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COUNTERING CHINA'S "TRIDENT" STRATEGY

Frustrating China's Aims in the East and South China Seas and the Indian Ocean

Kohji Kuhara

In Greek mythology, the god Poseidon dominated the sea with a three-pronged spear—a trident—that became a symbol of naval power.¹ China now is trying to construct its own trident-like, three-pronged naval strategy for the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to dominate the country's near seas and deny U.S. forces freedom of action in the western Pacific Ocean.

To counter this, the U.S. Navy (USN) should look back fifty years to its last major strategic contest. Similar to the way the Soviet Union expanded its navy during the Cold War, China has modernized and expanded its navy dramatically since the Cold War ended. Consistent with Alfred Thayer Mahan's sea-power theories, China intends to act far from its home territory to protect its national interests.² The Soviet Union recognized, as China recognizes today, that it had to deploy its navy globally to strengthen its strategic and defensive position.³ The Soviet Union ambitiously expanded its navy from being a green-water, or coastal, force to being a blue-water navy that could operate all over the world, just as China is doing today.⁴ Both the father of the Soviet navy, Admiral Sergey Gorshkov, and the father of the Chinese navy, Navy General Liu Huaqing, transformed their fleets into blue-water forces to operationalize Mahan's strategic counsel to contain one's potential adversary, and did so against the same target: the U.S. Navy.⁵ By following the Soviet navy's model, China today (or soon) might be able to blunt a U.S. counterintervention in a potential conflict. Even in peacetime, China's naval expansion could make the United States hesitate during an escalating crisis.

As early as 2005, James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara warned about the PLAN's 遠海防衛 (open-seas defense strategy) against U.S. operations in the western Pacific. Since then, the U.S. Navy has grown only more concerned about the

PLAN's rapid development and the ways China's leaders might use it (see the table).⁶ The risk of a clash or conflict with China, especially in the maritime domain, has increased substantially over the last decade.⁷ For example, a Chinese warship approached within forty-five yards of an American destroyer in 2018, risking a collision that could have escalated.⁸ Given that this incident occurred after China and the United States concluded the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) and other confidence-building mechanisms designed to prevent unintended incidents and clashes, it is clear that China was, and perhaps remains, comfortable with the risk attendant on an incident at sea, suggesting that the potential for escalation in a future incident is significant.⁹ China's top Communist Party-run newspaper warned in 2020 that "US military operations easily could trigger accidents, which risks further escalations."¹⁰ Considering the strong concern about China's rapid military development and its aggressive activities, the U.S. Navy has designated China its "most pressing long-term strategic threat" and has begun to prioritize its efforts and capabilities to deal with the PLAN.¹¹

Because China, with its strong economy and sophisticated military, is expanding its power and influence, more effective countermeasures are necessary for the U.S. Navy to address the threat and capabilities that the PLAN poses. Since China learned a lot from Soviet naval strategy over the years, comparing the current situation with that of the Soviet Union during the Cold War may provide an important lens through which to assess Chinese strategy and develop effective countermeasures.¹²

There are three useful parallels between China and the Soviet Union to guide formulation of a strategy against the former's maritime ambitions. First, both China and the Soviet Union historically are continental powers that grew using land-based resources.¹³ Second, both countries realized naval power's importance and developed their navies using Mahanian ideas.¹⁴ Third, both countries have

CHANGES IN CHINESE NAVAL STRATEGY

Period	Strategy	Outline
1950s–1970s	coastal defense / inshore defense	<i>Main AO:</i> Chinese littoral <i>Main objectives:</i> support of land operations, etc.
1980s–early 2000s	offshore defense	<i>Main AO:</i> offshore area (Yellow Sea, ECS, SCS) <i>Main objectives:</i> protection from invasion, national unification, territory protection, SLOCs protection, protection of rights and interests in the maritime domain
Early 2000s–	offshore defense / open-seas defense	<i>Main AO:</i> open seas and offshore area <i>Main objectives:</i> strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime mobility, joint operations on the sea, comprehensive defense, and comprehensive support

AO = area of operations; ECS = East China Sea; SCS = South China Sea; SLOC = sea line of communication

Source: Iida, "PLAN's Intention," p. 7, table 1-1.

(or had) defensive strategies against the United States and its partners and allies.¹⁵ Moreover, the PLAN received significant support from the Soviet navy from its establishment in 1949 until the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations in 1960, which affected China's strategy toward naval power.¹⁶ Xiao Jinguang, a confidant of Mao Zedong and one of China's highest-ranking military officers, called the Soviet navy "a midwife, a nanny, and a teacher of the Chinese navy."¹⁷ As a result, the early PLAN's foundations—its education, tactics, and equipment—all derived from the Soviet navy, with enduring effects to this day.¹⁸ Hence, and from the beginning, the Chinese navy's strategy also was adapted from that of its Soviet parent.

The PLAN largely operates in three key maritime areas—the East China Sea (ECS), the South China Sea (SCS), and the Indian Ocean—and these efforts represent the prongs of its trident strategy. This three-region focus echoes that of the Soviet Union in the Cold War, in the form of the Soviet navy's approach toward Eastern Europe, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Mediterranean Sea.

Since the U.S. Navy had considerable success against the Soviet navy during the Cold War, comparing Soviet and Chinese strategy in these regions yields important insights. Understanding the analogies between these two competitors can help the United States and its partners develop more effective countermeasures against undesirable Chinese initiatives in those three crucial geographic areas. As it did during the Cold War, the United States should increase its naval presence in those regions, to prevent further Chinese naval expansion there by maintaining a strong strategic posture, and it should offset the advantages inherent in China's trident strategy by leveraging its allies and partners to burden share.

THE EAST CHINA SEA: DEFENSE LINE

The first similarity between China and the Soviet Union is the creation of a defense line against their adversaries' main avenue of approach to their homelands; the Soviet Union drew its line in Eastern Europe, while China's is the ECS. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union regarded Eastern Europe as a defense line against potential threats from the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Soviet army stationed 60 percent of its best divisions in Eastern Europe to prevent invasions from the west.¹⁹ Even Admiral Gorshkov believed that Soviet naval strategy should support the protection of the main "Central Front" line on the ground in Europe. He once noted that the Soviets were especially concerned about the security environment in Eastern Europe because all previous invasions of Russia had come from this direction—not surprising, given the comparatively permissive geographic accessibility on its western borders.²⁰ Accordingly, the Soviet Union concentrated its force in Eastern Europe to create a defense line against attacks from that direction.

Similarly, China views the ECS as its defense line against the U.S. Navy. China experienced a painful humiliation during the Taiwan crisis in 1995, facing two

USN carrier strike groups that taught China the necessity of developing effective countermeasures against U.S. power-projection capabilities.²¹ During a meeting with President George W. Bush in 2003, China's then president Hu Jintao explained that Taiwan is the most significant security concern for China by using the phrase 核心的利益 (core national interest).²² Since then, China has focused its defense efforts on its eastern coastline to face potential threats from the United

Both the father of the Soviet navy . . . and the father of the Chinese navy . . . transformed their fleets into blue-water forces to operationalize Mahan's strategic counsel to contain one's potential adversary, and did so against the same target: the U.S. Navy.

States and its allies. Despite its continuous military development, China remains concerned about this potential threat from USN operations from the east.²³

Some may say that the characteristics of the threats

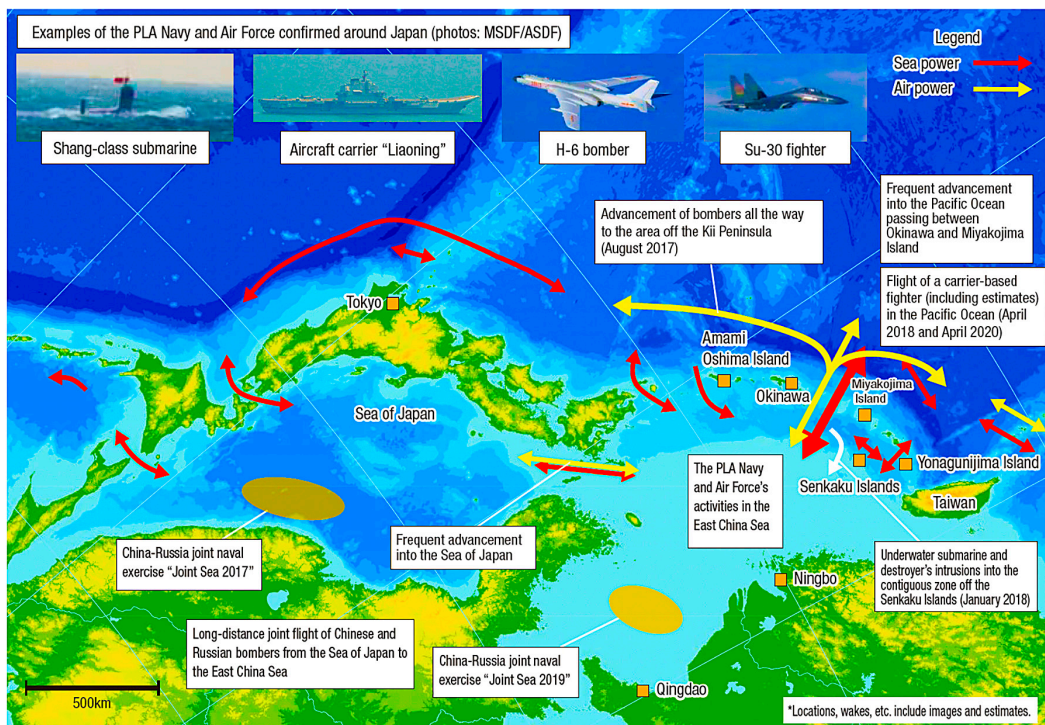
faced by China and the Soviet Union are different because China's concern is maritime while the Soviet Union's was terrestrial. Nevertheless, a comparison of their defensive strategies reveals striking similarities. The Soviet Union created a buffer zone between itself and the Western powers by incorporating Eastern Europe into the Eastern Bloc. Likewise, China intends to create a buffer zone in the ECS. In 2010, Major General Peng Guangjian, a senior theorist at the Academy of Military Science, introduced the PLAN's Active Strategic Counterattacks on Exterior Lines (ASCEL) concept. ASCEL leverages the advantages of forward defense by using preemptive strikes against U.S. military forces. In the United States, this operational approach is often called the antiaccess/area-denial (A2/AD) strategy. This strategy consists of two parts: *antiaccess* involves preventing U.S. forces from entering China's operations area—the west side of the first island chain; and *area-denial*, which means restricting operations conducted by the United States within China's operations area.²⁴ In short, the ECS would perform a similar strategic buffering function for China to what Eastern Europe did for the Soviet Union.

Today, China has acquired and deployed potent ASCEL capabilities. China already has antiship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), the DF-21D and DF-26B. These are the so-called carrier killers, and some consider them to be China's most dangerous weapons against U.S. and allied naval forces.²⁵ In addition to ASBMs, the PLAN is acquiring additional silent diesel submarines and long-range, hypersonic, antiship cruise missiles (ASCMs). These can be launched from platforms such as J-11B, H-6, and DH-10 aircraft. Hypersonic cruise missiles are a particular concern because their high speed makes effective countermeasures against them difficult.²⁶ Thus, the PLAN has various capabilities that can be used to conduct coordinated attacks using ASBMs, ASCMs, and torpedoes to carry out an ASCEL strategy in the ECS.

However, China has a geographic disadvantage. The PLAN's main forces with responsibilities for the ECS, the North Sea and East Sea Fleets, are completely surrounded by the Japanese archipelago (see figure 1). To proceed out into the Pacific Ocean to conduct ASCEL operations against the U.S. Navy, PLAN warships would need to pass through choke points between those islands. Transiting maritime choke points is an enormously difficult and perilous task for surface ships in times of conflict because of the geographic constraints on maneuvering and an adversary's potential ability to concentrate forces from multiple domains against those points.²⁷ Hence, to mitigate its vulnerability to multiaxis attacks from the shore, sea, and air, the PLAN needs to improve its ability to achieve sea control and air superiority around the Japanese archipelago.

The PLAN seeks to ensure the survivability of its surface ships by enhancing their mobility. Since 2008, the PLAN has been conducting passages through the southern parts of Japan, such as across the Okinawa–Miyako Islands line and through the Osumi Strait, as well as in northern parts, such as the Tsugaru and Sōya Straits.²⁸ China's air force has increased its activities in these areas dramatically as well, and the number of times Japan has scrambled fighters in response

FIGURE 1
CHINESE COAST SURROUNDED BY JAPANESE ISLANDS



Source: Defense Ministry, *Defense of Japan 2020* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defense, 2020), p. 73, fig. 1-2-2-8.

to Chinese military aircraft has increased correspondingly. According to Japan's Ministry of Defense, the number of fighter scrambles against Chinese incursions in 2016 was thirteen times greater than in 2006.²⁹ This acceleration of Chinese activities in the ECS indicates that China aims to overcome its geographic disadvantage by seizing sea and air superiority in a conflict.

In short, China considers the ECS to be its defense line against the United States and its allies. Building ASCELC capabilities, the PLAN intends to create a buffer zone against the activities of U.S. forces in the region, and China intends to mitigate its geographic disadvantages by increasing its ability to access choke points. China's strategy is similar to the strategy of the Soviet Union in terms of making a buffer zone to protect a defense line, but the importance of naval forces will be much greater for China because it needs to focus on the ocean instead of the land. In fact, China deploys a huge number of PLAN units as well as ground-based missiles in the buffer zone around the ECS, similar to how the Soviet Union deployed ground forces in Eastern Europe.

The Taiwan crises of the 1990s triggered China's pursuit of an ECS buffer zone, the purpose of which is thought to be to prevent adversary forces (especially the U.S. Navy) from intervening against its operations there, such as potential moves against Taiwan. This contrasts with the Soviet buffer zone in Eastern Europe, which was intended to halt invading troops. China already may have achieved this buffer and made similar progress toward overcoming its geographic disadvantages. If the U.S. military's relative advantage continues to decline as a result of China's rapid military developments, the ECS may become a "solidified" buffer zone in the near future, as Eastern Europe was for the Soviet Union during the Cold War, even without its hard political borders.

THE SOUTH CHINA SEA:

CHINA'S NUCLEAR ASSURED RETALIATION SANCTUARY

The second similarity between China and the Soviet Union is China's apparent pursuit of a submarine sanctuary in the SCS, like that the Soviet Union established in the Sea of Okhotsk. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union defined the Sea of Okhotsk as a "sanctuary" or "maritime bastion" for its nuclear-armed missile submarines (SSBNs).³⁰ By attempting to maintain absolute sea and air superiority in this area north of the Kuril Islands (which Japan calls the Chishima Islands), the Soviet Union intended to protect and maintain an assured nuclear-retaliation capability against the United States.³¹ Admiral Gorshkov believed that continuous maintenance of the Soviet Union's ability to target the American homeland with nuclear-tipped submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) was crucial to deterring the United States from attacking the Soviet homeland. Therefore, he designed the Soviet navy and directed its operations to secure that

sanctuary through absolute sea and air superiority to ensure the survivability of Soviet SSBNs.³²

China similarly seeks to militarize the SCS, at least in part to create a sanctuary for its military operations against the United States.³³ Although China has a substantial maritime border with access to the ECS, the SCS, and the Yellow Sea, the SCS is the area that is most suitable for establishing a naval and submarine sanctuary on the model of what the Soviets created in the Sea of Okhotsk.

[T]he early PLAN's foundations—its education, tactics, and equipment—all derived from the Soviet navy, with enduring effects to this day.

First, a successful sanctuary requires sufficient depth to accommodate submarine operations, and bases to supply and otherwise support submarines; only the SCS

meets these conditions.³⁴ Second, the sanctuary must be free from USN influence; otherwise China's submarines would remain under potential threat in a conflict, when their deterrent capability would be most important. China recognizes the U.S. Navy's superiority and competence in antisubmarine warfare (ASW), which prevents the SCS from being an effective sanctuary—for now.³⁵ The SCS, however, could fulfill these conditions if and when China completes the militarization of the “artificial islands” it has constructed in the SCS, especially in the Spratly and Paracel groups.³⁶ If a conflict breaks out between China and the United States, the SCS presently would be a contested area, but the air and sea bases China has built on its militarized artificial islands could provide it with access and capacity for force projection to establish sea and air superiority over the region, and provide an additional base for ASW operations. This could leave the SCS unacceptably perilous for U.S. warships, including nuclear submarines.

There are two strong indications that China intends to use the SCS as a sanctuary for its SSBN fleet. First, Liu Huaqing, the father of the PLAN, was influenced strongly by the Soviet navy, and therefore placed high priority on improving China's submarine capabilities, including the development of SLBMs for deterrence.³⁷ Second, China already considers the SCS to be a “core national interest,” alongside the resolution of Taiwan's status. In 2010, high-ranking Chinese officials told U.S. Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg that the SCS is a core national interest, echoed by the director of China's State Oceanic Administration.³⁸ Chinese president Hu Jintao once cited China's vulnerability to the Malacca dilemma—China's overdependence on trade flowing through the Malacca Strait without viable alternative routes—as one of the reasons his country placed strategic value on the SCS.³⁹ Hu feared that the United States could close off the strait in a crisis, which would have a dire impact on the Chinese economy.⁴⁰

However, trade vulnerability does not explain fully China's focus on the SCS. With respect to energy, China has sought to reduce its vulnerability under the

Malacca dilemma by diversifying its global sources for oil and gas and increasing energy imports arriving via overland pipelines.⁴¹ Furthermore, China appears to recognize that the reciprocal economic costs of a blockade to the United States, owing to the two countries' close economic interdependence, may reduce U.S. leaders' willingness to shut off China's maritime trade. Trade between the United States and China exceeds \$2.1 trillion in value per year, leaving ample opportunity for China to impose its own economic costs on the United States. The economic and supply-chain chaos created by COVID-19 illustrates the vulnerability of the United States to China-dependent supply chains, and hints at the type of pain China might impose deliberately on the United States in a conflict.⁴² Furthermore, the economic and political consequences of a blockade do not hit immediately, leaving China time to conduct swift counterattacks to undermine the U.S. blockade before it produced the intended effect.⁴³ Thus, China has a variety of countermeasures and mitigations that it can deploy to protect its sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the SCS. Therefore, the need to protect its SLOCs does not explain fully the strategic value that China places on the SCS, or the resources and effort it has expended to exert dominance over the region.⁴⁴

The best explanation left is the sea's strategic and military importance, suggesting that China will continue to try to shape the SCS to serve as a bastion for its military, especially its SSBNs. China already appears to have started to develop an SSBN sanctuary in the SCS. First, it continues to build up the infrastructure on the artificial islands it constructed in the Paracel and Spratly Islands (and may begin to construct on the Scarborough Shoal), effectively creating a "Great Wall of Reefs" equipped with sensors and airfields to help shield its submarines. Second, in Yulin on Hainan Island in the South China Sea, China has built a large submarine base, which now is home to its Type 094 Jin-class SSBNs, and presumably also will host its new Type 096 SSBNs. China's most advanced type of SSBNs can be deployed along this maritime "Great Wall" from the base in Yulin yet still enjoy generous water depth in which to operate.⁴⁵ Even though the JL-2, the latest SLBM carried on the Jin class, cannot reach the U.S. homeland from the SCS, China possesses the world's third-largest space industry, and presumably it will equip its next generation of SSBNs with longer-range SLBMs capable of targeting the United States, possibly as soon as 2025.⁴⁶

In sum, China appears intent on establishing a sanctuary for its SSBNs (or at least on reserving the option to do so) by militarizing the SCS to increase the subs' survivability against U.S. ASW capabilities and achieve a survivable, assured nuclear-retaliation capability (in concert with new, longer-range SLBMs). This explains why China considers the SCS to be a core national interest, and why it seeks to dominate those waters in a manner analogous to its territorial seas, even if it does not claim the SCS as such explicitly. The modern record of China's actions in the

SCS—occupying the Paracel Islands in 1973, the Spratly Islands in 1988, and Mischief Reef in 1995, followed by the rapid, large-scale construction of military infrastructure on those features beginning in 2014—suggests China’s grand ambitions for the SCS and the risks that their full realization could pose to the United States.⁴⁷

THE INDIAN OCEAN:

THE SUPPORT AREA FOR THE DEFENSE LINE AND SANCTUARY

China also seeks to establish a support area in the Indian Ocean, analogous to the Soviet navy’s strategy in the Mediterranean Sea. During the Cold War, the Soviet navy used the Mediterranean as a support area that could give it access to the southern flank of its defense line in Eastern Europe and provide a sanctuary to warships and submarines operating against NATO forces. The Soviet Union also needed naval bases in the Mediterranean Sea to support deployments onward into the Atlantic Ocean and provide logistical support to its defense line. As mentioned, the main concentration of Soviet forces was stationed on the Soviet Union’s western border, and Soviet planners were concerned about potential vulnerability to the south, and thus saw access to and freedom of action in the Mediterranean Sea as a crucial element of successful homeland defense.⁴⁸

Gorshkov believed that the Atlantic Ocean was the paramount naval theater, and the Soviets’ inability to secure their SLOCs was a significant vulnerability that he believed might be mitigated by obtaining additional naval bases.⁴⁹ Because of the vastness of the country itself, most of the Soviet Union’s naval bases were isolated geographically from each other, and many of its ports were icebound in the winter, making warm-water ports on the Black Sea especially important. Gorshkov insisted that maintaining freedom of action and access for the Soviet navy in the Mediterranean Sea was key to denying an adversary access to Soviet coasts, and bases there would permit the service to conduct naval deployments in support of Eastern Europe while preventing the enemy from threatening it.⁵⁰

Gorshkov cited Napoléon’s invasion of Russia in 1812 as illustrating the Mediterranean Sea’s strategic importance. During that campaign the tsarist navy cut off the French supply line that passed through Turkey in the Mediterranean Sea, which disrupted critical logistics support for Napoléon’s army. Russia then drove the French back, in part by leveraging naval mobility in the Mediterranean.⁵¹ But if France had controlled the eastern Mediterranean Sea, not only would Russia not have enjoyed that leverage, but it would have faced an additional threat as well.

During the Cold War, Gorshkov insisted that the Soviet Union should try to contain the U.S. Navy’s Sixth Fleet, which was based in the Mediterranean Sea, because U.S. submarines and aircraft carriers could be a serious threat to the Soviet Union. The presence of the Sixth Fleet not only posed a threat to the Soviet homeland from the sea; it also presented the possibility that Soviet forces would face threats on two fronts in a conflict: Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean Sea.⁵² In short, the goal

of denying freedom of action to NATO naval forces in the Mediterranean Sea was crucial for the Soviet Union's homeland defense because it protected the southern flank of its defense line in Eastern Europe. Consequently, the Soviet Union began significant naval deployments into the Mediterranean to begin filling the regional power vacuum after World War II, and it worked to maintain influence in Egypt and Syria to preserve its access to the eastern reaches of the sea.⁵³

Today, the Indian Ocean shares similar strategic importance as a support area for China. Just as the U.S. Sixth Fleet threatened the Soviet navy and the southern maritime approaches to the Soviet homeland, U.S. naval forces flowing

China experienced a painful humiliation during the Taiwan crisis in 1995, facing two USN carrier strike groups that taught China the necessity of developing effective countermeasures against U.S. power-projection capabilities.

from the Fifth Fleet area of responsibility in the Middle East can approach the SCS from the southwest while China's ASCEL operations focus toward the east and the ECS. If China has no countermeasures against

U.S. naval forces approaching from the Indian Ocean to intervene in the SCS, China could face threats on two maritime fronts, including the potential for strikes against the Chinese homeland. This is almost exactly the same strategic problem the Soviet Union faced in the Mediterranean Sea during the Cold War. China similarly must maintain presence and deterrent capabilities in the Indian Ocean to counter potential encirclement by the U.S. Navy.

To deter NATO naval forces, Gorshkov concluded that the Soviet navy needed larger, more-capable warships and long-range maritime patrol aircraft.⁵⁴ He did not emphasize aircraft carriers as part of this modernization, likely because the Soviet navy's operational area was not large enough for them to be useful. China, by contrast, needs a much larger fleet, including aircraft carriers, to maintain a naval presence or project power in the vast Indian Ocean. Zhang Xusan, the deputy commander of the PLAN at the end of the Cold War and part of the second generation of senior navy leadership that followed Liu Huaqing, insisted that the PLAN needed aircraft carriers for their sea-denial capability.⁵⁵ He envisioned Chinese aircraft carriers principally being used to defend the SCS, but since China now has "unsinkable" aircraft carriers in the form of its artificial island bases, the PLAN's growing carrier force may be freed up to operate in the Indian Ocean.

As for the U.S. Navy, aircraft carrier operations remain its best solution to maintain a naval presence in the Indian Ocean that can project force into the SCS to counter the PLAN. A USN carrier strike group (CSG)—consisting of an aircraft carrier and a mix of escorting surface combatants—can conduct a variety of operations against a multitude of threats in both the open ocean and the littorals, thanks to its high mobility and strike capabilities.⁵⁶ Just as the U.S. Navy believes highly capable, multimission

combatants are required to conduct the full range of naval operations over vast sea spaces, the PLAN similarly may see a CSG of its own as the only appropriate force to intercept and disrupt adversary operations in the Indian Ocean.

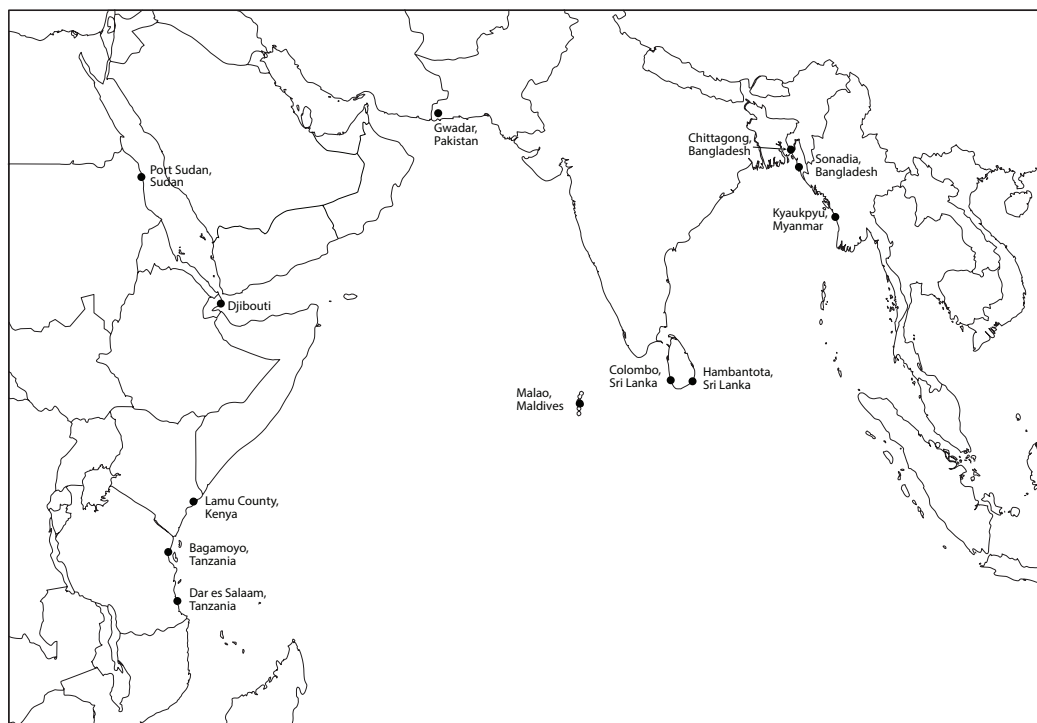
China's approach to the Indian Ocean is very similar to the Soviet navy's in the Mediterranean Sea, although the methods differ. After World War II, the Soviet Union tried to coerce Turkey militarily to ensure its access to the Mediterranean Sea via the Bosphorus and Dardanelles. Turkey turned to the United States, fomenting the Turkish Straits crisis, and ultimately the Soviet Union's effort at intimidation failed.⁵⁷

Perhaps mindful of how overt coercion can cause counterproductive backlash, China has pursued influence and access in the Indian Ocean through commercial and other economic means. China is leveraging its massive economic power in the Indian Ocean with a "first civilian, later military" approach.⁵⁸ First it attracts coastal countries with financing and development projects to establish a local infrastructure presence and gain political influence and leverage; later it may convert this influence into securing military and logistical access, especially through ports it has built and manages for the host country.⁵⁹ There is concern that China accomplishes this acquisition of coercive leverage and access to strategic infrastructure under the auspices of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which Chinese officials describe as "a way for win-win cooperation that promotes common development and prosperity and a road toward peace and friendship by enhancing mutual understanding and trust, and strengthening all-around exchanges."⁶⁰ Despite this innocuous framing, China gradually may expand the civil facilities that it builds overseas for use by its military, relying on the host state's growing economic dependence on China to ensure continued access.⁶¹

The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps also appreciate the importance of securing basing and logistics in contested areas, and have developed the Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations concept to establish temporary bases in areas expected to be contested at the outbreak of a conflict.⁶² Establishing a military base can be a daunting task in a contested environment, but it is easier to accomplish in peacetime. Similarly, China appears to be laying the foundations for wartime port and logistical access in the Indian Ocean now, before any conflict has broken out, including developing "dual-use possibilities" in some commercial ports to provide logistical support to PLAN warships. In the near future, it is possible that more than ten Chinese-operated ports in the Indian Ocean will be developed with dual-use capabilities to serve both commercial and military needs (see figure 2).⁶³

The PLAN rapidly is improving its ability to operate and employ CSGs. In April 2018, the Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning* (CV 16) conducted the PLAN's first CSG operations in the Philippine Sea, just east of Taiwan; China's second aircraft carrier, *Shandong* (CV 17), conducted sea trials and training exercises in May 2020.⁶⁴ The PLAN also is believed to be constructing a next-generation

FIGURE 2
CHINA-INFLUENCED PORTS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN



Source: Nagao, "The Growing Militarization of the Indian Ocean"; Joshua T. White, "China's Indian Ocean Ambitions: Investment, Influence, and Military Advantage," *Brookings Institution*, June 2020, www.brookings.edu/.

nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, and is expected to build several more.⁶⁵ Toshi Yoshihara estimates that the PLAN could have sixteen to twenty cruisers, thirty-six to forty destroyers, and forty to fifty frigates by 2030, which is a sufficient base of surface combatants to form several CSGs and simultaneously conduct ASCEL operations in the ECS.⁶⁶ These prospective CSGs, in combination with the sustainment rights and access China appears to be pursuing at Chinese-operated ports in the Indian Ocean, will give the PLAN sea-control, power-projection, and logistics capabilities similar to the U.S. Navy's in the Indian Ocean. This could undermine U.S. forces' influence in the region and subsequently threaten U.S. approaches and logistics lines into the SCS in a conflict.⁶⁷

CHINA IS A TOUGHER RIVAL THAN EVER

Like the mythical Poseidon, China has its own trident: a three-pronged strategy to defend its homeland and prevent any intervention by the United States and its allies. It consists of implementing an ASCEL strategy in the ECS, creating an assured retaliation capability in the SCS, and establishing a support area in the Indian

Ocean. These strategies mirror the Soviet navy's approaches in Eastern Europe, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Mediterranean Sea during the Cold War. The contrast between the Soviet Union's unbalanced economy (which led to its ruling regime's collapse) and China's stronger economy, the economic levers it provides, and its close integration with naval strategy illustrates why the Chinese trident shows prospects superior to those of the Soviet naval strategy over the medium term.

However, there remains widespread concern among leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that China could fall victim to the same fate as the Soviet Union. This motivated long-term research into the Soviet collapse, which concluded that "military stresses caused by the Cold War" exacerbated "overemphasis on defense industries and military sector of economy" and led to "domination of Eastern Europe and other client states," resulting in the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁶⁸ In other words, the CCP understands that too much investment in militarization could cause a Chinese collapse—a lesson that informs the Chinese trident.

Some may argue that the size of the SCS—let alone the vastness of the Indian Ocean—makes it difficult, perhaps impossible, for China to defend its SLOCs effectively, and that it thus will remain vulnerable to blockade. But Chinese strategists have been contemplating mitigation measures against this vulnerability. Fang Liang, a professor at the People's Liberation Army National Defense University, says that Chinese naval power can protect the Sea Silk Road, a subset of the BRI that includes the SLOCs from the SCS to the Indian Ocean.⁶⁹ She recognizes the potential for armed conflict in the SCS and advocates for developing a spectrum of defenses against blockades for both peacetime and wartime situations. If a crisis escalates in a disputed area, the PLAN would project naval force using forward patrols and exercises, hoping to raise the cost and escalatory risk to the United States and its allies of implementing a blockade. During open armed conflict, the PLAN could take "corresponding-retaliation" measures commensurate with the degree of the blockade. As an example, Fang suggests that the PLAN would block other important choke points to impose costs on the blockading coalition.⁷⁰ Carrying out such measures—which were proposed in official People's Liberation Army media in 2015—would require substantial and potent naval force, but China already has the world's largest navy numerically, which makes the execution of such proposals more plausible.⁷¹

As for the United States and its allies, China's strategy presents serious burdens and dilemmas. It likely would be too costly for the U.S. Navy to attempt to counter all three of China's strategic thrusts—in the ECS, SCS, and Indian Ocean—on its own, as well as blunting PLAN forces that will go on the offensive once a conflict starts. The German theorist Carl von Clausewitz believed that war structurally favors the defender, in part because attackers are forced to consume their advantages, gradually depleting their chance to win.⁷² This difficulty—validated by war games that have examined possible Pacific conflict scenarios—is what U.S. forces

would have to confront when attempting to fight through the three prongs of China's trident.⁷³ Chinese ASCEL operations would complicate severely the U.S. Navy's efforts to break into China's buffer zone in the ECS.⁷⁴ If China develops and matures its ability to conduct CSG operations in the Indian Ocean, the U.S. Navy would be hard-pressed to push the PLAN back into the South China Sea or Pacific Ocean. Compounding this challenge, the U.S. mainland's extraordinary distance from the ECS, SCS, and Indian Ocean presents significant logistics difficulties, and the U.S. Navy would require a sound sustainment plan to support maritime combat in the western Pacific and Indian Ocean regions.⁷⁵ Ironically, in some ways a peacetime or gray-zone environment may present more complexities logistically than does a wartime one, because until "the balloon goes up" the U.S. Navy must maintain presence in all three of these regions to prevent power vacuums and the erosion of its strategic position vis-à-vis China, while still marshaling capacity and capability for potential offensive operations in the event of a conflict. Addressing this multitude of strategic fronts and efforts simultaneously imposes high costs on the United States—which is itself a feature of China's approach.

HOW TO COPE WITH CHINA'S NAVAL STRATEGY

Considering the structural similarity between Soviet naval strategy during the Cold War and China's trident strategy today, the United States could deter or mitigate China's strategic expansion effectively in much the same manner that it worked to contain Soviet naval power, using its own three-pronged strategy.

First, the United States should take strong, public political positions against China's excessive maritime claims and efforts to undermine partners and international norms, just as it did during the Cold War against the Soviet Union. Under the auspices of the Truman Doctrine, the United States frustrated the Soviet Union's attempts to expand its influence into Turkey and Greece, which was critical geographically to its "support area" concept. In Eastern Europe, the United States, in coordination with NATO allies, conducted an aggressive and proactive campaign to compete with the Soviet Union and undermine its defense line there.⁷⁶ In the Sea of Okhotsk, one of the Soviet Union's SSBN sanctuaries, the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF), with its ASW capabilities, played a critical role in helping to defend U.S. SLOCs in the western Pacific Ocean and blocking Soviet naval access to key choke-point straits.⁷⁷ In aggregate, these containment efforts contributed to deterring the Soviet Union and mitigating its influence.

Today, strong and consistent U.S. political commitments already have proved to be an effective counter against some strategically threatening Chinese claims and actions. For example, the PLAN expanded its activities in the ECS, the SCS, and the Indian Ocean when COVID-19 began to spread globally in February 2020, alongside broader Chinese efforts that included strengthening CCP

governance of Hong Kong, clashing with India on the two nations' border in the Himalayas, and beginning island and infrastructure construction in the Maldives.⁷⁸ The White House officially declared its strong political opposition to China, emphasizing that the United States does not accept China's attempts to change the rules-based world order.⁷⁹ In response to China's military exercises in the SCS, the U.S. Navy conducted a joint exercise in those waters with the JMSDF and the Aus-

The economic and supply-chain chaos created by COVID-19 illustrates the vulnerability of the United States to China-dependent supply chains, and hints at the type of pain China might impose deliberately on the United States in a conflict.

tralian navy to emphasize that the United States did not recognize China's excessive claims in the region.⁸⁰ While it is impossible to establish clear linkages between U.S. activity and Chinese decision-making, it is notable that China de-escalated

its border clash with India at around the same time as the U.S.-Japan-Australia naval exercise; pressure on China's leadership in one area may have had effects elsewhere.⁸¹ Given past experience that suggests that China moderates its activity in the SCS when the United States hardens its stance and responses, maintaining and expanding overt U.S. opposition to China's excessive claims and coercion are key to preventing its consolidation of advantages in the SCS.⁸²

Second, burden sharing with allies and other like-minded countries is crucial for Washington's regional position vis-à-vis Beijing. China has expanded and likely will continue to expand its influence whenever and wherever power vacuums develop. China's naval expansion not only diminishes the prospects for the United States to establish sea control in a crisis; it undermines U.S. credibility across the international community, especially among crucial regional partners in Asia. To arrest this potential loss of military and political influence, the United States must endeavor to maintain its military advantages and expand the role of naval forces in its security strategy. The current trend of China's military growth, however, is disadvantageous, and counterbalancing it may demand too much for the United States to accomplish alone. Power projection is key to U.S. strategic influence, and, because of the great distances involved, exercising it requires enabling allies and partners. Thus, the United States should share this burden with its allies and other countries with shared regional interests.

Burden sharing must mean more than seeking financial support from partners. Geography demands that an effective response to China's trident strategy should assign primary responsibilities to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan to counter China's defense line in the ECS, just as NATO once contained the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. To enhance its position in the SCS, China's sanctuary area, the United States should deploy ASW capabilities to other regional coastal

states and support building up their own capacities. Once these countries possess sufficient ASW capabilities, their contribution could mirror Japan's role in U.S. efforts to counter the Soviet Union in the Sea of Okhotsk.

India also must play a significant role in the Indian Ocean to address China's support area. This would be similar to Italian, French, Greek, and Turkish efforts to guarantee NATO access to the Mediterranean Sea during the Cold War.

Shifting the U.S. strategic approach to emphasize the defensive is crucial. Christian Brose, staff director on the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee until 2018, argues that U.S. countermeasures against China should change from being offensive to being defensive, aiming to block or erode China's offensive intentions rather than to roll back Chinese gains after the fact.⁸³ In particular, the United States and Japan have a great opportunity to impose costs on Chinese operations in the ECS.⁸⁴ Just as China seeks to impose costs on potential U.S. operations within the first island chain now, if Japan obtains sufficient A2/AD capabilities against the PLAN, it would raise substantially the PLAN's costs to break out beyond the Japanese archipelago and the Taiwanese islands into the western Pacific Ocean.

In the SCS, the United States must work to limit PLAN submarines' freedom of action and reduce that sea's utility as a sanctuary area or bastion. While the artificial islands China has constructed in the SCS provide it substantial geographic advantages for projecting power, the United States can leverage the geographic advantages of partner countries. Just as the U.S. Navy relied on support from the JMSDF during the Cold War, if the U.S. Navy enhances other coastal countries' ASW capabilities and thereby threatens PLAN submarine operations, China would need to develop new capabilities to regain its lost advantages.

In the Indian Ocean, China continues to expand its regional influence via its economic power. If India coordinates its naval presence and posture in the region with those of the United States, China would need to expand its military deployments correspondingly to counter the increased threat to its freedom of action in a conflict. Beyond the operational necessity this would impose, it also might make association with China less politically and economically attractive to the coastal countries it targets in peacetime. By imposing new costs on China, the United States can force China to change its strategic orientation and seek some new source of advantage, all while reducing its current advantages at sea.

Finally, the United States should contain China's trident strategy by involving like-minded countries, regardless of their geographic location. China's claims and many of its activities in the South China Sea have no valid basis in international law.⁸⁵ To counter China's excessive claims and deter its illegitimate acts in the region, the United States needs to organize like-minded states in opposition. To put force behind their political opposition requires expanding regional naval

capabilities and their interoperability with the U.S. Navy, as well as the Royal Navy, French navy, Royal Australian Navy, and JMSDF. This coalition should become more integrated and focus its operations in the ECS, SCS, and Indian Ocean. The numerous close partners the United States has in the region constitute a decisive advantage over China. Using them defensively to help contain China's trident strategy could be a game changer in the ongoing international competition. It would force China either to reduce its ambitions or to adopt an increasingly offensive naval strategy that would both strengthen the coalition against it and incur the same disadvantages that the United States would face at present in conducting offensive operations against China.

To deal with China's trident strategy, the United States needs its own three-pronged strategy, which should include leveraging its allies and partners and the defensive advantages offered by East Asia's geography. Burden sharing and international cooperation are particularly crucial. On 23 July 2020, Michael Pompeo, Secretary of State in the Trump administration, acknowledged the existence of a cold war against China.⁸⁶ While the Biden administration in its first year did not view the relationship with China that starkly, it nonetheless has acknowledged that the United States is engaged in an intense strategic competition with China.⁸⁷ In many respects, China is a tougher rival for the United States than the Soviet Union was, and the United States must counter the threats that China poses in conjunction with its allies and partners, just as it did against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. China's trident strategy in the ECS, SCS, and Indian Ocean has worked well so far. ASCEL in the ECS has created a defense line that can frustrate USN forces approaching from the east; an emerging submarine sanctuary area in the SCS would strengthen China's credible nuclear-retaliation capability; and an Indian Ocean support area would enable China to conduct sea-denial operations with its naval presence.

Alan Dupont, an Australian strategist, warns that the escalation of global competition between the United States and China already constitutes a new cold war and that the United States is disadvantaged in this new competition because of the two countries' deep economic interdependence.⁸⁸ But even if China possesses advantages that the Soviet Union lacked, and therefore poses some tougher challenges to the United States, comparison of China's and the Soviet Union's naval strategies offers both useful insight and warning. China's similar ambition to surge into regional power vacuums is both a challenge and an opportunity for the United States and its partners. But if in this new strategic competition the United States pursues blind engagement with China and ignores those vacuums, it may end up in a position from which it will be unable to recover.

NOTES

The contents of this paper reflect the author's personal views and are not endorsed by the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force or the Japanese government.

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