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China and the Asia-Pacific Region: Geostrategic Relations and a Return to a Naval Dimension

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Abstract

The thesis examines China's geostrategic relations with Asia-Pacific countries with special reference to its naval ambitions toward the region. The study initially explores the role of a naval force as a nation's tool for protecting commercial shipping and fisheries, safeguarding sovereignty of offshore islands and resources, and as a complement to diplomatic activities and force projection in the outside world. The thesis concentrates especially on the People's Republic of China (PRC)'s apparent intention to expand its maritime influence into the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean by putting pressure on the security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) from the Gulf to the nations of East Asia. The thesis argues that, although China was a world-class maritime power by the mid-fifteenth century, it was intruded upon, and subsequently politically humiliated, by Western and Japanese invaders, who, ironically used the sea to achieve this in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After its foundation in 1949, the PRC attempted to overcome these humiliations by employing Mao Zedong's 'people's war' strategy, and this was developed as a fundamental military doctrine until the emergence of Deng Xiaoping as supreme leader in 1979. In geopolitical terms, the PRC's strategic environment has begun to transform after the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Since then, the PRC's fear of major land border wars has been significantly diminished and replaced by sea challenges. Moreover, considerations of security on regional SLOCs have become more urgent for China, as it became a major exporter of manufactured goods and a net oil importer after 1993, requiring that its southwestern approaches are kept open and safe. The thesis explores the proposition that in this process, China could become a great regional sea power of sufficient scope to cause problems to the security and economy of regional countries as well as to the United States (US) for its trade and force projection in the event of crisis in the Gulf or elsewhere. The study further considers how China's naval challenge to regional waterways might develop, and, finally, suggests which policy options are open to regional powers (including the United States) in furthering their own interests, but at the same time maintaining a critical level of peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region in the new century.

Table of Contents

Abstract -----	i
Acknowledgments -----	ii
Thesis Submission Statement -----	iv
Table of Contents -----	v
List of Tables and Figures -----	viii
Abbreviations and Acronyms -----	ix

Introduction

An Overview of the Study	1
Methodology	5
The Structure of the Thesis	6

Chapter One Sea Power and the World

1.1 The Ocean and Humankind	8
1.2 Ancient Sea Power States	10
1.3 The Evolution of Modern Sea Power	
1.3.1 European Sea Powers and the Division of the Globe	12
1.3.2 The Emergence of the United States Navy	18
1.3.3 Asian Sea Powers	21
1.4 The Nature of Naval Power Today	25

Chapter Two Chinese Sea Power and the Century of Humiliation

2.1 Origins of China's Sea Power	29
2.2 Ming Dynasty's Ambitious Sea Adventure	32
2.3 Western and Japanese Naval Challenges	37

Chapter Three China's Emerging Sea Power in the PRC Period

3.1 China's National Defence Policy since 1949	48
3.1.1 Force Balance	56
3.1.2 Research and Development (R&D)	57
3.1.3 Arms Sales and Procurement	60
3.1.4 Regional and Global Strategy	63
3.2 Shaping and Evolution of the China's Navy	
3.2.1 Force Structure of the China's Armed Forces	66
3.2.2 Evolution of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN)	67
3.3 The PLA in the Post-Deng Era	77

Chapter Four

China's Expanding Maritime Sphere of Influence in the Western Pacific and the Indian Ocean

4.1 China's Navy and Its Threat Perception	82
4.2 The South China Sea	86
4.3 China's Intention to Expand Its Maritime Influence into the Indian Ocean Region	92
4.4 China and Southeast Asian Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs)	
4.4.1 The Role of the Southeast Asian SLOCs	103
4.4.2 China's Economic Interest in the Region	110
4.4.3 China's Political and Military Ambitions in the Strait of Malacca	114

Chapter Five

Southeast Asia: A Gateway to China's Maritime Expansion

5.1 Southeast Asian Nations and China	119
5.2 Southeast Asian Nations' Interests in the Regional SLOCs	126
5.3 Southeast Asian Nations' Responses to China's Naval Challenge	131
5.4 Region's Institutional Responses to China's Naval Resurgence	133

Chapter Six

Russia and India: China's Immediate Competitors

6.1 Overview of China's Relations with Russia and India	139
6.2 Russia: The Rise and Fall of a Superpower	
6.2.1 The Sino-Russian Relationship	141
6.2.2 Arms Sales and Military Cooperation	150
6.2.3 Sino-Russian Sea Challenges: Rivals or Partners?	153
6.3 India: China's Everlasting Contestant	
6.3.1 The Sino-Indian Relationship	156
6.3.2 India's Nuclear Option and Its Implications for China	160
6.3.3 Naval Rivalry between China and India	161

Chapter Seven
Japan and the Republic of Korea (ROK): China's Competitive Neighbours

7.1 Overview of China's Relations with Japan and the ROK	166
7.2 Japan and China	
7.2.1 Japan's Maritime Interest in the Regional SLOCs	170
7.2.2 Japan's Options to the Chinese Naval Challenge in the Region	174
7.3 Korea and China	
7.3.1 Korea's Maritime Interest in the Regional SLOCs	180
7.3.2 Korea's Option to the Chinese Naval Challenge in the Region	181

Chapter Eight
The United States: China's Strategic Competitor

8.1 History of the Sino-US Relationship	
8.1.1 Overview	186
8.1.2 The Taiwan Issue	191
8.2 The United States and the Asia-Pacific Regional Countries	
8.2.1 Overview of US Relations with Regional Countries	197
8.2.2 Sino-US Naval Rivalry in the Asia-Pacific Regional SLOCs	208
8.3 Recent Controversies Between China and the United States	213
8.4 The United States' Policy Choices toward China	
8.4.1 Engagement Policy	217
8.4.2 Containment Policy	218
8.4.3 Constructive Engagement	220

Conclusion	223
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Bibliography	227
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