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On Chinese Maritime Ambitions

China's Maritime Ambitions

Implications for U.S. Regional Interests

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China wants to become a 'maritime great power,' a term Chinese President Xi Jinping uses as part of his national revitalization rhetoric.¹ To this end, China is building a blue-water navy that can control its near seas, fight and win regional wars, and protect its vital sea lanes and its many political and economic interests beyond East Asia. But whether in the near or far seas, China's ambitions engage U.S. interests.

Therefore, in this testimony, I will focus on China's approach to the near seas—the South China Sea (SCS) and the East China Sea (ECS) —and touch upon its intentions in the Indian Ocean. But first, I would like to lay out a few thoughts about how to conceptualize ambition more generally. This may seem academic, but I believe a rigorous framework is crucial for understanding the nuances of China's ambitions and devising effective U.S. strategic responses.

Using this framework, I come to two main conclusions: 1) China's ambitions are different in the SCS and ECS than in the Indian Ocean and beyond. For the near seas, China is concerned with sovereignty and regional hegemony; for the far seas, it is concerned with protecting the sources of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) domestic legitimacy such as economic growth, guarding against external political pressure, and protection Chinese nationals. But all of its ambitions are about competition with the United States. 2) China's objectives in the SCS and ECS are detrimental to U.S. interests, but its methods are problematic mainly because they are effective and difficult to counter. In contrast, in the Indian Ocean and beyond, there are aspects of China's current objectives that are legitimate and do not necessarily threaten U.S. interests. But its methods are undermining democratic principles and sustainable growth. Moreover, there is the risk that China could change its strategy to disrupt freedom of navigation as its capabilities evolve.

A framework for understanding China's intentions

To understand which aspects of China's maritime ambitions are problematic for the United States, it is useful to think about processes and objectives separately. For the process, what are China's preferred methods for achieving its maritime goals? Objectives refer to "what one wants to bring about, accomplish or attain."² To foreshadow the discussion that follows, sometimes the challenge is not what China wants, but how it is trying to obtain it; sometimes, the main issue is China's ultimate goal regardless of the national toolkit it uses to achieve that goal.

To assess what China is trying to achieve in the maritime domain and how it plans to do so, I look at national discourse, China's military capabilities, and its behavior. Because states deliberately implement plans to pursue specific objectives, it is theoretically possible to decipher current ambitions. Current ambitions refer to what the leadership has already decided it wants to achieve in the future – this is the focus of my testimony. This is not to say we should not care about future ambitions, but given limited resources, the United States needs to address China's current ambitions first and foremost. Moreover, knowing China's current ambitions provides insight into future ambitions as well. First, current intentions may be the same as future intentions; bureaucratic and political inertia makes continuity the norm.

Moreover, rising powers have likely taken into account projections of future power when devising current ambitions. If China does change its maritime ambitions, the direction and nature will reflect the aspects of the current intentions that have produced results, any negative consequences, and any socially and politically viable replacement ideas for intentions that have not produced results.³

Lastly, we can shape China's ambitions. Those who say we cannot tend to focus on past efforts to change China's conception of its interests, mainly through positive inducement and the power of persuasion. I agree that this strategy is likely to fail. However, the United States has shaped China's goals and the ways it achieves them through the power of deterrence; the Chinese military considers the U.S. military response first and foremost. This is why Beijing has yet to attempt to reunify with Taiwan by force. This success shows that ambition is not entirely separate from opportunity or costs. Unsurprisingly, China is more aggressive against weaker countries, hence its recent skirmish with India and its harassment of Vietnamese and Malaysian vessels in the South China Sea. But China may pursue a policy because it is relatively costless, which means that if the United States imposes costs, Beijing may change its mind about the extent of its objectives.

The Near Seas: The East China Sea and the South China Sea

China's ambitions in its near seas pose the greatest threat to the interests and security of the United States and its allies. China considers the ECS and the majority of the SCS to be an inalienable part of its territory. China does not accept or respect Japan's sovereignty claims in the former case, or Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, or Vietnam in the latter. In China's ideal world, Beijing would enjoy sovereignty, meaning absolute control and monopoly over the use of force, in these waters. This would entail the exclusion of the U.S. military from the first island chain, which might involve the abrogation of our treaties and obligations to Japan, the Philippines, and Taiwan since we would no longer be able to defend them.

But in the short term, China realizes that these goals are unrealistic. Its current ambitions are best understood as establishing sovereignty over the disputed islands (Senkaku/Diaoyu in the ECS; Paracels and Spratlys in the SCS) and gaining the power to dictate the rules and regulate all activities in the surrounding waters, meaning that countries would have to obtain Chinese permission to operate there.⁴ In other words, the issue is not the sovereignty of the islands, but China's position on the maritime rights such sovereignty would confer in the surrounding waters.

The first step in the East China Sea case is for China to coerce Japan into acknowledging the existence of a dispute and undermine Japan's unilateral administration of the islands recognized by the United States.⁵ China believes control of the East China Sea to be paramount for several reasons; the waters are rich in oil and fishing resources, the sea serves as China's entrance into the Pacific Ocean and the frontline of China's national defense, and Beijing believes that acceding to Japan would embolden Tokyo and the U.S.⁶

While there has been a lull in aggressive Chinese activities in the East China Sea since 2016, an uptick in PLA exercises in the area indicates that the stability of the peacetime competition between China and Japan may be coming to an end.⁷ On June 18, 2020, China set a new record

for the number of consecutive days (66) its government vessels had been spotted in waters near the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea.⁸ Additionally, on June 22, the Ishigaki City Council in Okinawa Prefecture voted in favor of legislation that changes the name of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea for administrative purposes from “Tonoshiro” to “Tonoshiro Senkaku” in order to avoid confusion with another region governed by Ishigaki.⁹ The decision elicited sharp criticism from China, which characterized the legislation as a flagrant provocation and an attempt to change the status quo.¹⁰ From the U.S. perspective, Japanese claims over the Senkakus are less worrisome because Tokyo does not believe its potential sovereignty over the islands implies exclusive Japanese control over the whole ECS.

China hopes to enjoy military dominance in these waters first and foremost to ensure that it would prevail in any conflict across the Taiwan Strait and to ensure that it would prevail against Japan even if the United States intervened. This is an essential consideration since territorial disputes are the primary cause of interstate conflict (approximately 80% of wars from 1648 to 1990 were fought over territorial-related disputes).¹¹ Chinese aggression toward Taiwan has increased since Xi Jinping’s 2020 New Year’s Day speech in which he called for concrete progress towards reunification. Recently, the Chinese media described the USS *Russell*’s passage through the Taiwan Strait in early June as “an attempt to provoke the Chinese mainland.”¹² Several days later, PLA fighter jets followed the flight of a U.S. transport plane over Taiwan, crossing the median line in the Taiwan Strait. The PLA also held several military exercises this spring, including live-fire and landing drills believed to be a warning to Taiwan.¹³ But in the near term, the most pressing danger regarding China’s naval modernization is not full-scale war, but rather China’s ability to coerce its opponents in its favor.¹⁴

Tensions in the South China Sea have also increased in recent months with China’s establishment in April of two new administrative districts that supposedly have authority over disputed islands in the South China Sea.¹⁵ In April, a Chinese maritime surveillance vessel sank a Vietnamese fishing vessel near the Paracel Islands, indicating China’s willingness to use force to defend its territorial claims.¹⁶ But the threat to U.S. interests goes beyond China’s actions against countries in the region, including the U.S. ally, the Philippines. China’s claim to exclusive control over the waters of SCS and the military installations on the islands pose a direct military threat to the United States.

China’s maritime ambitions in the East China Sea and the South China Sea are detrimental to U.S. and allied interests, mostly because of China’s ultimate objectives of control and dominance. But China has rarely relied on military coercion to achieve its goals; instead, Beijing prefers to employ positive inducements, nonmilitary tools (economic, legal, political), and gray-zone activities.

In one of the best-known cases, Chinese economic coercion was employed against Japan after a Chinese ship collided with two Japanese coast guard vessels during a regular fishing trip near the disputed Senkaku Islands, and the Japanese coast guard arrested the Chinese fishing trawler. In response, China halted the export of rare earth minerals (at the time China produced 93% of the world’s rare earth minerals), which were needed for Japanese products like hybrid cars, wind turbines, and guided missiles.¹⁷ China also employed a “diplomatic effort to coerce and ostracize Tokyo, including a unilateral freeze on high-level bilateral diplomacy with Japan for over two

years and a global campaign to present Japan as a revisionist power.”¹⁸

Though the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is undoubtedly trying to create a single community with a unanimous policy response vis-à-vis China, Beijing's strong economic presence drives its member states apart. While Vietnam stands as the most adamant challenger of China's claim in the South China Sea, Thailand and Malaysia have adopted a "play-it-safe" approach. The Philippines has shown a greater affinity for China under the leadership of President Duterte. Countries like Cambodia, China's closest partner within ASEAN, have sided with China in territorial disputes in exchange for loans and aid from Beijing.¹⁹ China frequently uses promises of economic assistance—often in the form of infrastructure investment through its Belt and Road Initiative—to shape countries' behavior. Recipient countries are effectively prevented from publicly opposing Chinese actions, as they risk losing their loans.²⁰

In the South China Sea, China has also been negotiating a code of conduct (COC) with ASEAN members for over two decades to manage the South China Sea disputes.²¹ Since 2016, a new round of discussion on a potential COC has gained momentum, and China has expressed a new enthusiasm for reaching an agreement with ASEAN states.²² However, Beijing's change in its attitude does not reflect a recalibration of its goals and interests, as China will not yield its claim to the entirety of the South China Sea. Whereas the ASEAN states hope that the COC will serve as a binding mechanism for dispute resolution, China sees it as a non-binding instrument to build regional trust.²³

China also tries to shape the narrative about its maritime ambitions, claiming they are purely defensive. China is looking to secure its energy supplies—80% of its crude oil and one-third of global shipping²⁴ (which comprises the majority of China's trade flows) routes through the South China Sea.²⁵ Also, many of the assets deployed to China's artificial islands—such as advanced sensors and air defense systems—are defensive in orientation. In 2018, China added anti-ship cruise missiles and surface-to-air missile systems to Fiery Cross Reef, Subi Reef, and Mischief Reef near the Spratlys but insisted the move was defensive: “Those who do not intend to be aggressive have no need to be worried or scared,” claimed ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying when commenting on the installation.²⁶

These 'defensive' motivations are still highly problematic for three reasons. First, the South China Sea is not China's to defend. Second, China's claim that it is not expanding to gain this territory but instead fighting not to lose it is dangerous because it encourages risk-acceptant behavior.²⁷ Third, China wants foreign powers out of the first island chain to create a defensive buffer. If China is successful, the United States will have difficulty conducting anti-surface, anti-submarine, and anti-air operations against China during a conflict. China wants to undermine U.S. deterrence against it to use force against Taiwan, for example, at a lower cost with a higher probability of success. In other words, China wants to minimize other countries' abilities, especially the United States, to counter Chinese aggression in the region.

China also uses gray-zone tactics, which are activities that allow a country to stay below the threshold of overt military action to secure gains without provoking military responses by others. China relies mainly on its Coast Guard and maritime militia to advance its aims because they are effective, low-cost, and less likely to prompt a strong response.²⁸ The construction of artificial

islands at Mischief, Fiery Cross, and Subi Reefs have provided China with increased territory in the South China Sea and created a platform on which to base missiles and surveillance technologies without sparking a strong U.S. reaction.

Lastly, China attempts to create the guise of legitimacy for its maritime ambitions through the manipulation and misapplication of international law. For example, in the East China Sea, China established an air defense identification zone (ADIZ) in 2013, the boundaries of which overlap with existing ADIZs belonging to Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.²⁹ Similarly, Beijing may be planning to establish a South China Sea ADIZ, which sources claim would include several disputed islands.³⁰ Below is a summary of China’s abuse of international law through which China claims approximately 80% of the South China Sea as its territory.

Table #1: Chinese Lawfare in the South China Sea

China	International Law, Norms
Waters between islands and features internal waters; commercial transit requires PRC permission (claimed explicitly for Paracels)	Only very few island nations considered archipelagos have right to treat islands as a group; does not apply to disputed SCS islands
Territorial sea of 12 N.M. measured from outer perimeter of island groups; artificial islands, most features get a territorial sea	Territorial sea measured from each island; most PRC-claimed features do not meet standard for any rights under int'l law
Can regulate military activity within EEZ	Can only regulate economic activity there
Claims rights to “Historic Waters” within nine-dash line	“Historic waters” meaning unclear but has no legal basis, confers no rights

The Far Seas: The Indian Ocean and beyond

While China prioritizes achieving sovereignty in the SCS and ECS, under Xi Jinping, its maritime ambitions have extended beyond the immediate region. For the first time, the 2019 defense white paper called for transforming the Chinese navy from a near seas defense navy (近海防御型) to a far seas protection navy (远海防卫型), designated maritime interests as important as territorial integrity, and it highlighted maritime territorial disputes and cross-Strait tension as the most significant challenges to China’s sovereignty.³¹

Currently, China aims to operate in the Indian Ocean and beyond, but it does not aspire to prevent others from doing so as it does in the near seas. In these waters, China's ambitions are driven primarily by the desire to protect its strategic lines of communication and its economic and political interests.³² In 2010, over fourteen thousand Chinese firms were operating overseas.³³ In 2016, more than two million Chinese nationals worked overseas³⁴ and in 2019 alone, more than 166 million Chinese nationals ventured abroad for tourism. With the advent of Xi's signature strategy of "One Belt, One Road," Chinese maritime ambitions extended to the

Mediterranean as part of its component Maritime Silk Road.³⁵ Additionally, roughly 80% of China's oil imports passed through the Strait of Malacca.³⁶ Chinese leaders believe that the United States may seek to cut off their access to the Strait as a coercive measure, especially during a conflict.³⁷ China has tried to resolve the dilemma in several ways, including with the China-Myanmar pipeline, building the Kra Canal, which would circumvent the Strait of Malacca and by developing the naval capabilities necessary to protect its maritime trade routes.

While Chinese ambitions and capabilities are more limited in the far seas, they are not without risks and challenges. Because of this increased focus on 'far seas protection,' China is outfitting its fleet with longer-range air defenses, aircraft carriers, and larger ships that allow greater endurance away from home ports.³⁸ This creates a need for access to ports for logistical support like resupply and maintenance throughout the Indian Ocean Region, including along the east coast of Africa.³⁹ Experts currently point to Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Israel, and Cambodia as host nations for future Chinese bases (China has presently one overseas base in Djibouti).

China's attempts to gain such access are undermining stability, democratic norms, and sound economic development. Many of the countries involved in the Maritime Silk Road have high levels of corruption and low levels of democracy. Although China implemented an anti-foreign bribery law in 2011, it has shown minimal interest in enforcing compliance by its companies operating overseas.⁴⁰ This attitude increases local corruption and has led to negative perceptions and even political backlash among recipient country populations.⁴¹ Most of China's investments in the BRI involve loans rather than grants, and many of the countries receiving these loans lack the technical capacity to assess their repayment ability. Beijing's willingness to ignore debt sustainability standards, which generally serve as guardrails for investors and recipient countries, exacerbates this problem.⁴² In one example, Sri Lanka leased Hambantota port to Beijing for 99 years to repay China for an over \$1 billion loan for the port's development; China now holds over 70% of Djibouti's gross domestic product in debt.⁴³

Second, there are evolving aspects of China's activities in the Indian Ocean against which the United States needs to protect. China could use its greater access to the region to collect intelligence on the United States to support operations in regional contingencies like Taiwan, and to develop the ability to meaningfully hold at risk U.S. assets in these waters in the event of a wider conflict.⁴⁴ Also, while China does not want to restrict other countries' peacetime access to the Indian Ocean, it may start relying more heavily on coercion to achieve its objectives in this region, including military pressure, especially against India, with which China has a land dispute.

But unlike the near seas, the United States enjoys a decisive military advantage over China in the far seas, which currently deters Chinese aggression against U.S. partners and allies in this area of operations. Additionally, China's ambition is more limited and flexible in the Indian Ocean. As Indo-Pacific security expert Arzan Tarapore argues, China's military presence in the Indian Ocean region poses strategic risks rather than the acute strategic threat that they represent in China's near seas:

In the Indian Ocean, where China is not engaged in territorial disputes, its posture and behavior may pose more amorphous dangers, emerging and receding aperiodically, with varying severity. There are no clear and constant targets of Chinese aggression, and no

sustained Chinese campaign against a designated adversary, but a range of actors with a range of interests that are vulnerable, and perhaps only incidentally, to Chinese action.⁴⁵

Implications for U.S. Policy

China's desire to exercise absolute control over the SCS and ECS to exclude other countries threatens freedom of navigation and deterrence. It could also cause a major war if other countries do not acquiesce to China's position. In contrast, China's maritime ambitions in the Indian Ocean and beyond are more limited: it wants to be able to routinely operate in these waters, effectively respond to non-traditional security threats in peacetime, and protect its trade and energy routes against a blockade. The main missions China is currently planning for in the Indian Ocean region include non-combatant evacuation operations, humanitarian relief operations, counterblockade, and potentially coercive diplomacy campaigns, though on a limited scale.

While China's maritime ambitions are problematic in both the near and far seas, U.S. policy needs to consider these differences in the degree of threat and risk. Specifically, Washington needs to 1) prioritize countering Chinese ambitions in the South China Sea and the East China Sea and 2) take a hardline risk-acceptant approach to countering China in the near seas, but 3) devise a hedging strategy in the Indian Ocean. This would include cooperation with China in the Indian Ocean to address non-traditional security threats while also preparing to respond strongly if China's ambitions there change, or China begins to employ its newfound far seas capabilities for coercive purposes routinely.

There is more flexibility in China's Indian Ocean strategy because sovereignty is not at stake. If the United States hopes to encourage Beijing to pursue its interests in a way that supports regional stability and sustainable development, Washington needs to articulate the appropriate and acceptable means of doing so clearly. In 2016, I outlined four ways Beijing could use its expeditionary capabilities to protect its interests, depending on the degree to which China is directly targeted and the international community's receptivity to a more significant Chinese role. The best outcome for the U.S. is a China that acts as a team player and contributes to multilateral operations even when its interests are peripherally threatened. When Chinese interests abroad are targeted, and the U.S. does not have interests at stake, Washington should still try to shape China's actions to minimize the potential fallout from Chinese operations.⁴⁶ For now, China's goals in the Indian Ocean do not diverge widely from those of the United States, which creates a rare opportunity for consultation and collaboration between the two capitals.

China's maritime ambitions in the far seas could evolve in troubling ways. The United States should remain vigilant and agile so that we can change our strategic approach if necessary. But given limited resources, U.S. military dominance beyond the first island chain, and the more significant threat Chinese near seas ambitions pose, the United States should prioritize countering China in the SCS and ECS. This requires a principled hardline response. The United States needs to maintain its ability to operate in these waters to deter Chinese aggression and maintain regional peace and stability. Therefore, undermining Chinese maritime ambitions in these waters needs to be a top priority. The United States could expand and increase the tempo of its military operations in the South China Sea. U.S. military operations should extend beyond FONOPs to include escorting fishing vessels and oil exploration platforms for allies and partners

when assistance is requested, potentially even specifying that U.S. alliance commitments extend to EEZ protection.

To increase the costs associated with gray-zone activities, the U.S. president could also state in a major policy speech that the activation of mutual defense obligations could be triggered by any event threatening the safety of Philippine forces, aircraft, or public vessels in the South China Sea. To further increase costs to China, the United States could warn Beijing that it may reconsider its neutral position on the sovereignty of the SCS and ECS disputed islands to support claimants with less expansive and restrictive EEZ claims. In the meantime, the United States should respond immediately to each aggressive act China takes in these waters, *regardless of its target*. The Chinese assets or organizations involved should not determine the response; instead, the United States should respond to the Chinese coast guard and maritime militia vessels in the same way it would to a Chinese navy ship. Moreover, the United States should be sure to respond even when a treaty ally is not involved—this would stress that the United States is serious about protecting international norms, regardless of who the transgressors are and what the violation is. While the United States does not take a position on the sovereignty of the Paracels, Spratlys or Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, Washington is clearly against China's position that such sovereignty grants them rights of control to most of the South China Sea and the East China Sea, a position none of the other claimants share.

To reconstitute our deterrent, the United States should seek military access to new partner facilities in the South China Sea. Countries in the region would face political difficulties if they granted access to the U.S. military, but a crisis or conflict could make it more feasible. It would be beneficial for the United States to reach agreements with claimants that allow U.S. forces to visit or rotate through strategic islands in the South China Sea. The United States should also improve the quality of other claimants' maritime reconnaissance and surveillance capabilities and build their defensive capabilities.

Lastly, the United States should spearhead and prioritize a diplomatic solution to the South China Sea disputes, with or without China. Countries in the region disagree with China's interpretation of international law (see Table 1). If the rest of the claimants agree about the islands' sovereignty and the rights granted by those islands and ask the international community to help enforce the agreement, China will have difficulty pushing its claims and pressuring states unilaterally to concede to its demands. If Beijing refuses to follow these rules, Washington should form a coalition to restrict China's access to technology and related information broadly. Washington should even threaten to expel Beijing from the relevant international regimes.

The most effective U.S. strategy should combine diplomatic initiatives with a robust deterrent posture in the region. For any of these initiatives to succeed, however, the United States will need a lasting strategy to deter China's aggression, respond if a confrontation does occur, and, if necessary, defeat China in a military conflict. Success will require bipartisan consensus and an agreement that maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific is genuinely critical to U.S. national interests. The United States has made some progress in this regard, but given the extent of China's maritime ambitions, it is not yet enough.

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