



Security Nexus Perspectives

# BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE: U.S. MARITIME GRAND STRATEGY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN AND THE ARCTIC OCEAN

By Kimberley B. McCann, James A. McMullin, and Wade D. Turvold\*

*"If one day China should change her color and turn into a superpower, if she too should play the tyrant in the world, and everywhere subject others to her bullying, aggression, and exploitation, the people of the world should identify her as social-imperialism, expose it, oppose it and work together with the Chinese people to overthrow it."*

– Deng Xiaoping in a 1974 Speech to the United Nations

## Introduction

The United States, along with others who support the tenets of a free and open Pacific, must plan now for the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) expansionist activities to move beyond the South China Sea. The legitimacy of the CCP depends on a growing economy, which will cause the People's Republic of China (PRC) to explore new markets and seek to dominate resources to its North and West. As a result, the CCP's voracious appetite will soon be focused on the Indian and Arctic Ocean regions. The CCP's consistent behavior in the South China Sea demonstrates that it seeks to upend the rules-based international order in other maritime frontiers. The consequences of such behavior would be disastrous for the free and open Indo-Pacific concept.

The CCP's unlawful aggression and coercive actions during the COVID-19 global pandemic forebodingly highlight its determination to achieve its objectives at all costs. For example, the CCP recently abandoned its promises regarding Hong Kong by enacting security measures that effectively outlaw dissent and subject Hong Kong's citizens to mainland China's prosecution.<sup>1</sup> China also enacted trade barriers to Australia for challenging the PRC's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, China was recently accused of implementing forced sterilization of its minority Muslim populations. Finally, and perhaps most alarming, India asserts that China instigated the June 2020 border clash with India in the Galwan Valley that resulted in the death of 20 Indian soldiers.<sup>2</sup>

---

\*Capt. Kimberly McCann, Capt. James McMullin and Prof. Wade Turvold are professors at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies. The views expressed in this article are the author's alone, and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the DKI APCSS or the United States Government.

With the CCP's errant behavior in mind, the United States must challenge China's expansive maritime strategy, which will grow from a focus in the South China Sea to a focus in the Indian and Arctic Oceans. The CCP's consistently belligerent and overreaching behavior in the South China Sea leaves no doubt as to its modus operandi in these new regions. As a result, the creation and execution of a U.S. maritime grand strategy has never been more important. The United States must continue to collaborate with allies and friends to enforce the Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy and proactively address China's expansion into new geographic areas. Getting ahead and staying ahead of China's maritime aspirations is vital because of their importance to the world's free use of the sea and the global economy. China is aggressively seeking to upend the rules-based international order at the expense of littoral states in the Indian Ocean region. The signs cannot be ignored.

### The South China Sea

China's actions in the South China Sea clearly demonstrate its intent to ignore international law in the maritime domain and ultimately try to alter the existing rules-based international order. Beijing continues to claim it has historical rights to most of the South China Sea based on a map created by the then-Republic of China in 1947. This claim ignores the unambiguous 2016 ruling by the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea that found there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources, in excess of the rights provided for by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, within the sea areas falling within China's claimed 'nine-dash line.'<sup>3</sup> Even while the case was in-progress, Beijing continued to build artificial islands in the South China Sea. Beijing has reclaimed 3,200 acres of land since late 2015, more than all other claimants combined in the past forty years.<sup>4</sup> Since the tribunal's final ruling and despite pressure from the international community to follow international law, Beijing continues to build military infrastructure on the artificial islands it illegally constructed within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Recently, in response to a Philippine government appeal for compliance with the tribunal, Beijing left no question of its intent when the Chinese Embassy in Manila tweeted: "China's position is consistent, clear and firm. The South China Sea arbitration and so-called award are illegal and invalid."<sup>5</sup>

Beijing continues its strategy of claiming to support international law as it bullies its neighbors to accept unfavorable agreements that undermine their sovereign rights. Beijing is currently participating in talks with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) regarding a Code of Conduct for the region. As the slow-moving discussions have languished due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Beijing has exploited the pandemic by flexing its muscles against the same ASEAN neighbors with whom it purports to seek peaceful resolutions. China's bullying actions in the South China Sea are an unfortunate but predictable part of Beijing's strategy, especially considering what then-PRC Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi told his ASEAN counterparts in 2010: "China is a big country and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact."<sup>6</sup>

Since the emergence of COVID-19, China's maritime activities have continued to escalate tensions within the South China Sea. To begin, a Chinese Coast Guard vessel rammed and sank a Vietnamese fishing vessel, resulting in a formal complaint by Vietnam. During the same month, China dispatched its survey vessel *Haiyang Dizhi 8*, accompanied by a Chinese Coast Guard vessel, into Malaysia's claimed EEZ for petroleum exploration. This is the same ship that entered Vietnam's claimed EEZ in 2019 for the same purpose. China

also used Coast Guard and maritime militia vessels to harass Malaysia's resupply vessels that were supporting lawful exploration within its own EEZ. . These unlawful incidents all occurred with the backdrop of China establishing headquarters facilities in both the Spratly and Paracel Islands and announcing it is demarcating the South China Sea into governed districts as if it is China's territory.

Beijing is using similar intimidation tactics in the East China Sea. Chinese ships have been operating in the contiguous zone of Japan's Senkaku Islands for a record length of time.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, incursions are at an all-time high since the start of the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> These actions accompanied an equally high number of Chinese intrusions into Japanese airspace during the same period. China's behavior in its near-abroad clearly signals its intent for other maritime regions.

### The Arctic Ocean

"The Arctic belongs to all the people around the world, as no nation has sovereignty over it... China must plan an indispensable role in Arctic exploration as we have one-fifth of the world's population."<sup>9</sup> Chinese Admiral Yin Zhuo wrote these words in March 2010 and offered China's plain view of the Arctic. China has been surprisingly transparent, although probably not wholly forthright, about its intentions in the Arctic region, which include technological advancements and partnerships.

China clarified its intentions in its Arctic Policy, published in January 2018.<sup>10</sup> China's draw to the region includes the potential for access to energy and natural resources, along with shorter, cheaper, and safer sea passages between Asia and Europe. Consequently, the Arctic region promises alternatives to some of China's key challenges.<sup>11</sup> The Arctic Council awarded China with observer status in 2013 and, despite Beijing being 3,000 km from the Arctic Circle, China has declared itself to be a "Near-Arctic State".<sup>10</sup> China is developing technologies to support Arctic exploration, shipping, and mining.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, China seeks to partner with Arctic nations to build the "Polar Silk Road". This transportation corridor will provide China with access to resources, shipping routes, and infrastructure.

The Arctic region may contain 13 percent (90 billion barrels) of the world's undiscovered crude oil and 30 percent of the world's undiscovered natural gas. As the world's largest oil and gas importer, China desires to exploit these untapped energy resources in the Arctic.<sup>12</sup> However, since the majority of these natural resources are located in other nations' Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), China will have to partner with Arctic States to access these resources. Shipping these resources by using Arctic sea routes will also enable China to become more economically efficient.

China relies heavily upon exports and imports to grow its economy, and China's use of Polar shipping routes would dramatically lower the shipment time, distance, and cost of these resources. Vessels sailing from Europe to East Asia travel 21,000 km through three maritime chokepoints (the Suez Canal, the Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Malacca) for approximately 48 days.<sup>13</sup> Using instead the Northern Sea Route that hugs the coast of Russia would cut the distance to 12,800 km and the transit time by 10 to 15 days. China values the cost savings that Polar passages offer and the strategic value of avoiding three crucial maritime chokepoints. China also desires to develop infrastructure to complement its enhanced use of the Arctic.

Like the Maritime Silk Road, the “Polar Silk Road” will require China to seek partnerships with Arctic States that possess both the Arctic EEZs and the Arctic territory to support China’s ambitions with physical, economic, and policy infrastructure. China obtained just such a partnership in April 2019 when Russia and China announced plans to connect the Northern Sea Route with China’s Maritime Silk Road.<sup>14</sup> If this partnership matures, China will gain access to Russia’s vast polar infrastructure of icebreakers, ports, roads, and rail lines.

In May 2019, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo cautioned other members of the Arctic Council to be wary that China may attempt to transform the Arctic Ocean as it did the South China Sea.<sup>15</sup> China has informed the world of its plans for the Arctic Ocean, so there is no reason to doubt its aspirations in this strategic region. The world should not, however, accept China’s attempt to frame its entrance into the Arctic as benevolent. In its white paper, Beijing states its approach to Arctic affairs will be through law-based governance, international cooperation, and commitment to maintaining a peaceful, secure, and stable Arctic order.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, China’s idea of supporting a rules-based order and international cooperation is clearly displayed and well-documented through its nefarious behavior in the South China Sea.

### **The Indian Ocean**

Retired Commodore Anil Jai Singh, Indian Navy, Vice President of the Indian Maritime Foundation, put it bluntly and accurately: “Once China consolidates its domination of the South China Sea, it will attempt to do so in the Indian Ocean.”<sup>16</sup> The Indian Ocean is strategically located in the world’s most significant economic corridor, and it contributes to half of the surface area of the region currently labeled the Indo-Pacific. It is also the epicenter of global trade with half of the world’s underway commercial vessels, and two-thirds of the world’s oil transits through it.<sup>17</sup> Using an approach from famous sea power theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, China is thoughtfully developing its basing network in the Indian Ocean region. It mainly portrays the network as a non-military adjunct to its One Belt One Road initiative, using similar reasoning as it once did with features in the South China Sea. China has established a full-service base in Djibouti, leased the port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka through the most visible instance of debt-trap diplomacy, and runs the extensive port complex at Gwadar in Pakistan using a Chinese state-owned enterprise.<sup>18</sup>

Beyond its robust relationship with Pakistan, China is developing security ties and conducting electronic surveillance through its telecommunications company Huawei in several littoral states. China then leverages the resulting economic and informational advantage for diplomatic advantage, collects intelligence, and gains the ability to inhibit information flows throughout the region. In addition to establishing its basing network, China is actively engaging with Bangladesh, Myanmar, the Maldives, Seychelles, and Mauritius, and is trying to establish dual-use port facilities in Iran.<sup>19</sup> China is simultaneously increasing its naval presence in the region. In addition to counterpiracy deployments in the Gulf of Aden, China routinely deploys guided-missile ships, amphibious landing ships, submarines, and intelligence collection vessels to the Indian Ocean.<sup>20</sup> China’s motives are to advance its own development and could threaten Indian and U.S. interests.<sup>21</sup>

China’s methods include expanding its One Belt One Road economic lines of communication across the Eurasian continent and through the Indian Ocean into Europe, thereby encircling India and establishing a

relationship of suzerainty with participating states along the way. Perhaps most importantly, the ability to attain sea control in the Indian Ocean will enable China to address the fact that most of its resources traverse through the Strait of Malacca, its 'Malacca Dilemma,' and thereby ensure that resources continue to flow to, and finished products flow from, ports in the PRC. China's designs on the Indian Ocean are evident, and it will not be satisfied until it obtains hegemony over the entire region.

### Recommendations and Conclusion

China's recent increased aggressive state behavior in the face of the global COVID-19 pandemic is alarming. However, this conduct is useful in that it telegraphs China's real strategic intent to extend state dominion into the Indian Ocean region and exercise authority over the region's littoral states. China will do this by controlling the sea lines of communication and the information within the region. The implications for the United States and its likeminded allies and partners are clear. China is consolidating unilateral control of the South China Sea and preparing the Indian Ocean as the next geopolitical maritime battlespace. The Indian Ocean will become the next frontline in global competition. This is also true in the Arctic Ocean region, to some extent.

The United States, India, and others must prepare now or risk a repeat of what has happened in the South China Sea. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared on July 13, 2020: "We are making clear: Beijing's claims to offshore resources across most of the South China Sea are completely unlawful, as is its campaign of bullying to control them."<sup>6</sup> India's Ministry of External Affairs spokesperson similarly announced on July 16, 2020, that the "South China Sea is a part of [the] global commons. India has an abiding interest in peace and stability in the region."<sup>22</sup> These statements were long overdue as China consolidates its gains there, and the United States must get ahead in the Arctic Ocean and the Indian Ocean regions.

The United States should immediately work with its ally the United Kingdom, as well as Mauritius and other regional powers, to secure the Indian Ocean basing rights in Diego Garcia well into the future. China is actively establishing its perimeter of bases in the region, and the United States must not lose its access to the centrally and strategically located base in Diego Garcia. This U.S. base should complement India's emerging bases in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The United States must also continue to develop the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue (Quad) with allies Australia and Japan, and especially with India, its major defense partner, to anticipate the emerging situation in the Indian Ocean. The Quad should focus on diplomatic efforts, economic investment, and information initiatives to proactively engage the South Asia region, as well as military approaches.

The United States should capitalize and expand upon the Asia Reassurance Initiative Act<sup>23</sup> and the Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative Act<sup>24</sup> to ensure that both fully support partners in the Indian Ocean region. By investing in these enterprises and working with partner states, U.S. military strategy for the region can expand beyond Freedom of Navigation Operations. Lastly, the U.S. Department of Defense must continue to prioritize and resource efforts in the Indo-Pacific to bring sufficient quantities of advanced weapons and well-trained forces to the region.



In the Arctic region, the United States should work with its North American ally, Canada, its European allies, the Arctic States of the Arctic Council, and even Russia, to moderate China's Arctic behavior, and to ensure China's entry into the Arctic does not follow the destructive trajectory that it did in the South China Sea.

The United States still has time to step forward with likeminded partners to ensure the world retains lawful, unhindered access to the Arctic Ocean and the Indian Ocean, that South Asian states remain free from China's subversion and coercion, and that the area remains a sanctuary within the free and open Indo-Pacific region. Nevertheless, time is running out, and soon China will shift its predatory gaze to the Indian Ocean region. The United States must act now before it's too late.

---

*The views expressed in these articles are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of DKI APCSS, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.*  
August 2020

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Feng E. China Enacts Security Law, Asserting Control Over Hong Kong. National Public Radio, June 30, 2020. <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/30/885127007/china-enacts-security-law-asserting-control-over-hong-kong>.
- <sup>2</sup> Biswas S. India-China Clash: 20 Indian Troops Killed in Ladakh Fighting. BBC, Jun 16, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53061476>.
- <sup>3</sup> UN Permanent Court of Arbitration. PCA Case No 2013-19 in the Matter of the South China Sea Arbitration. Jul 12, 2016. <https://www.pcacases.com/pcadocs/PH-CN%20-%2020160712%20-%20Award.pdf>.
- <sup>4</sup> Council of Foreign Relations. China's Maritime Disputes. <https://www.cfr.org/interactives/chinas-maritime-disputes#!/>.
- <sup>5</sup> Mangosing F. In Slap on Face of PH, China Replies to Locsin on Tribunal Ruling: It's Invalid. Enquirer.net, Jul 13, 2020. <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/189441/in-slap-on-face-of-ph-china-replies-to-locsin-on-tribunal-ruling-its-invalid>.
- <sup>6</sup> Pompeo MR. U.S. Position on Maritime Claims in the South China Sea. Washington DC: U.S. Department of State, Jul 13, 2020. <https://www.state.gov/u-s-position-on-maritime-claims-in-the-south-china-sea/>.
- <sup>7</sup> Niekawa S. Chinese Ships Set 65-day Record for Closing in on Senkaku Waters. The Asahi Shimbun, Jun 17, 2020. <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/13465411#:~:text=Chinese%20ships%20set%2065%2Dday%20record%20for%20closing%20in%20on%20Senkaku%20waters,By%20SHUN%20NIEKAWA&text=A%20Japan%20Coast%20Guard%20patrol%20vessel%20observed%20four%20China%20Coast,the%20morning>.
- <sup>8</sup> The Japan News by the Yomiuri Shimbun. Chinese Intrusions Into Seas Around Senkakus up 57%. Apr 26, 2020. <https://the-japan-news.com/news/article/0006512369>.
- <sup>9</sup> Manushi M. Has the Dragon Woken Up? A Look at China's Arctic Policy. The Pangean, May 10, 2019. <https://thepangean.com/China-Arctic-Policy>.
- <sup>10</sup> PRC. 2018. China's Arctic Policy. <http://www.scio.gov.cn/zfbps/32832/Document/1618243/1618243.htm>.
- <sup>11</sup> Nakano J, Li W. China Launches the Polar Silk Road. Feb 2, 2018. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-launches-polar-silk-road>.
- <sup>12</sup> Clemente J. China Is the World's Largest Oil & Gas Importer. Forbes, Oct 17, 2019. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/judeclemente/2019/10/17/china-is-the-worlds-largest-oil--gas-importer/#3c9c69835441>.
- <sup>13</sup> Sharma T. Melting Arctic Sea Ice Opens New Maritime Shipping Route. Global Security Review, Jun 9, 2019. <https://globalsecurityreview.com/arctic-new-maritime-shipping-route/>.
- <sup>14</sup> O'Rourke R. Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress. Congressional Research Service, Jun 18, 2020. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R41153>.
- <sup>15</sup> Pompeo M. Looking North: Sharpening America's Arctic Focus. May 6, 2019. <https://www.state.gov/looking-north-sharpening-americas-arctic-focus/>.
- <sup>16</sup> Singh AJ. China's Maritime Aggression and Options for India. Financial Express, May 1, 2020. <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/chinas-maritime-aggression-and-options-for-india/1945508/>.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of Defense. Department of Defense Indo-Pacific Strategy Report. Washington DC: U.S. Department of Defense, June 1, 33-34, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Dreyfuss L, Karlin M. All That Xi Wants: China Attempts to Ace Bases Overseas. Washington DC: The Brookings Institute. September 2109. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/all-that-xi-wants-china-attempts-to-ace-bases-overseas/>.

<sup>19</sup> Aamir A. China-Iran Deal Overshadows Pakistan Belt and Road Project. Nikkei Asian Review, July 21, 2020. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/China-Iran-deal-overshadows-Pakistan-Belt-and-Road-project>.

<sup>20</sup> White JT. China's Indian Ocean Ambitions: Investment, Influence, and Military Advantage. Washington DC: The Brookings Institute. June 2020. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP\\_20200615\\_chinas\\_indian\\_ocean\\_ambitions\\_white-1.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP_20200615_chinas_indian_ocean_ambitions_white-1.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> White JT. China's Indian Ocean Ambitions: Investment, Influence, and Military Advantage. Washington DC: The Brookings Institute. June 2020. [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP\\_20200615\\_chinas\\_indian\\_ocean\\_ambitions\\_white-1.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FP_20200615_chinas_indian_ocean_ambitions_white-1.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> TimesNowNews.com. India Challenges China's Claims on South China Sea, Says It Is 'a Part of Global Commons'. Times Now News. July 16, 2020. <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/article/india-challenges-china-s-claims-on-south-china-sea-says-it-is-a-part-of-global-commons/622649>.

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Congress. Asia Reassurance Initiative Act of 2018. Washington DC: U.S. Congress, December 31, 2018. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/2736/text>.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Congress. Asia-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative Act of 2016. Washington DC: U.S. Congress, April 27, 2016. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/2865/text>.