and the United Kingdom. Overall, these account for 62% of total military expenditure. The United States accounts for the largest expenditure with \$778 billion. And when it comes to exports, Chinese weapons systems have become an offer that is hard to refuse: they offer roughly 75% of the capability of the same Western warfare technology, but at half the price.

Even with the usual lack of transparency, there is a consensus among analysts that China’s military budget has been growing for 26 consecutive years until 2020. According to *Infodefensa*, China has practically doubled its military expenditure in the last 10 years, from 129,359 million dollars in 2009 to 244,349 at constant prices in 2019, an 89.34% increase; 252,304 million dollars at current prices. A good part of it has gone to the Navy, which it seems that, in 2021, is going to have an increase of 7% to the detriment of the Army.

In addition, Chinese military expenditure has seen a significant increase since 2011, which was further accentuated in 2015. According to the Stockholm International Peace

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<sup>3</sup> “We sweep up the enemy like a mat is rolled up/ Someone moans in disillusionment. What good is a bastion at every turn?”

<sup>4</sup> On this subject, see the work: AZNAR FERNÁNDEZ-MONTESINOS, Federico. 'Naval Geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific'. Available at: [http://www.ieeee.es/contenido/noticias/2021/09/DIEEEA31\\_2021\\_FEDAZN\\_Naval.html](http://www.ieeee.es/contenido/noticias/2021/09/DIEEEA31_2021_FEDAZN_Naval.html)

<sup>5</sup> QIAO Liang and WANG Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare*, 1999.

Research Institute (SIPRI) , in 2015 China spent 1.9% of its GDP on defence, while the US allocated 3.3% to it; and this is against a backdrop of rising Chinese GDP. In 2017, the response to President Trump's assertive statements was a 7% increase in military expenditure, probably the largest military expenditure increase in the world in absolute terms that year (\$12 billion)<sup>6</sup>.

With this increase, China has financed an entire naval policy that has led it first to the coast, from there to the “near seas” of the Pacific Ocean and from there to the “far seas” of the Indian Ocean, by this means also seeking the change of geopolitical status that derives from its economic weight. As Robert Kaplan points out in his paper *Monsoon* published in 2010, one fleet in the Western Pacific made China a regional power; while two fleets, one in the Pacific and the other in the Indian Ocean, would make the country a global superpower<sup>7</sup>.

Some analysts draw parallels between the Chinese naval effort and that of Japan at the beginning of the 20th century, or that of the United States in the last quarter of the 19th century. Although it cannot be specified with great precision, this Chinese naval modernisation effort encompasses a wide range of ship, aircraft and weapons procurement programmes, as well as improvements in maintenance and logistics, but also in doctrine, quality of personnel, education and training, and exercises<sup>8</sup>.

As we have seen, China wants its navy to be able to act as part of an anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) force, to deter U.S. intervention in a conflict in the near China Seas, in the vicinity of Taiwan; or, failing that, to delay the arrival or degrade the effectiveness of intervening U.S. forces. Additional missions would include conducting maritime security operations (including anti-piracy), evacuation of citizens of foreign countries and conducting humanitarian assistance/disaster response (HA/DR) operations<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> '7% más para gasto militar: la respuesta de China a la propuesta de Donald Trump de aumentar el presupuesto de Defensa de EE.UU.', *BBC*. 04.03.2017. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-39165362>

<sup>7</sup> ESTEBAN G. MANRIQUE, Luis. 'India, China y EEUU y el gran juego del Índico', *Revista Política Exterior*. 07.12.2020. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/india-china-y-eeuu-y-el-gran-juego-del-indico/>

<sup>8</sup> 'China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress', CRS Reports. 03.08.2021. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33153/252>

<sup>9</sup> 'China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress', CRS Reports. 03.08.2021. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33153/252h>

Year of DOD report	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2020 change from 2005
Ballistic missile submarines	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4	4	+3
Nuclear-powered attack submarines	6	5	5	5	6	6	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	6	6	0
Diesel attack submarines	51	50	53	54	54	54	49	48	49	51	53	57	54	47	50	46	-5
Aircraft carriers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	+2
Cruisers	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	+1
Destroyers	21	25	25	29	27	25	26	26	23	24	21	23	31	28	33	32	+11
Frigates	43	45	47	45	48	49	53	53	52	49	52	52	56	51	54	49	+6
Corvettes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	15	23	23	28	42	49	+49
Missile-armed coastal patrol craft	51	45	41	45	70	85	86	86	85	85	86	86	88	86	86	86	+35
Amphibious ships: LSTs and LPDs	20	25	25	26	27	27	27	28	29	29	29	30	34	33	37	37	+17
Amphibious ships: LSMs	23	25	25	28	28	28	28	23	26	28	28	22	21	23	22	21	-2
<b>Total of types above (does not include other types, such as auxiliary and support ships)</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>221</b>	<b>222</b>	<b>233</b>	<b>262</b>	<b>276</b>	<b>276</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>273</b>	<b>283</b>	<b>294</b>	<b>303</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>306</b>	<b>335</b>	<b>333</b>	<b>+117</b>
China Coast Guard ships	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	185	240	248	255	<i>n/a</i>
Total U.S. Navy battle force ships (which includes auxiliary and support ships but excludes patrol craft)	291	282	281	279	282	285	288	284	287	285	289	271	275	279	286	296	+5
Total U.S. Navy battle force ships compared to above total for certain Chinese ship types	+75	+61	+59	+46	+20	+9	+12	+13	+14	+2	-5	-32	-42	-27	-49	-37	-112

Figure 1. Evolution of the number of vessels in the Chinese navy.

In 2005, the Chinese Navy went from 216 vessels, none of which was an aircraft carrier, to 333 in 2020, 117 more, i.e. 72% more, including 2 aircraft carriers, 1 cruiser, 4 ballistic submarines (3 more than then), although its submarine technology is far below that of the United States. In 2013 or 2014 it would likely already numerically outnumber the navy of this country.

In any case, the forecast is that, by 2030, the Chinese navy will total 425 vessels, including 5 aircraft carriers and 8 ballistic submarines. And that, by 2040, it will have 6 aircraft carriers and 10 ballistic submarines.

**Table 2. Numbers of Chinese and U.S. Navy Battle Force Ships, 2000-2030**

Figures for Chinese ships taken from ONI information paper of February 2020

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025	2030
Ballistic missile submarines	1	1	3	4	4	6	8
Nuclear-powered attack submarines	5	4	5	6	7	10	13
Diesel attack submarines	56	56	48	53	55	55	55
Aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers	19	25	25	26	43	55	65
Frigates, corvettes	38	43	50	74	102	120	135
<b>Total China navy battle force ships, including types not shown above</b>	<b>110</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>255</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>425</b>
<b>Total U.S. Navy battle force ships</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>297</b>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>

**Source:** Table prepared by CRS. Source for China's navy: Unclassified ONI information paper prepared for Senate Armed Services Committee, subject "UPDATED China: Naval Construction Trends vis-à-vis U.S. Navy Shipbuilding Plans, 2020-2030," February 2020, 4 pp. Provided by Senate Armed Services Committee to CRS and CBO on March 4, 2020, and used in this CRS report with the committee's permission. Figures are for end of calendar year. Source for figures for U.S. Navy: U.S. Navy data; figures are for end of fiscal year.

**Figure 2. Number of Chinese and U.S. combat vessels, 2000-2030.** Source. CRS.

This navy is not only trying to surpass Western navies numerically, which is of unquestionable symbolic value, but also in terms of tonnage and, above all, capabilities, which is the real measure of a force beyond the numerical, which remains merely illustrative. However, some analysts argue that it still lacks one or two decades of technological development to be able to do so in capabilities, the decisive element of valuation.

The numbers of vessels, which in themselves do not mean much, offer some relevant conclusions. It is worth highlighting the technical and logistical capacity that has made it possible for the company to build these vessels as a means of self-development and which implies a will to remain in this project over time.

The fact is that China is launching a tonnage similar to that of the entire British fleet every year. In 2020, the volume refloated by Chinese shipyards was 23 257,200 tonnes, while the volume of the Chinese flagged merchant fleet reached 98,242,000 tonnes<sup>10</sup>. This implies the creation of shipyards, industry, arsenals, logistics, maintenance... on a colossal scale. Thus, the Chinese shipyard in Dalian on the Bohai Sea has the capacity to build up to four nuclear submarines at the same time. China Shipbuilding Industries (CSI), which develops them, has 310,000 employees and 147 R&D institutes. In 2019, its

<sup>10</sup> Available at: <https://unctadstat.unctad.org/CountryProfile/MaritimeProfile/en-GB/156/index.html>

shipyards launched 10 heavy destroyers and two amphibious assault helicopter carriers and is now building two 85,000-tonne aircraft carriers and two 40,000-tonne assault vessels<sup>11</sup>.

China has also used shipbuilding to promote its industry and technology by making short series of ships in which lessons are learned and implemented in the next series. This process has culminated in the design of double-hulled aircraft carriers, and in a qualitative leap in the quality of its now nuclear submarines. This is in addition to advanced aircraft with stealth technology such as the J-20 or the DF-26 ballistic missile.

It seeks to equip itself with its own technology. It does not import weapons systems from third countries; as we pointed out, they are rather the result of the effort derived from its own technological development. And also the acquisition of experience on that same scale, where the country seems to be able to do everything by its own means. Moreover, this effort must be placed in parallel with others to which it feeds and to which it contributes: the space race, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cybernetic capabilities, weapons technologies (such as hypersonic weapons)? The United States caused the economic collapse of the USSR by imposing a rate of spending that the USSR was unable to keep up with. It does not seem that, in this case, the same story can be repeated as China's GDP exceeds that of the United States.

In addition, China believes that the country's decline in science, technology and innovation began when it turned its back on the Industrial Revolution at the end of the 18th century. This is, reciprocally, in the opposite direction to the progressive success of the West and the key, therefore, that explains its superiority. After this historical lesson and in the presence of what has come to be called the Fourth Industrial Revolution, it intends to lead this process<sup>12</sup>.

China's technology strategy for 2025, also known as 'Made in China 2025', aims to have narrowed the gap with the most advanced countries with a policy of heavy investment in R&D&I. The aim is to strengthen strategic high-tech sectors—such as the military naval sector—with private and public participation; it therefore involves a whole industrialisation

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<sup>11</sup> ESTEBAN G. MANRIQUE, Luis. 'India, China y EEUU y el gran juego del Índico', *Revista Política Exterior*. 07.12.2020. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/india-china-y-eeuu-y-el-gran-juego-del-indico/>

<sup>12</sup> ROSALES, Osvaldo. 'Las claves del conflicto económico China-Estados Unidos', *Flacso*, August 2018. Available at: <http://www.flacsochile.org/slider/las-claves-del-conflicto-economico-china-estados-unidos/>

programme<sup>13</sup>. This is a long-term programme that aims to strengthen its own position by 2035 and reach parity with the United States, and finally, by 2045, to lead world innovation<sup>14</sup>, so that by 2049, when the People's Republic turns 100 years old, it will be a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally-advanced and harmonious.

In short, the total number of submarines, including conventional ones, has gone from 62 in 2000 to 66 in 2020, with a notable technical improvement, of course. And it is planned that there will be 76 in 2030, which demonstrates the firm will to have a negative dominion of its nearby sea, whose territoriality and exclusivity it claims.

In this context, the challenge of building an aircraft carrier is singularly relevant due to the effort and technological complexity required for its construction and maintenance (ships, aircraft, doctrine, pilots, training, etc.) and therefore, in addition, the will to have extended expeditionary capabilities, i.e. a will to project power over the "distant seas", since the aviation is embarked to take it far from the land bases, expanding the country's strategic capabilities, is exhibited by the facts. This implies the development of the so-called "two oceans strategy", i.e. at the very least, the extension of Chinese power to the Indian Ocean.

Its first aircraft carrier was only commissioned in 2013, partially using an old Soviet-era hull for its construction, and it did so, according to analysts, as an additional way of learning and gaining experience, as demanded by an effort that is intended to be prolonged over time and transcends the construction of the vessel itself. The second one that went into operation at the end of 2019 was already a product of its own technology. And the third, on which they are making rapid progress, is expected to have nuclear capabilities. A fourth is also already scheduled, which would enable the country to have two aircraft groups in the Pacific and two in the Indian Ocean. The latter two are expected to have such advanced technology as the Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS).

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<sup>13</sup> SAHAGÚN, Felipe. 'Introduction' in *Strategic Panorama 2019*. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies.

<sup>14</sup> SANCHEZ, Carlos. 'La geopolítica del 5G se estrena con Huawei: la guerra del siglo XXI', *El Confidencial*. 21.05.2019. Available at: [https://www.elconfidencial.com/economia/2019-05-21/geopolitica-5g-huawei-veto-google\\_2012074/](https://www.elconfidencial.com/economia/2019-05-21/geopolitica-5g-huawei-veto-google_2012074/)



And not only that, at the same time it develops other series of vessels such as the 055 class destroyers, a very advanced vessel in relation to the surrounding navies. It has also significantly improved its amphibious capabilities and joint logistics.

China's maritime power exceeds the force represented by its ships. And, in its immediate space, it acts locally and, remembering Clausewitz's idea that "defence is stronger than attack". By operating close to the coast, it gains the advantages that geography can provide; thus, China would benefit from the logistical support and coastal firepower offered, for example, by anti-vessel missiles (such as the DF-26, whose preferred target is aircraft carriers and has a radius of 2,000 nautical miles from the coast)<sup>15</sup> or by naval and non-naval aviation based on the mainland.

And naval matters are not limited to warships either. Thus, as far as foreign elements are concerned, we should begin by recalling that the islands and reefs of the Chinese Mediterranean have become veritable "unsinkable aircraft carriers" (H-6K bombers have been sent to several of them and they have been equipped with runways of up to 2,900 m) located up to 2,000 miles from the mainland. And as for its projection capacity, it is worth remembering that China has all kinds of vectors that practically cover the entire world; and, most importantly, that we are talking about a nuclear power.

Moreover, more than a few analysts have highlighted the role of the Chinese fishing fleet, acting as an irregular or paramilitary maritime force. This role even extends to maritime police vessels, a concept in which we would include coast guard units. It is also the largest in the world and incorporates more ships than all its neighbours combined. Some 200 medium-sized units, over 500 tonnes, capable of operating in the open sea, and more than 1000 small patrol boats<sup>16</sup>. The Coast Guard was established with 185 ships in 2017, and had 255 in 2020. And they are already expected to be able to participate in the fight against drug trafficking in the seas near Ibero-America.

The Maritime Militia, as detailed by Augusto Conte de los Ríos, occupies a relevant place as paramilitary forces. It would be formed by what is presented as "fishing vessels" to which real fishing vessels would be added if necessary. It is an organised force, trained and controlled by the State (for which multiple institutionalised mechanisms have been

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<sup>15</sup> 'La modernización naval de China: ¿El dragón se globaliza?', *El radar de la georealidad*. 10/06/2021. Available at: <https://www.elradar.es/la-modernizacion-naval-de-china-el-dragon-se-globaliza/>

<sup>16</sup> CONTE DE LOS RÍOS, Augusto 'La milicia marítima de China: ejemplo en la zona gris'. *Global Strategy*. 02.01.2021. Available at: <https://global-strategy.org/la-milicia-maritima-de-china-ejemplo-en-la-zona-gris/>

created, involving civilian and military authorities at the local and central levels), capable of carrying out operations in both near and deep waters under military control. They are useful for changing the local *status quo* and implementing strategies of force in a “non-violent” way.

This means that the fishing fleet as a whole is being politically instrumentalised by confusing these vessels with those. Their role takes the form of possibly unfriendly actions that are centralised and coordinated with conventional forces, which is why they have come to be classified as actions that fall under the concept of a “grey zone”. The aim is to overwhelm conventional forces with the simultaneous use of up to hundreds of these vessels, depriving them of their capabilities—the use of which would always be excessive and would eliminate the technological advantage—in order to obtain *de facto* domination of a sea such as the South China Sea. Thus, compared to a few high-tech vessels, there are hundreds of cheap, “unarmed” fishing boats that outperform them by rendering them inoperable because they cannot respond on the same level to the challenge they face<sup>17</sup>.

Moreover, Conte de los Ríos stresses, we are faced with increasingly professionalised, militarised and well-paid units, which include military personnel among their members, and are equipped with water cannons and reinforced helmets to be able to charge. They have been involved in multiple maritime incidents in the Pacific, in the South China Sea and in Vietnamese and Philippine waters, including against American ships such as the USNS *Impeccable*. They have also been used to cover the occupation of reefs and islets, and have contributed to the constructions carried out on them, where this type of unit is frequently located. They act as a sort of Green March of maritime sign in a sea largely claimed by China, despite the remoteness of its coasts (up to 2,000 miles)<sup>18</sup>.

In this sense, some analysts suggest that the defence of the coastal and territorial sea would gradually pass into the hands of the Coast Guard and the national maritime militia, while the Navy would focus on the country’s growing presence on the high seas along the first and second island chains<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> SUDWORTH, John. ‘El misterioso libro que sustenta el reclamo de Pekín sobre el disputado mar de la China Meridional’, *BBC*, 30.06.2016. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-internacional-36576528>

<sup>18</sup> CONTE DE LOS RÍOS, Augusto. ‘La milicia marítima de China: ejemplo en la zona gris’, *Global Strategy*, 02.01.2021. Available at: <https://global-strategy.org/la-milicia-maritima-de-china-ejemplo-en-la-zona-gris/>

<sup>19</sup> ‘La modernización naval de China: ¿El dragón se globaliza?’, *El radar de la georealidad*, 10.06.21. Available at: <https://www.elradar.es/la-modernizacion-naval-de-china-el-dragon-se-globaliza/>

## US naval projection in Asia-Pacific

Henry Kissinger refers in his book *China* to the case of the Crowe memo. This, drawn up in 1907 by a British diplomat, considered the confrontation between Germany and the United Kingdom as inevitable, thus prejudging the intentions of that country after a period of financial, industrial and commercial competition—in 1896, the book *Made in Germany* by Ernest E. Williams was published in the United Kingdom, a first warning sign—and which became political with a confrontation between protectionism and free trade in colonial terms, for the arms race, etc.

This was a repetition of what Graham Allison, reusing an idea of Sir Michael Howard, called “the Thucydides trap”—the rise of one country (Sparta) promoted the distrust of the power then overcome (Athens) and thus the conflict (Peloponnesian War)—i.e. it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. As the well-known Thomas theorem reminds us: “if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”

The United States is a “*resident* power” in the region, the other “indispensable” actor. Its strategy, the axis from which the whole of its containment system is articulated, is based on the presence of a powerful naval force, as well as on bilateral agreements signed with Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Australia.

In global terms there has been a significant and gradual decrease in America’s naval force, which ultimately made it necessary for the allies to make a greater commitment to cover security needs. The fact is that the US has gone from slightly more than a thousand frontline ships in the 1950s to slightly less than three hundred; for this reason it is difficult for it to maintain its capacity for global influence and face more than one naval conflict, when during the Cold War it had capabilities that allowed it to conduct two and a half wars simultaneously.

A greater increase in North America’s naval power in the region, as a material expression of the announced shift towards the Asia-Pacific, would send a powerful signal to the surrounding countries of the reliability of their behaviour so that they would become allied to face a growing danger.

This rivalry is also substantial in naval terms, this being a particularly relevant plane. As we have seen, in 2014, China overtook the United States in number of ships, but not in actual capabilities, although its deployment is primarily regional. The qualitative element, in the case of North America, is more relevant than the quantitative one.

In 2020, it had 330 vessels and 66 submarines deployed (396 in total) compared to 283 for the Americans, 211 vessels and 72 submarines. Furthermore, the Chinese navy acts locally and supported from its territory, while the American navy acts globally and its main bases are thousands of kilometres away, which hampers its logistics and significantly weakens it. In other words, it is not a question of North America's (naval) power, but of its capacity for naval projection over the Asia-Pacific, with all its conditioning factors and however much it may increase either temporarily or permanently. In these terms, the concentration of forces makes China regionally more powerful. But if we expand we see that the United States has more bases and is, as a result of history, geopolitically more endowed.

Not only that, but the country's political and diplomatic leadership in the world, which is part of its soft power, must be considered in addition to its hard power. It is at the head of many alliances and organisations, not just military ones, which also include the weight it wields in the IMF and the World Bank, as well as NATO and ANZUS. Once again, power cannot be subsumed in a mere sum of weapons.

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2021
<b>Aircraft Carriers</b>	12	12	11	10	11
<b>Cruises</b>	27	23	22	22	24
<b>Destroyers</b>	54	46	59	62	68
<b>Frigates/LCSs</b>	35	30	31	5	21
<b>SSN</b>	56	54	53	54	50
<b>SSBN</b>	18	14	14	14	14
<b>SSGN</b>	0	4	4	4	4
<b>Mineshooters</b>	18	17	14	11	8
<b>Amphibious</b>	41	37	33	30	32
<b>Auxiliary</b>	57	45	47	55	50
<b>Total</b>	318	282	288	271	282

**Figure 3. Evolution of vessels in service in the U.S. Navy, including all types of vessels except patrol boats and naval train.** Source. Data as referenced by MacKinlay Ferreiros, Alejandro 'Maritime Asia and the Balance of Power in Flux' *IEEE*, US Ship Force Levels, Naval History and Heritage Command, published on 17/11/2017, available at <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/us-ship-force-levels.html> (for 2000 to 2015) and (2021) Chapter Three: North America, The Military Balance, 121:1, 30-65, DOI: 10.1080/04597222.2021.1868792 (for 2021).

In any case, and even if they were, this is not a purely numerical analysis. The North American capabilities are technologically overflowing the Chinese ones, which will take, according to many analysts, at least a decade to catch up with the North American ones. Victory in a conflict is decided today more by the technological gap than by the volume of forces. This is the correct analysis, and only if we stick exclusively to the military level, in terms of capabilities.

A capability can be defined as a set of factors (weapon systems, infrastructure, personnel and logistical support assets), based on doctrinal principles and procedures that aim to achieve a certain military effect at the strategic, operational or tactical level, in order to fulfil assigned missions

In this regard, it is worth noting that the United States has 11 large aircraft carriers, even though it has to serve the entire world with them. But China will have to do the same if it wants to be a global power. It is not a global power half-heartedly or concentrated only in its regional environment. It must have a global deployment according to its condition.

The American defence budget is (formally) three times that of China, but it is for the whole world. Being a global power is expensive. Does China want to disperse its concentrated forces to become a global power, as the United States apparently is today, and should the United States stop being a global power to concentrate its resources in Asia-Pacific? The issue that such approaches suggest is that we are facing an imperfect multipolarity in which the cost of imposing or the ease of denial make possible a factual status quo, at least in regional terms.

Finally, North America's response to the tensions with China has been to turn its navy towards the Pacific, increasing its naval force and its active presence in the region, introducing new operational concepts to counteract China's negative control policies, doctrinally assuming the challenges and specificities that the grey zone embodies. This is also insisted on doctrinally from the North American perspective in the field of cyberspace, in space activities, in the relevance of social networks; in the protection of supply chains, especially those of the defence industry. But also, and at the same time, in the use of traditional military power to safeguard the international order<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> 'China evalúa la nueva Estrategia Naval de EE.UU.', *El radar de la georealidad*, 02.03.2021. Available at: <https://www.elradar.es/china-evalua-la-nueva-estrategia-naval-de-ee-uu/>

Furthermore, and as required by the reduction of the difference in power between the two countries, it has developed an integration effort—the integrated defence—of the various services with a view to strengthening the effectiveness of its action, in view of the power represented by China and the reduction of the military gap on the part of this country. Thus, it has brought out by the end of 2020 a joint strategy of the navy, marines and the North American coast guard.

These three services recognise China as a strategic rival of the United States while emphasising the naval nature of the confrontation between the two giants, whose power they understand has evolved in a direction unfavourable to their interests, even though they continue to maintain their supremacy. Moreover, there is a consensus in the US strategic community that China is gaining an advantage over the United States, and that the United States is losing its advantage<sup>21</sup>.

Along these lines, it proposes that the United States pay attention to freedom of navigation, port security, control of maritime choke points, the struggle for sea dominance, and the strengthening of alliances, as it believes that Sino-US maritime competition is global in scope.

The problem of the United States vis-à-vis China, let's reiterate, is the great distance between its main bases and the theatre of operations. China is playing at home. This has led to the recreation of the idea of a "First Fleet" to fill the gap between the Pacific and Indian Oceans, which would again be a specific recognition of North America's commitment and the integral nature of the Indo-Pacific space. The VII Fleet, from Japan, and the III Fleet, which protects the area extending from the West Coast to the 180° meridian, cover a territory that stretches from California to the border between India and Pakistan<sup>22</sup>. And the natural location, if it lends itself to this, would be Singapore, a country to which it would thus anchor itself definitively, avoiding the rapprochement with China that is taking place.

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<sup>21</sup> 'China evalúa la nueva Estrategia Naval de EE.UU.' *El radar de la georealidad*, 02.03.2021. Available at: <https://www.elradar.es/china-evalua-la-nueva-estrategia-naval-de-ee-uu/>

<sup>22</sup> ESTEBAN G. MANRIQUE, Luis. 'India, China y EEUU y el gran juego del Índico', *Revista Política Exterior*. 07.12.2020. Available at: <https://www.politicaexterior.com/india-china-y-eeuu-y-el-gran-juego-del-indico/>

## Conclusions and Relevance

Kissinger said that, without the United States, Europe was destined to become China's appendix. If only for that reason alone, Europe cannot remain on the sidelines of what is happening in the region, even if it intends to. That is what the shift to Asia-Pacific is all about. There is no need to dwell on the volume of trade between the two regions which, in 2018, was equivalent to 1.4 trillion euros and is expected to reach 2.5 trillion by 2025, double the existing flow with the United States, which it already exceeds today.

France, Germany and the United Kingdom have sent vessels to the South China Sea and demanded freedom of the seas in the Taiwan Strait even at the cost of straining their relations with China, a country with which they have significant economic exchanges.

Europe can hardly be left out of the US-China confrontation. The launch in September 2021 of AUKUS—a strategic alliance between Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, which will place Australia in the select club of countries with nuclear-powered submarines (12 units)—serves to reinforce the strategic perimeter of the Indo-Pacific and strengthen other alliances not unrelated to the region such as *Five Eyes* (an intelligence alliance between the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom).

The naval units are unlikely to be ready before 2040. And the relevance of the agreement is political. The fact that the agreement did not include Europe in general and France—with significant territories in both the Pacific and Indian Oceans—in particular, demonstrates the need to make further progress in the coordination of European foreign policies. The struggle between the United States and China has Europe as one of its main theatres of operations.

The truth is that if China were to add its maritime power to the continental power that geography has given it, it would emerge as the great global power it is destined to be, since it is located within the Eurasian continent and thus overflows Mahan's concept of "insularity" by taking over the great island that is this continent.

The latter is precisely Mackinder's proposal that would be integrated into his political project. But such a move, which would make China the hegemon, would require a colossal effort that China has historically rejected in order to concentrate on its own environment. The point is that globalisation has made the earth flat and relativised the concept of distance, which is ultimately a paradigm shift.

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