



The Chinese navy: From minnow to shark

By Dr Kevin Rowlands and Dr Edward Hampshire

Throughout its long history, China has had a continentalist outlook. With the exception of a few short-lived forays into the Pacific and Indian Oceans centuries ago, it has never been a so-called 'seapower state'.¹ Its vast territory, huge population, and sometimes difficult and porous borders have encouraged earlier Chinese governments to look within rather than without.² Yet, over the past several decades an extraordinary change has occurred: internal development and economic growth have combined with globalisation, fuelling Chinese maritime ambitions. A distinct Chinese navy has emerged from the shadow of the People's Liberation Army (PLA); naval modernisation programmes have taken place at a pace that liberal democracies can only look on with incredulity; and the PLA Navy (PLAN) now challenges the United States (US) Navy to be the leading navy in East Asia.

The purpose of this Explainer is to shine a light on the evolution of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) maritime strategy while also outlining how

¹ Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Made the Modern World* (New Haven, Massachusetts: Yale University Press, 2018).

² Jakub J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 123–164.



the PLAN has grown and modernised. It also seeks to assess the geostrategic implications of these developments for the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Chinese naval geostrategy in a nutshell

Perhaps the simplest way to understand Chinese naval strategy is to consider it in terms of maritime geography. Picture an admiral from the PLAN standing on the Chinese coast, near Shanghai, and gazing out to sea. As Map 1 shows, if their eyes were good enough the view would not be of the open ocean leading to untold opportunities that a counterpart in San Francisco or New York would see. Rather, the Chinese admiral would notice a series of arcs of concentric circles controlled by others – especially Japan, Taiwan and the US – forming natural barriers to hem the PRC in. They are the maritime equivalent of mountain chains or major rivers with their accompanying passes and crossings. These barriers are, of course, the infamous First, Second, and Third island chains.³ The first of these island chains stretches from Kyushu in Japan to South Sumatra in Indonesia via the islands of Luzon and Palawan in the Philippines. The second runs from Honshu in Japan to New Guinea via Guam. And the third chain stretches from the Fox Islands in Alaska to North Island in New Zealand. In addition, there is the ‘Malacca Dilemma’, by which a significant proportion of China’s maritime trade must transit the Strait of Malacca between Singapore and Indonesia or the Sunda Strait, potentially leaving it open to blockade by a hostile power – a crucial and worrying point of vulnerability for the PRC’s leaders.⁴

Why is this encirclement of significance when the PRC has the world’s largest industrial economy and long land borders with other major states such as Russia and India? It is because the PRC is dependent on maritime transport – much cheaper tonne-for-tonne than air, road or rail – for its essential imports and exports. It is the world’s second largest consumer of oil and third largest consumer of natural gas, but unlike other big fossil fuel users such as the US and Russia, it produces little itself and therefore imports enormous quantities each year.⁵ Three pipelines supply oil from Russia, Kazakhstan and Myanmar, but these only deliver a relatively small proportion of the total needed to support the

³ Andrew Erickson and Joel Wuthrow, ‘Barriers, Springboards and Benchmarks: China conceptualises the Pacific “Island Chains”’, *The China Quarterly*, 225 (2016), pp. 1–22.

⁴ Ian Storey, ‘China’s “Malacca Dilemma”’, Jamestown Foundation, 12/04/2006, <http://bit.ly/3GJKzIu> (checked: 01/12/2022).

⁵ ‘BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2022, 71st edition’, British Petroleum, 29/06/2022, <http://bit.ly/3tv207u> (checked: 01/12/2022).



Map 1: The PRC's maritime perspective





Chinese economy.⁶ There are also three gas pipelines that come into the PRC: one from Russia, one from Turkmenistan (via Kazakhstan) and one from Myanmar, but their total capacity provides less than 60% of Chinese requirements. For the foreseeable future, the PRC will continue to rely on the sea for its prodigious demand for energy.⁷

The PRC is not self-sufficient when it comes to feeding its population, either. Although it is one of the world's leading rice exporters, the PRC has a lower acreage of land per person than both the US and India, and with much contaminated land and environmental damage, it has very low agricultural sustainability coupled with low public trust in some Chinese-produced food products.⁸ The PRC runs a significant food trade deficit, and in 2020 imported nearly US\$160 billion (£130.8 billion) of food, well above its exports of US\$70 billion (£57.2 billion).⁹ It is also the world's largest exporter of merchandise, accounting for almost 15% of the world's total in 2020, with an equivalent value of US\$2.6 trillion (£2.1 trillion).¹⁰ In short, without the ability to import and export goods and commodities by sea, the PRC would soon be on its knees economically. For a state that has historically been averse to working within alliances or building trust with its neighbours, it is not surprising that the PRC's foreign and defence policy has increasingly focused on securing its sea lines of communication. Those lines, of course, are largely controlled by others under 'Western' rules.

Phases of Chinese naval expansion

Playing the long game, and keeping to it with remarkable consistency, the PRC's broad strategy has been to push out from its coast in stages, using the island chains as geographical markers of progress. Adm. Liu Huaqing (1916–2011), the so-called 'father of the PLAN', envisaged a three-step process but it is perhaps easier to consider the entirety of the maritime expansion in four broad phases:¹¹

⁶ Carol Zu, 'Russia crude oil pipeline capabilities to mainland China – The ESPO crude oil pipeline', S and P Global, 01/04/2022, <http://bit.ly/3GeALWl> (checked: 01/12/2022).

⁷ Ankita Chauhan and Logan Reese, 'Asia Pacific Regional Integrated Energy Service research highlights, Q2 2022', S and P Global, 19/07/2022, <http://bit.ly/3O85oib> (checked: 01/12/2022).

⁸ 'How is China Feeding its Population of 1.4 Billion?', China Power, 25/01/2017 (last updated: 16/08/2022), <http://bit.ly/3WXiBOW> (checked: 01/12/2022).

⁹ 'World Trade Statistical Review 2021', World Bank, 29/07/2021, <http://bit.ly/3EwRG5y> (checked: 01/12/2022), p. 70.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

¹¹ Office of Naval Intelligence (United States), *The People's Liberation Army Navy: A Modern Navy with Chinese Characteristics* (United States: Office of Naval Intelligence, 2009), pp. 5–6.



- **Phase 1 (1949–1982):** From the founding of the PRC in 1949, through the Korean War, the early Cold War, the Cultural Revolution, and up until 1982, the PLAN's purpose was to provide coastal defence. The navy was subordinate to the army (hence the name) in political terms and in terms of the chain of command, and was optimised for littoral operations in well-understood waters. It supported land operations and consisted of a large number of relatively small and unsophisticated ships and submarines.
- **Phase 2 (1982–c. 2000):** This was when Adm. Liu's long term plan for growth really began and Chinese naval strategy shifted from coastal to offshore defence. The slowly modernising PLAN started to push out to the First Island Chain, extending its reach into the East and South China seas, but not yet the open ocean. As the PLAN matured in the 1990s, it sought to develop its capabilities to fight 'local wars under high-tech conditions', emphasising 'informationisation', the effective use of networked command and control, electronic warfare, cyber and space.¹² It also pursued 'non-contact warfare', the use of long-range weaponry to defeat adversaries at greater range.¹³ The 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, when the PRC used missile launches and naval manoeuvres to intimidate Taiwan, occurred during this phase.¹⁴ The PLAN was becoming more visible but was not yet a serious concern.
- **Phase 3 (c. 2000–c. 2020):** Whilst continuing to consolidate its position in 'home waters' – particularly with the establishment of the China Coast Guard in 2013 and its transfer to the Central Military Commission in 2018 – the next stage saw a steady shift to a concept of distant sea defence, whereby the PLAN would project naval power out to the Second Island Chain and occasionally beyond. It sought to defend and protect Chinese interests, and as its maritime muscles were flexed, tensions with other regional actors increased. Anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) measures were put in place and coercive diplomacy over the so-called 'Nine-dash line', competing claims over the Senkaku (or Diaoyu or Diaoyutai) islands, the reclamation, occupation and construction of artificial islands on low tide elevations, and harassment of American and allied warships became hallmarks of the period. Further afield, the PLAN also embarked on counter-piracy patrols off Somalia and dispatched occasional task groups

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Douglas Porch, 'The Taiwan Strait Crisis of 1996', *US Naval War College Review*, 52:3 (1999).



to the Persian Gulf, conducted humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations, sent a ship to Libya in 2011 to evacuate Chinese citizens during the Libyan civil war, and deployed to the Baltic in 2017 to undertake naval drills with Russia.¹⁵ The PRC was learning to operate its navy on the world stage; during this phase the PLAN also ceased to be an adjunct of the army and, from 2019, its leadership began to report directly to the Central Military Commission of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).¹⁶

- **Phase 4 (c. 2020-):** Adm. Liu's ultimate vision was for a blue-water navy, fielding ballistic submarines and aircraft carriers, dominating its region and challenging the US Navy for maritime hegemony. To this end the PLAN has already begun to construct naval stations overseas: the first was opened in Djibouti in 2017; future facilities are planned in Cambodia and reportedly even Equatorial Guinea on Africa's Atlantic coast.¹⁷ Although the PLAN is not yet able to match the US Navy (or even the Royal Navy in some cases) in terms of modern expeditionary naval power, it is no longer simply an irritant. That the PRC has developed a serious navy at breakneck speed may come as a surprise to some established sea powers, but self-evidently it has been approximately forty years in the making.

Finally, it is worth noting that throughout all phases, the PRC's seapower capabilities have not solely been in the hands of the PLAN, but are buttressed by significant additional capabilities. The Maritime Militia – effectively fully-armed fishing vessels – have played their role in ways often termed 'grey zone' operations.¹⁸ Similarly, besides flags of convenience, the PRC's merchant marine has become one of the largest in the world and its ships, by law, as with many other states, can be taken up by the PLAN in times of crisis. In short, the PRC is using the whole 'sea power of the state' to assure its interests, a concept devised by Sergey Gorshkov, an Admiral of the Fleet of the Soviet Union.¹⁹

¹⁵ 'China in Baltic navy drill with Russia', BBC News, 21/07/2017, <http://bit.ly/3ECv5o9> (checked: 01/12/2022).

¹⁶ '新时代的中国国防' ['China's National Defense in the New Era'], 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室 [The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China], 07/2019, <http://bit.ly/3hFlm7x> (checked: 01/12/2022).

¹⁷ See: Eric A. Miller, 'More Chinese Military Bases in Africa: A Question of When, Not If', *Foreign Policy*, 16/08/2022, <http://bit.ly/3hAqN7s> (checked: 01/12/2022).

¹⁸ Grey zone operations are explained in: Bonny Lin, Christina L. Garafola, Bruce McClintock et al., 'A New Framework for Understanding and Countering China's Gray Zone Tactics', RAND Corporation, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3O65abs> (checked: 01/12/2022).

¹⁹ Sergey Gorshkov, *The Seapower of the State* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1976).



Modernising a minnow

To meet the needs of its ambitious maritime strategy, the PRC has had to grow its navy in both size and sophistication. The small, primitive vessels used for coastal defence during the first phase of Chinese naval expansion are simply unsuited for deep ocean operations and deployment to the other side of the world.

Modernisation has been driven according to a long-term vision and has produced ocean-going warships. Considerable effort has also been made to reduce the PLAN's dependence on overseas technology.

Navies are not cheap. Despite the dramatic growth in naval spending needed to fund the procurement of a modern Chinese fleet to challenge the might of the US Navy, little strain seems to have been placed on the PRC's defence budget or the Chinese economy at large. This is due to rapid economic growth, particularly over the last two decades. In March 2022, the PRC announced its defence spending would grow by 7.1% in 2022, hitting CN¥1.45 trillion (US\$230 billion/£188 billion).²⁰ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Chinese defence expenditure is, however, probably somewhat higher. It calculates that Chinese military spending has grown from less than US\$10 billion (£8.2 billion) in 1990, doubling to around US\$22 billion (£18 billion) in 2000, jumping to US\$105 billion (£85.9 billion) in 2010, and hitting US\$258 billion (£211 billion) in 2020.²¹ But, during this time (except the early 1990s), it remained almost static as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). At approximately 1.8% – a little higher if various paramilitary forces (such as the China Coast Guard) are included – it is less than the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's (NATO) spending target for its member states (2% of GDP).²²

When an economy is delivering high growth year-on-year, then corresponding growth in the defence budget is fiscally sustainable – defence spending was only 5.14% of overall government spending in 2017, increasing to 5.4% in 2021.²³ The naval slice of the cake has also increased over time, from approximately 15% of the defence budget in the early 1980s to around 35% by the late 1990s, with the bulk of that going on equipment.²⁴ Given the scale of the

²⁰ Chen Zhuo, 'Defense budget proposed to grow by 7.1%, military urged to upgrade, remain resolute', Ministry of National Defence of the People's Republic of China, 05/03/2022, <http://bit.ly/3F1nnUO> (checked: 01/12/2022).

²¹ 'SIPRI Military Expenditure Database', Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3EYfDJz> (checked: 01/12/2022).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Matthew P. Funairole, 'Understanding China's 2021 Defense Budget', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 05/03/2021, <http://bit.ly/3WZu9RK> (checked: 01/12/2022).

²⁴ 'China's defence budget', *Global Security*, 2022, <http://bit.ly/3F1tVTf> (checked: 01/12/2022).



modernisation since then, the PLAN has likely seen a similar level of investment over more recent decades. If Chinese economic growth slows substantially, which is perhaps likely,²⁵ then defence spending increases would probably be curtailed, with a knock-on impact on the PLAN's future update and expansion. But that downturn has not happened yet.

Despite the relatively easy flow of money, the practicalities of modernisation and growth, and especially procurement processes, still need to be addressed. The PRC's long-term approach appears to have been effective so far and has a number of distinctive characteristics:

- There has been a shift from procuring large numbers of low-tech coastal and inshore patrol vessels towards fewer sophisticated ocean-going ships, gradually widening to the full spectrum of naval capabilities including aircraft carriers, nuclear attack submarines, ballistic missile submarines, amphibious shipping, and logistic support vessels.
- There has been a move away from dependence on foreign technology and a greater reliance on home-grown production. For instance, the first modern PLAN destroyers and frigates of the 1990s had a mix of Western and Russian equipment, but by the time the Type 52D destroyer entered service in 2014 almost all equipment was domestically sourced.²⁶
- There has been a willingness to experiment with small numbers of different types of ships during long 'development' phases before moving to a 'production' phase after the right type has been selected. This approach has allowed for greater consideration of effectiveness and value for money, and has focused on the suitability of different classes and variants before moving to mass production in considerable quantities. For example, seventeen destroyers of six different classes were completed between 1994 and 2012 ('development'), but thirty Type 54A frigates have been produced since 2008, forty-four Type 56 corvettes since 2013, and thirteen Type 52D destroyers since 2014 ('production').²⁷ The shift to 'production' has not yet occurred with nuclear submarines, aircraft carriers and cruisers, but is potentially not far away.

²⁵ George Magnus, 'The Chinese economy: Troubled times ahead', Council on Geostrategy, 05/11/2022, <http://bit.ly/3Ut6uaJ> (checked: 01/12/2022).

²⁶ Michael McDevitt, 'The Modern PLA Navy Destroyer Force: Impressive Progress in Achieving a "Far Seas" Capability', Peter Dutton and Ryan Martinson (eds.), *China's Evolving Surface Fleet* (Newport, Rhode Island: United States Navy War College, 2017), pp. 55–66.

²⁷ Edward Hampshire, 'The Rise of the Chinese Navy', *The Naval Review*, 108:4 (2020), pp. 336–343.



- In common with most established navies, the PLAN witnessed an overall reduction in personnel (until 2018 – it is now increasing again) accompanied by reforms in recruitment, training, and command and control.
- China Coast Guard ship numbers have doubled over the past decade, with a slight overall reduction in coastal and offshore patrol craft more than compensated for by larger offshore patrol vessels with helicopter hangars and logistic support ships.²⁸

These characteristics could be described as reflecting a coherent and well-resourced long-term plan to build capacity and develop capability across the maritime spectrum. Take-off from ‘development’ to ‘production’ in major surface ships clearly occurred after 2008 as series production of Type 54A frigates became apparent followed six years later by the series production of Type 52D destroyers, but it should also be noted that in many areas modernisation is still a work-in-progress. Carrier air power is still being developed with the two ships in service, Liaoning and Shandong (Type 001 and Type 002 respectively), not matching the capability of their American or British equivalents, and the third carrier, Fujian, still being fitted out. However, the PLAN could have six in-service aircraft carriers by the mid-2030s.

Nuclear submarine technology also lags behind that of the US, the United Kingdom (UK), and even Russia. The most modern Chinese nuclear attack submarines – the Type 93 – are regarded as having noise levels worse than those of the Soviet Victor III submarines, which have been in service since the late 1970s, and they are significantly inferior to contemporary Russian classes. A more sophisticated nuclear attack submarine – the Type 95 – with quieting capabilities slightly worse than the Soviet Akula class (at sea since the late 1980s) has not yet appeared in service and has suffered delays in development.

In addition, the ‘under-the-bonnet’ capabilities of the PLAN’s new surface ships have yet to be fully tested in high-intensity peer or near-peer operations, with Bernard Cole, Professor at the US National War College, stating that the PLAN ‘has yet to demonstrate the C2 [command and control] capability necessary to conduct net-centric operations successfully in the twenty-first century maritime battlespace’.²⁹ Further, Cole argues that the PLAN remains ‘marginal’ in anti-air warfare, mine countermeasures, and force integration, and

²⁸ Nan Tian and Fei Su, ‘A New Estimate of China’s Military Expenditure’, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 14/01/2021, <http://bit.ly/3AdB1kE> (checked: 01/12/2022).

²⁹ Bernard Cole, ‘What do China’s Surface Fleet Developments Suggest about its Maritime Strategy?’, Peter Dutton and Ryan Martinson (eds.), *China’s Evolving Surface Fleet* (Newport: United States Naval War College, 2017), pp. 24–25.



simply inferior to the established navies in anti-submarine warfare.³⁰ However, the PLAN is also investing heavily in uncrewed underwater and surface vessels, the first of which have begun to appear in the last few years.³¹ Although Cole and other experts acknowledge that the PLAN has rapidly developed credibility in each of these areas of naval warfare since 2000, it has not yet matched the world's most advanced navies.

Geostrategic implications of a shark

What, then, are the regional, hemispheric and global geostrategic implications of the PRC's maritime strategy and the PLAN's modernisation? No government possesses a crystal ball to see the future, but if one were to imagine a continuing trajectory out to 2040, rather than a sudden and abrupt change of course, then some simple deductions can be made. After all, the CCP has not hidden its ambitions: Beijing has published a series of Defence White Papers over the years, with the most recent appearing in 2019.³² The latest document uses more robust language than some of its predecessors, where the US stands accused of 'unilateral policies' and provoking 'international competition'.³³ But it is the naval element that is of greatest interest. The following excerpt sets the tone:

China's armed forces defend important waters, islands and reefs in the East China Sea, the South China Sea and the Yellow Sea, acquire full situation awareness of adjacent waters, conduct joint rights protection and law enforcement operations, properly handle maritime and air situations, and resolutely respond to security threats, infringements and provocations on the sea.³⁴

The references to adjacent waters, full situational awareness, law enforcement, and response to threats, infringements and provocations at sea, are telling. The

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Lyle Goldstein, 'China's Underwater Unmanned Vehicles: How They'll dominate Undersea Combat', *The National Interest*, 29/01/2022, <https://bit.ly/3ORyDGm> (checked: 01/12/2022).

³² Helpfully, Andrew Erickson, the leading American expert on Chinese military and naval affairs, has collated the various White Papers in one place, and offered some analysis of his own. See: 'Home', Andrew S. Erickson, undated, <http://bit.ly/3GenEo8> (checked: 01/12/2022).

³³ '新时代的中国国防' ['China's National Defense in the New Era'], 中华人民共和国国务院新闻办公室 [The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China], 07/2019, <http://bit.ly/3hFlm7x> (checked: 01/12/2022).

³⁴ *Ibid.*



PRC is not backing away; instead, it intends to focus more on the sea in general and on the PLAN in particular.

In keeping with the PRC's national defence aims outlined in the 2019 Defence White Paper, the geostrategic implications of the PLAN's modernisation can be grouped together in three categories: homeland defence, territorial claims, and economic prosperity:

- **Homeland defence:** It is certain that the PRC will continue to try and dominate what it considers as its own maritime backyard for the foreseeable future. It will therefore focus on consolidating coastal and offshore defence and maritime domain awareness in its own territorial waters, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), out to the First Island Chain. Increasingly sophisticated A2/AD systems and a combination of military and paramilitary means will work together to deter aggression and, perhaps, limit others' legitimate use of these waters to the greatest extent possible.
- **Territorial claims:** The PRC's most obvious claim is over Taiwan. It cannot be said with any certainty whether that claim will be pursued through entirely peaceful means (unlikely) or through direct attack on the island (highly risky for the PRC).³⁵ It is, however, likely that Chinese coercion will continue and potentially intensify. Options for the PLAN include operating in close proximity to Taiwan, staging exercises near or in Taiwan's territorial waters, harassment of other countries' navies operating nearby, and, even, interdiction of commercial traffic to and from the island (maritime blockade). The PRC's other claims, particularly in the East China Sea and the area of the South China Sea demarcated by the so-called 'Nine-dash line', could be pursued in similar fashion. It is likely that increased militarisation of the artificial islands there and coercive activity in and around the island groups that are subject to disputed sovereignty, such as the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos, will occur. This will impact on international and regional interpretation of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), and on economic exploitation of the area for natural resources such as fish, minerals, oil and gas. There will be a need for claimants and their supporters to engage in customary practice including exercising freedom of navigation and engaging in economic activity, often in the face of increasing and intense pressure from the PRC.

³⁵ For an excellent overview of PRC ambitions in relation to Taiwan, see: Charles Parton, 'Taiwan: Invasion is not likely, but deterrence remains vital', Council on Geostrategy, 06/09/2022, <http://bit.ly/3UFBLLHD> (checked: 01/12/2022).



- **Economic prosperity:** Heavily reliant on foreign trade, and hemmed in by a number of powerful countries, and the US, the PRC is extremely vulnerable to a maritime blockade. Such a blockade could be part of an American response to a Chinese blockade or invasion of Taiwan. There have been two concurrent Chinese responses to this risk: the reinforcement of the PLAN, plus the levying of a deliberate challenge to the global economic system that, since the end of the Second World War, has favoured the US and other free and open nations. Through its so-called Belt and Road Initiative, the PRC is now investing heavily beyond its shores, buying influence and currying favour. Greater engagement with the small, independent island states of the Pacific that have hitherto been hedging can be expected – they all have a vote at the UN General Assembly. For the PLAN this engagement might take the form of humanitarian assistance, joint enforcement of huge EEZs, hydrographic and meteorological surveys, and work to combat the effects of climate change. Further afield, the PLAN may undertake more patrols and forward-deploy warships to protect maritime choke points and sea lines of communication, particularly those routes to and from Africa and South America. Overseas basing will be consolidated and regions which are now less frequented by the navies of free and open nations, but remain economically essential, such as the Persian Gulf, might see a more regular Chinese naval presence. Chinese aircraft carriers will be used to project the PRC's prestige and power throughout the Indo-Pacific, even as far as the Atlantic.

Conclusion

The PLAN has been transformed, in less than thirty years, from a minnow to a shark. Given the PRC's resources and determination, countering the emerging Chinese maritime posture will be difficult, though not impossible. The UK and its allies and partners should not doubt the determination of the CCP to offset what it considers to be the PRC's greatest economic and strategic vulnerability: its dependence upon maritime trade for the expansion, proper functioning, and ultimately the survival of the Chinese economy – and consequently CCP control over the state. Conversely, this Chinese geostrategic vulnerability provides those powers supportive of an open international order with their greatest chance of ensuring success in a time of crisis – though a strategy of blockade and trade war brings major risks. Preventing such confrontation should be the priority. Thus,



the question such countries need to ask is whether their navies are strong enough and whether they can more effectively work together to dissuade the PRC from deploying the PLAN to revise Indo-Pacific geopolitics, such as initiating a major confrontation over Taiwan or pressing its maritime claims in the South China Sea.



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