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The role of sea power in China's rise: is maritime conflict inevitable?

Análise Social, 217, L (4.º), 2015

ISSN ONLINE 2182-2999

EDIÇÃO E PROPRIEDADE

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Análise Social, 217, 1 (4.º), 2015, 708-732

The role of sea power in China's rise: is maritime conflict inevitable? This article seeks to further our understanding and conceptualization of sea power and its role in China's foreign policy. It addresses the crux of a puzzle in the current International Relations literature, namely, how can the rise of Chinese sea power be a potential source for cooperation. It is argued that the analysis presented throughout this article, both in conceptualizing sea power and in its examination of Chinese capabilities, can further the case for the need and the possibility of reframing security through the idea of the defense of the system.

KEYWORDS: China; international security; sea power; defense of the system.

O papel do poder marítimo no crescimento da China: o conflito marítimo é inevitável? Este artigo procura melhorar a compreensão e conceptualização do poder marítimo e do seu papel na política externa chinesa. Analisa um *puzzle* crucial na literatura das relações internacionais: de que forma o crescimento do poder marítimo da China pode ser uma potencial fonte de cooperação. Argumenta-se que a análise presente neste artigo, tanto ao nível da conceptualização do poder marítimo como no exame das capacidades marítimas chinesas, pode contribuir para um reenquadramento da segurança dos países interessados, com base no conceito de "defesa do sistema".

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: China; segurança internacional; poder marítimo; defesa do sistema.

DANIEL ROCHA E SILVA

The role of sea power in China's rise: is maritime conflict inevitable?

INTRODUCTION¹

The rise of China is increasingly seen as bringing about an inevitable conflict – be that hot or cold – with the United States and some of its long-standing allies in the East Asian region. This article will highlight some of the key assumptions that are often made regarding China's sea power, why these might be incorrect, and how the debate need not be framed in a competitive environment insofar as the role of sea power is concerned. While the literature on China's rise is substantial, this article has certain key features that distinguish it from other works, filling an important gap. Firstly, it presents China's sea power in a broader maritime strategy, which in turn is fulfilling its foreign policy objectives. Sea power, just as any other strategic concept, does not exist in a vacuum.

Secondly, parallel to the central argument of this article – that China's rise need not be framed inside a strategic competitive environment – it will also be argued that sea power, as a theoretical concept and in practice, is not offensive by nature. This argument will be important given that much of the literature uncritically posits China's military modernization, and in particular its naval capabilities, as a reason for strategic competition and sees this as evidence of its desire to contest American hegemony. Ultimately, even authors that often offer a more nuanced understanding of China's rise in the international system, end up uncritically placing its sea power developments in the “potential for conflict column”, whereas economic interdependence is often considered a constraint on war.²

1 The author wishes to thank Dr. Catherine Jones, University of Warwick, for comments on an earlier version of the core ideas present in this article as well as the two anonymous reviewers who greatly enhanced the quality of some its key arguments.

2 The edited volume by Dutton, Ross, and Tunsjø is an important exception (Dutton et al., 2012).

Ultimately, the crux of the argument in this article is that strategic competition should not be seen as inevitable, and that the security dilemma can be mitigated (Jervis, 1976, 2011). A different view, systemic security, can be a potential way out of the current strategic and security-related dilemma.³ This article builds on the work of Rubel and similar authors who perceive the opportunity to change the current great power competitive framework toward a defense of the system approach. Additionally, economic interdependence can often be used in a conflict and be perceived as a threat (Armstrong and King, 2013; Burgos Cáceres and Ear, 2012). Indeed, China's perceived insecurity on some fronts often stems from its integration in the world economy (Paul, 2010). In conclusion, by embracing all of these arguments, it presents China's sea power and its rise in a novel and distinct way.

This article is divided into three sections. The first is concerned with understanding and defining sea power as a concept, and in showing how it has often been leveraged by states at various moments in history. The second section provides an analysis of Chinese maritime developments, both military and commercial, and how they are related to its interests and ambitions. It is argued that firstly, China's maritime path has been developed along two distinct vectors and that the dialogue between means and ends is not a one-way street. More capabilities often mean greater perceived security interests and vice-versa. The final section is focused on potential avenues for cooperation directed toward averting some of the issues that might arise from China's maritime rise that could have a destabilizing effect. It is in this final section that the concept of systemic security is addressed, focusing on how to turn it into reality, taking into consideration the previous assessment of China's maritime developments, its interests, and its limitations.

In its conclusion this paper argues that the rise of China presents a unique set of challenges in accommodating its re-emergence in the current global order, and that the recent Chinese narrative for the need of "a new type of great power relationship" highlights some of those difficulties. The fact that scholars are recognizing the importance of the seas to China underscores the transformation witnessed in the last decades, and China's integration in the global system. Many of the insecurities that China feels and tries to hedge against through a stronger maritime presence are based on its re-emergence as an important economic player. Yet, this article's analysis points toward the conclusion that the goals of changing the frame of reference and the US-China

3 See, for a better understanding of this concept (Rubel, 2012). This article attempts to use its claims and arguments to provide a more robust defense of the possibility and opportunity to Rubel's "Defense of the System".

relationship narrative toward systemic security are worthwhile and feasible; China's growing sea power need not be an impediment to stability, and the maritime environment can in fact be a source of cooperation and strategic reassurance.

SEA POWER

DEFINING A CONCEPT – PAST AND PRESENT USES

Sea power has long been an implicit concept in the formulation of foreign policy. Some authors suggest that our current understanding of sea power “as an instrument of state policy” is distinguishable from the ancient use of sea power (Gray, 1992, p. 3). Indeed, the European Age of Discovery made us aware of the maritime commons as a global one, not in confined, local seas such as the Mediterranean in European history or the China seas in Asian history (Tavadze, 2013, p. 48). Yet, in a stricter sense, the seas were always viewed as an instrument of state policy and the illustrations that Colin Gray utilizes to argue about “the leverage of sea power” prior to the age of sail make such a case (Gray, 1992, chap. 3-4). Sea power as a concept was greatly influenced by the works of Mahan, who became one of the key authors for the American and British navies, even considering Corbett's popularity in his home country. Even so, Mahan does not specify exactly what sea power is, but rather assumes that the reader will implicitly understand its role, relevance, and constitutive parts (Armstrong, 2013; Till, 2009, p. 23).

Colin Gray argues that sea power is “the ability to use the seas and oceans for military or commercial purposes and to preclude an enemy from the same” (Gray, 1992, p. 4). Similarly, Hedley Bull thinks about military outcomes when defining sea power, namely, “as military power that is brought to bear at sea” – while acknowledging Admiral Gorshkov's reminder that the determinants of a nation's sea power are not solely its naval capabilities, but also “its merchant marine, fishing and oceanographic fleets, and its maritime outlook and tradition” – he seems to distinguish between sea power as a form of military power and other forms of sea power (Bull, 1980, p. 3). It is certainly possible to make a narrow assessment of military sea power capabilities – or naval capabilities in the language of this article – though it seems a rather narrow definition of it, particularly at times of peace, when naval missions other than combat might be at the forefront of a naval strategist's preoccupations (*Contested Commons: The Future of American Power in a Multipolar World*, 2010; Egli, 2013; Till, 2007). Additionally, it does seem considerably difficult to make a clear cut distinction between military sea power and other types of sea power, as they often intersect and interact, a point that could be

made when dealing with China's shipbuilding and merchant marine capabilities, for example.

Geoffrey Till's framework of what sea power is seems the most reasonable in terms of its ability to incorporate both new thinking and technological innovations, and its clarity. It equates sea power to more than military maritime capabilities, remembering the importance of other services in the use of power at or from the sea. Furthermore, it reminds us that commercial maritime activities and shipbuilding capabilities are key features of sea power. Finally, Till's argument of sea power as being a relative concept is similar to the one that will be expanded upon during this article regarding strategy and power in general (Till, 2009, pp. 24-25).

Only the United States is able to effectively employ the necessary capabilities that encompass all the uses of sea power, distinguished by Luttwak as latent naval suasion and active naval suasion (Luttwak, 1974, p. 7). Other navies, whether British, French, or Spanish, are increasingly constrained in their ability to secure their objectives as defined by policymakers. Even before a world navy was technologically feasible, however, powers saw the maritime domain as an important one, and even if they were incapable of controlling the world's oceans, they had relative sea power (Heuser, 2010, pp. 207-208). In this line of thought, countries such as the Soviet Union or, at different periods in its history, China, can and must be considered as having sea power. As Till recognizes, the use of sea power as a relative term means that it changes depending upon the relationship between who is exerting the power and against whom (Till, 2009, p. 26).

Contrary to this, Colin Gray prefers to distinguish between sea powers on the one hand, as those that have a distinct sea mentality, and naval powers, which might have the capabilities but not the historical background (Gray, 1992, p. 7). This is an important distinction, but we should still be hesitant in accepting the idea that nations are unable to overcome their past, or that they will necessarily follow it. The United States was for a long time anything but a naval power, even though it had significant commercial interests tied to the seas. Indeed, Mahan's book was precisely a quest of the author for the United States to possess a stronger Navy. He and President Theodore Roosevelt, as Secretary of the Navy and later in the White House, made the United States Navy a reality. This should give us pause when trying to extract too much from historical experiences or what we believe to be cultural traits. Furthermore, recent scholarship makes significant contributions in pointing out that China's history with the seas was often more complex than previously assumed.

Following this reasoning, China can certainly be considered a sea power today, even though it must be vigilant over its continental borders. As will

be argued further below, China has made a conscious decision to pursue a strategy that accords sea power a high degree of significance. Ultimately, sea power is the result of a political choice, influenced by, among other factors, geography (Grygiel, 2010, p. 490; Heuser, 2010, p. 204).

THE ROLES AND PURPOSES OF SEA POWER

Some authors, such as Huang, assume that the importance of commercial activities is fundamentally an Anglo-Saxon conceptualization of sea power, but this is far from the truth (Heuser, 2010, p. 219; Huang, 2010). While from the eighteenth century on British and then American commercial interests were a key feature of the importance placed by these countries in their navies, history shows us how other culturally different countries have, at different times, had the same understanding of the importance of the seas (Wang, 2011, p. 164). The fact remains that both countries, before becoming the preeminent naval powers of their time, used the same tactics of *guerre de course*, and asymmetric warfare that authors now identify with China's naval developments (Baer, 1994; Heuser, 2010, p. 211). The *Jeune École* in France also tried to understand how to advocate for an asymmetric strategy in the relationship between the French and British navies (Roksund, 2007).

Huang further characterizes a key factor in China's maritime strategy as being in the tradition of the Sino-centric worldview, distinguishing it from a Western conceptualization (Huang, 2010, pp. 39-41). It is certainly true that, as various authors point out, the voyages during the Ming period were greatly influenced by the tributary system in place (Johnston, 1998; Levathes, 1996). Still, we should refrain from seeing the tributary system as a potential example for future relations in East Asia, or as part of a distinct Chinese perspective that is influential in its present foreign policy.⁴ Similarly, and looking ahead to the argument presented in this article, China is increasingly aware of the importance of the seas to its economic well-being.⁵ Just as importantly, it is reaching back to its history, such as the Song dynasty, which while threatened by land invasions, nonetheless felt the need to accommodate the needs of its trading class reliance on the seas and rivers (Fairbank, 2006, p. 92).

4 The historical circumstances and changes of the tribute system fall outside of the scope of this article, but any discussion of China's world view will inevitably be influenced by it. For some of the differing opinions regarding the tribute system and some of the new historical scholarship that has questioned some of our previous assumptions, see (Feng, 2009; Johnston, 1998; Kang, 2012; Zheng, 2010).

5 For a perspective in terms of the economic interests tied with energy supply routes, see (Collins et al., 2008; Holmes, 2006; Lei, 2008; Paul, 2010).

While the role of the oceans as connectors and highways cannot be overstated, as Corbett wrote “people live on land, not on water” (Corbett, 2004). From time to time every Navy has had to fend off the attacks of those who argue that it is obsolete in a time of nuclear weapons in war between great powers or that it should serve merely in support and in transport of troops.⁶ But as Colin Gray rightly acknowledges, sea power has been a crucial feature in gaining victory in war (Gray, 1994, chap. 2; Martel, 2011). Countries with sea power advantage over their adversaries or maritime coalitions were able to win, or draw, in large measure due to their naval advantages. As an addendum to the previous discussion regarding the existence of sea power even in countries that are traditionally thought of as land powers, Gray reminds us of some examples of great land powers that were able to prevail against maritime coalitions when, and only when, they themselves put their forces to the seas. While they did not have to match the naval power of their adversaries, they had to be sufficiently menacing, and, usually, destroy or harass the enemy’s fleet to a point where the command of the seas was in doubt, as is the case of the Peloponnesian War. In the case of both World Wars, neither Germany with the Tirpitz Plan nor Japan after the battle of Midway was able to challenge its maritime opponents.

While the debate between the primary focus and missions of a Navy might exist, the traditional uses of sea power remain remarkably similar to those during the Cold War. Today, just as in the 1980s, “Mahan and Professor Richmond would have little difficulty in carrying on a dialogue with today’s theorists; they would understand the problems and advocate solutions” (Alford, 1980, p. 1). Navies often have diplomatic missions, such as showing the flag in friendly ports and nearby dangerous waters. These actions continue to have a powerful deterrent effect, even though these missions’ character and objectives differ from imperial gunboat diplomacy.

The importance of naval forces does not disappear in times of peace, nor do the other constitutive features of sea power. Good order at sea has been an important mission of the great navies of the past, and the presence of this tradition is still felt today. Piracy continues to be an obstacle to commercial shipping and private enterprises, able to cause considerable disruption (Bueger, 2013a). The examples of recent problems regarding piracy are ample, as are those that show the ability of pirates to change tactics and move operationally when confronted with the presence of superior forces. When one hotspot is controlled, another seems to pop-up. In terms of broader foreign policy goals,

6 See, for the relevant debates in the last century of the American Navy (Baer, 1994; Heuser, 2010, chap. 7).

it could certainly be argued that piracy is a manifestation of problems on land, where people live, confirming Corbett's analysis. Nevertheless, in terms of the role of sea power, its use as a policy alternative to control key points is quite welcomed, especially due to its flexibility.

In conclusion, the roles of the navies in peacetime have not changed fundamentally, as maintaining good order at sea continues to be one of its key roles. While recent decades have seen Navies in a largely support role due to the nature of the nations involved (e.g., the Falklands War, studied by the Chinese Naval planners with great interest), we are reminded how Naval forces continue to have a profound influence and effect in power projection, both in supportive and active roles (Goldstein, 2008).⁷ The next section focuses on how China sees the seas and the importance of its the country's rising sea power.

SEA POWER IN CHINA'S RISE

CHINA'S EVOLVING GRAND STRATEGY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MARITIME SECURITY

China's maritime strategy is just one part of its grand strategy and the efforts to achieve its foreign policy objectives.⁸ By studying the development of China's naval capabilities and linking them with the stated security interests of China, it is clear that it possesses a strategic outlook on how to deal with its maritime environment. At the same time, however, decisions are often made only after a new fact emerges, as the situations involving civilian personnel working in Libya and Yemen made clear. After realizing the need to revamp PLAN's (People's Liberation Army Navy) policies and force structure for protecting its citizens abroad, its operational capability was shown in both the Libyan and Yemeni operations (Collins and Erickson, 2011; Perlez and Huang, 2015).

The links between grand strategy, strategy, and operations must be rooted in the security system if they are to be effective and need to recognize the constraints placed by the international environment. At the same time, however, China's strategy is also linked to more ideational aspects, projecting expectations toward the future and trying to construct a coherent narrative. As Carriço (2013) has shown, China's strategy is linked with a normative discourse. The latest development in this sphere, "China's Dream", is therefore an all-encompassing narrative within which Xi Jinping aims to present its conceptualization

7 The author wishes to thank one of the anonymous reviewers who mentioned this particularly important point.

8 See Vego, 2003, pp. 114-116.

of China's rise to both domestic and international audiences (Callahan, 2013; Carriço, 2013, p. 30).⁹

China's maritime strategy has also developed inside these discursive narratives. Huang states that China's "key strategic purposes are no more than its economic security, territorial integrity, sea routes and energy supply" (Huang, 2010, p. 252). While one has to wonder what else would be left for any other country, these are indeed China's main strategic objectives, even though it is often not clear how each is prioritized and ranked. China has throughout its recent history placed different value on each of these, and its maritime strategy has fluctuated as a result. While its naval developments were for a time centered on making sure that its territorial integrity concerning Taiwan was assured (Lewis, 2006), China's energy security has also featured prominently in its maritime strategy (Erickson and Collins, 2007). Nevertheless, and while it might have been assumed that its energy and offshore oil interests are a recent development, a closer look at China's strategic objectives would quickly demonstrate otherwise (Muller, 1983, pp. 125-126). This is also the case regarding its maritime territorial disputes, which have been the focus of China's maritime strategy for a long time.

Still, Huang's notion of "sea power with Chinese characteristics" is a redundant concept (Huang, 2010, p. 252). Every aspect of strategy is constrained and influenced by cultural perspectives (Booth and Trood, 1999; Feng, 2007). The study of culture in war and strategic studies has had a hard time in defining how, when, and why it is a variable with direct influence and effect in the conduct of war and strategy (Echevarria, 2013). Nonetheless, it is safe to assume that culture and socialization processes play a part in our understanding of certain situations. It is therefore entirely understandable that Chinese reactions, uses, and visions of sea power might be influenced by its historical and cultural background. But placing too much emphasis on this to explain behavior would be misguided. The recent scholarship of historians such as Alastair Johnston and Yuan-kang Wang should revise some of the previous conceptions of Chinese history that continue to prevail in the security and strategic studies literature regarding China's foreign policy and its relationship with the seas (Johnston, 1998; Wang, 2011).

The doctrinaire thinking of the PLAN has also changed throughout time.¹⁰ Its ability to discern the need of having control of the skies to have control of the seas is an important one, reflecting the increasing use of joint oper-

9 The author would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers whose comments were particularly useful in reinforcing this point.

10 See Ng, 2005; Shambaugh, 2002.

ations (Kane, 2002, p. 72). It also understands that while new technologies have greatly enhanced the capabilities and opportunities for joint operations, manpower continues to be a crucial differential in armed conflict. In practice, this means that the issues of the need for both skilled sailors and favorable geography have not gone away. Chinese military thinkers have had a great opportunity to learn more about the Falklands war and how Argentina was able, due to its geographical positioning, to substantially confront the United Kingdom even though its submarine forces comprised a single vessel. While the Royal Navy is not the United States Navy, it does provide important information and is one of the more recent examples in which warfare at sea was a reality, and the command of the seas disputed (Lord, 2012, p. 431). Technology has not been able to overcome the man nor has it replaced the need to think geographically, even though it might have changed the way we think about space (Kane, 2002, p. 75). For these reasons, China continues to confront the need to control the two island chains in case of conflict.¹¹

Grand strategy must be able to evolve and accommodate new situations, while at the same time being realistically grounded in core foreign policy principles. As can be gathered from the analysis above, China was able, by and large, to do so, even in periods of great change, such as the Sino-Soviet split, the Soviet Union disintegration, and the Western sanctions following the Tiananmen crackdown. Furthermore, and as will be highlighted in the third section, it started to use its new naval forces for diplomatic uses (Huang, 2010, pp. 209-210).

THE REASONS FOR CHINA'S VIEW OF ITS MARITIME ENVIRONMENT

This brief presentation of the key factors of insecurity to the Chinese leadership will be helpful in showing that, first of all, Chinese capabilities modernization and acquisition have by and large followed a pattern suited to remedy its feelings of insecurity. Although strategists disagree about the issues and priorities surrounding the “submarine or aircraft schools” (more on this below), the influence of a clear strategic delineation is apparent.¹²

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, it shows that China is deeply affected by how it perceives the overall global environment. A more open

11 The first Island chain is usually considered to run from the Kurile Islands to the Northern Philippines, passing through the Japanese archipelago and Taiwan. The second island chain, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, is commonly referred to encompass the Ogasawara Islands and Volcano Islands in Japan, and the Mariana Islands, which is American territory.

12 While some inside the PLAN still consider that its focus should be in anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) operations, for which submarines are an essential component of the Chinese navies' force structure, others argue that power projection should now be one of the main pieces in the PLAN's strategic outlook.

economy can often be a source of profound insecurity if a country does not feel that it is able to have its interests secured at the systemic level. It stands to reason that if it feels less insecure and with a greater ability to influence the system's security, China might be willing to plot a responsible path of coexistence with the United States and other countries, both regionally and globally.

To understand the reasons behind China's focus on maritime developments and sea power, we must understand its sources of insecurity. There are two paramount issues, both of which illustrate the relative importance of sea power: its national integrity and continued economic growth. The first has traditionally been focused on Taiwan. China has, with a few exceptions – notably India – been able to settle the borders with its land neighbors.

The second source of insecurity is the Communist Party's reliance on economic growth as its source of legitimacy (Shirk, 2007). Similarly, economic growth is tied with capabilities. Strategy without the means to accomplish it is little more than dreaming. To provide both security to the country and to the Communist party (which in the view of the latter is one and the same) economic growth is a key issue. China has realized that it must take part in trade, financial, and manufacturing systems at the global level if it wants to continue growing. At the same time, reliance on others can be a source of insecurity, or at least be perceived in such a way. The reliance of China on the seas to ship its products, its integration in global manufacturing networks (and the resulting interdependence), or the need for importing much of its energy supplies are seen by its officials as highly problematic as long as China remains unable to defend its interests, under the assumption that others, namely the US Navy, will continue to provide its security (McDevitt and Vellucci Jr., 2012, p. 83). The inability of China to control its own energy and sea Lines of Communications leaves it open to a blockade in the most dire of conflicts with the United States, which could escalate the conflict even further if China perceives it to be an existential threat (Montgomery, 2013, pp. 616-618).¹³

CHINA'S NAVAL MODERNIZATION

This article started by addressing the conceptualization of the term sea power and then set out to understand the allure and importance of it for the great powers. It underlined the fact that even though sea power is often considered

13 A similar point can be made in the financial and economic spheres, with Chinese initiatives such as the Maritime Silk Road, the One Belt one Road, and the recent developments with the AIB. In all of these the fact that China has grown to be an essential member of the economic, financial, and security global and regional orders implies a growing responsibility for China in these key systemic domains.

to be closely linked to absolute geographical and cultural conditions, it can also be considered as a relative term. The major modernization developments of the PLAN's fleet will now be considered. Some key examples are cited to demonstrate the two branches of China's developments and how they relate to its stated objectives.¹⁴ As mentioned above, all these processes start from a political decision; they are not created in a vacuum and are subject to a number of constraints.

While the PLAN's modernization has been across the board, there are specific areas which have received special attention and it is important to understand the main strategic interests covered by these capabilities. Capabilities have expanded in areas of crucial importance to China and their expansion has also led to China's ability to be more assertive. These are central to the analysis in this article, namely that while there is little doubt that the capabilities that have received the most modernization serve to protect China's interests, these interests have grown in proportion to its economic size. In essence, Chinese military developments have occurred along two vectors, one that is concerned with coastal defense and the traditional emphasis on national sovereignty, and another, more recent, concerning power projection capabilities and protection of its sea lines of communication further from shore (McDevitt and Vellucci Jr., 2012, pp. 75-76).

SUBMARINES AND ACCESS-DENIAL

One of the areas in which China has quickly modernized its Navy is in its submarine fleet (Erickson, 2007, p. 75). Submarines play a pivotal role in China's anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) strategy, and are seldom useful except during times of conflict (Godwin, 2012, p. 53).¹⁵ There are exceptions, such as intelligence collection activities and, of course, deterrence through their potential presence. This has led to the recognition from early on that China was focusing a significant amount of its energies on an A2/AD strategy against the United States. Its submarine force, coupled with its modernization of mine weaponry (Erickson, 2007, pp. 78-79) are extremely

14 Descriptions and assessments of the various developments in navy-related capabilities abound, and it would be pointless to repeat those descriptions. Instead, the focus of this article will be on key areas of interest and how they relate to this article's core arguments. The various works cited make the more exhaustive description of Chinese capabilities. A good starting point would also be (O'Rourke, 2013).

15 While different authors have slightly different definitions on China's A2/AD strategy, the underlying components are disrupting the ability for American forces to reach its East Asian allies in times of crisis for a limited time, and negating the possibility of the US Navy to have total freedom of navigation and sea control during these periods.

useful deterrents – ones that can easily harass or provide enough of a threat to merchant ships that commercial shipping – crucial to the majority of East Asian countries such as Japan – would have a difficult time countering (Kane, 2002, p. 117).

Slowly but steadily China has also developed a stronger logistical and support fleet (Kane, 2002, pp. 78-79). It has also developed an amphibious force that is continually expanding (Erickson, 2007, pp. 81-82). As Colin Gray rightly posited in his book regarding the post-Cold War Navy, space assets are increasingly relevant to naval matters (Gray, 1994, chap. 7). As one of the changes that resulted from the Revolution in Military Affairs, space systems have become one of the key features of success at sea, in which GPS, the AEGIS system, and various communications systems all depend on space assets. China recognizes this and has been working to reach the level of the United States and Russia in terms of space related capabilities (Stokes and Easton, 2012).

AIRCRAFT CARRIERS AND POWER PROJECTION

Since its early modernization days the PLAN has had two distinct schools of thought which differ on what is most important to China's presence at the great sea powers table. One emphasizes the role of its submarines in providing sea denial. The other prefers the ultimate certainty of sea control by means of the aircraft carrier (Huang, 2010, pp. 298-299). It should be emphasized that these schools are not necessarily antagonistic in their view of China's needs, but simply open which of the two should come first (Erickson, 2007, p. 91). Ultimately, it seems that China did not need or wish to face the choice between the two, and while its submarine force has grown more rapidly, it has also launched its first aircraft carrier and is now building a second one.

China is slowly turning its Navy into a "blue-water navy" with a force structure similar to one with a long-term view (McDevitt and Vellucci Jr., 2012, pp. 59-61). While no one can be sure how many aircraft carriers China will seek to have – undoubtedly not even the Chinese leadership yet knows – the recent trials of its first aircraft carrier and the recent developments in its second one are examples of capabilities that point in the direction of a navy confident in pursuing a power projection strategy. Lieutenant General Wan Zhiyuan, an important voice inside the People's Liberation Army (PLA), stated that "Aircraft carriers are a very important tool available to major powers" and that for China, they "are an absolute necessity".¹⁶ More importantly, the

16 Quoted in Erickson and Wilson, 2012, p. 245.

Chinese leadership has said explicitly that it considers the maritime domain one of its key priorities. While the most noticed example is on the issue of the maritime disputes of other Asian countries, it should be noted that it is far from the only situation in which China has shown that it is increasingly aware of the importance of the maritime sphere (Spegele and Ma, 2012). China has also recognized the importance of the Indian Ocean, going so far as to claim that it would not let it become India's backyard (Kane, 2002, p. 126).

In conclusion, China has amassed a considerable military naval force along with the industrial manufacturing capabilities to slowly start to become a blue-water navy. This is a process that will take decades, but the groundwork is being laid at present.¹⁷ Many commentators have ended their assessment of China's Navy at this point, and understand it as signifying an almost inevitability of future confrontation with the United States Navy for global supremacy.

Indeed, the analysis above of China's needs for a powerful navy coupled with the actions and words of many of its military and civilian leaders point to a continuing development of its capabilities toward the possession of a comprehensible blue-water navy. Still, as the next section will demonstrate, a global struggle for supremacy should not be taken for granted based on this analysis. Instead, sea power (as a theoretical concept) is "agnostic" in determining the likelihood for conflict between the incumbent power and the one subject to its hegemony. The next section provides an overview of how the us-China relationship can be improved with a number of different measures at sea.

The inferences that one decides to make regarding China's maritime modernization should not be restricted to a competitive frame of reference, but should rather acknowledge the possibility of cooperation on an equal footing. The next section will deal with this issue, and how it might be possible, by providing a new security framework based on systemic security, to partly overcome the insecurity problems bred by the security dilemma. Due to the unique characteristics pointed out above, the maritime sphere is a favorable place to start building such a framework. Its role as economic connector is of vital importance to both the United States and China and has the potential to be a domain in which cooperation and win-win situations between the two are the norm, rather than the exception.

17 The backdrop of these projections will always be China's ability to pay for its development and any sort of analysis of current trends and future prospects must be comprehended with that in mind.

THE INTEGRATION OF CHINA'S SEA POWER IN THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The previous sections made it clear that while sea power often seems to have a globalizing influence, naval considerations might just as well be regional or local in their nature, as is the case of the maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas. Furthermore, as highlighted at the beginning of this article and reinforced throughout, maritime considerations are part of a broader strategic concept, which hopefully makes the bridge between practice and ideal types, between capabilities and foreign policy goals (Gray, 2010). This is further reinforced in China's maritime strategy, in which the China Coast Guard (CCG) plays a significant role, especially regarding maritime disputes. In addition, civilian militias have become an increasingly utilized tool in China's maritime strategy. These two points reinforce the multiplicity of aspects that constitute sea power besides "grey ships", as was argued above in the section on the conceptualization of sea power.

It is particularly important to note the change that took place in March 2013, when the unification of various disparate maritime units took place, with the formation of the State Oceanic Administration (SOA). This includes not only the CCG, but also the China Marine Surveillance (CMS) and Maritime Safety Administration (MSA) agencies, among others. While this unification has streamlined the decision-making process and centralized control, it also means that paramilitary forces, such as the CMS, are now under the control of the same administrative agency as Search and Rescue (SAR) units, adding a level of ambiguity.¹⁸

It is indeed a bridge where the traffic flows both ways, where cooperation at the maritime level might produce cooperation at a higher level. This section will therefore analyze three distinct but interconnected ways of cooperative measures that encompass the regional and global, the natural self-interest, and the relationships between mariners. It starts by examining piracy, which has both regional and global characteristics in the sense that while for the East Asian region piracy might be a regional problem, it has global repercussions and China, being a power with increasingly global interests, will need to think globally about piracy spanning the globe (Horta, 2012, pp. 398–399). Secondly, it will deal with issues of SAR operations, be they military or humanitarian, after a natural disaster or outbreak of conflict. Finally, it will focus its attention on confidence building measures at the personal and institutional levels.

18 The author would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for the commentaries regarding this point.

ANTI-PIRACY MEASURES AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR COOPERATION

One of the key issues of interest and reasons for China's development of its sea power is its commercial maritime interests and sea lines of communication. While these were mentioned above in terms of a potential blockade or state related disruption, piracy and non-state disruptions are certainly much more common and are one of the greatest maritime problems and tasks for a navy. It can be highly disruptive to energy and shipping markets, with widespread repercussions (Collins, 2007, p. 113). In this regard both the United States and China are in agreement on the need to police key chokepoints and eliminate threats to good order at sea. Furthermore, countries such as South Korea and Japan, which share similar needs and interests in maritime shipping, would potentially welcome the opportunity to develop a partnership between them. This would have the added benefit of strengthening cooperation at both the regional and global levels. While this has often been a task left to the United States Navy – and to a lesser degree other Western navies – China has started to emerge as a potential partner just as its interests and capabilities have increased. China's interests now span the whole globe, from the Panama Canal to various shipping lanes in Africa and Asia such as the Gulf of Somalia and the Suez Canal (Cole, 2007, p. 66).

At the conceptual level, it is remarkable how academia was able to place piracy on the so called non-traditional security issues, even though it has been for the past centuries – if not millennia – one of the primary, and therefore traditional, targets of a country's Navy (Gray, 2012). This essay therefore disregards the use of the dichotomy of traditional and non-traditional issues, as it can be a source of further confusion. Instead, it categorizes piracy and good order at sea as essential missions of naval forces, crucial to maintaining commercial shipping as often the best mode of transport and a potential source of cooperation between countries. Piracy can be defined in a variety of ways, such as the more limited definition proposed in the United Nations Law of the seas (International seabed Authority, 2001, p. 39), the more expansive one found in the International Maritime Bureau Piracy Reporting Center (IMB-PRC), or by differentiating between an act of piracy and armed robbery against ships, as done by The Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (RECAAP).¹⁹ For sake

19 See K. Xu, 2009, p. 82. Even though IMB states that it “follows the definition of Piracy as laid down in Article 101 of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the sea (UNCLOS) and Armed Robbery as laid down in Resolution A.1025 (26) adopted on 2 December 2009 at the 26th Assembly Session of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO)” on its website, →

of simplicity this article uses the wider use of the word as manifested in the IMB-PRC.

At certain times in the past piracy was deemed to be a cost effective tool used by countries in disrupting good order at sea. Piracy was also often an issue that Imperial China had to deal with in the East and South China Seas (Shapinsky, 2014; Zou, 2009, p. 135). Since the eighteenth century, however, piracy has become gradually less acceptable as a state tool, and there is now widespread agreement on the need to police key maritime straits (Bueger, 2015, 2013b). Acts of piracy can also be connected to terrorist and criminal networks, even though the extent of these networks might have been exaggerated following the 9/11 attack (Young and Valencia, 2003). The current disputes in the South China Sea, where the maritime Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) are ill-defined or contentious, and the problems concerning the actual understanding of free passage in the EEZ under UNCLOS, hinder the ability of each individual country's navy to confront the piracy threat alone (Zou, 2009, p. 150).

Additionally, the coastal states in these chokepoints must also be in agreement with the proposed measures and see their interests safeguarded – something that was seemingly forgotten when the United States was unable to persuade either Indonesia or Malaysia to cooperate through the Regional Maritime Security Initiative (Wu and Zou, 2009, p. 7). It is important to note that while the term “piracy” is used indiscriminately, its causes can be different in Somalia, Nigeria, and the Malacca Straits. The political/economic situation is often of crucial importance. As Adam Young correctly points out, “if the asymmetries between economic and political development of the littoral states in Southeast Asia are not addressed, then the continued prevalence of piracy will be assured” (Young, 2007, p. 127). For a truly effective resolution of the piracy problem, its root causes must be addressed. Nonetheless, and because that would involve a much different set of needs to resolve, maritime security acts as a fundamental gatekeeper between the problems on land and the tranquility at sea.

HUMANITARIAN AND DISASTER-RELIEF OPERATIONS

One of the most common ways to witness the importance of navies in times of peace (besides the enforcement of good order at sea outlined above) is their actions before, during, and after a disaster. The past few years have given us a

→ its reports on piracy such as (IMB-PRC, 1993, p. 2) have a more expansive definition in that it does not restrict acts of piracy to acts “on the high seas or outside the jurisdiction of any state” as UNCLOS.

number of examples of how naval forces were able to quickly adjust their missions to provide relief in places such as Haiti and Southeast Asia, delivering aid and providing medical care in the absence of hospitals, or in providing security and transport when unrest occurs in a given country.

China has made considerable strides forward in improving its abilities to participate in humanitarian operations, especially with its flagship "Peace Ark" (Brant, 2014; Dornan and Brant, 2014; Luan, 2014). However, its actions at the time of the Philippines disaster, when the ship arrived only after considerable international pressure, can also be seen as China using its humanitarian operations capabilities as a diplomatic tool (Oremus, 2013). Finally, China is not the sole Asian player improving its humanitarian operation capabilities, as an analysis of Japanese procurement strategy makes clear (Patalano, 2015).

Shiming Xu points out that China has sought to develop the tools for an effective response in the case of an environmental disaster in its territorial waters. Most of the actions taken by the Maritime Safety Administration of the PRC (MSA) to date have been at the national level, such as the "phasing-out of Single Hull Tankers, strengthening Port State Control and Flag State Control, promoting maritime traffic management, inspections and education of mariners" (S. Xu, 2009, pp. 209-210). Much less clear is how these have been put into practice at the local level and the impact of the maritime disputes in the South and East China Seas on a regional inclusive approach to these issues.

In conclusion, maritime disaster relief and pollution are areas ripe for cooperation and in which China can advance its role as one of East Asia's leaders and as a party interested in a safe maritime environment (Bateman, 2015, p. 60). Unlike anti-piracy operations, it does not necessarily involve ships that might threaten the territorial sovereignty of the States concerned, and it could promote a vision for more inclusive naval policies in the region. Finally, these measures should also be seen as ends in and of themselves, not just as a means for greater strategic trust between the United States and China. Disaster relief operations and SAR missions are all important aspects of maritime strategy that also deserve to be considered independently of the Sino-American relationship.

CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MECHANISMS (CBM)

AND THE IMPORTANCE OF MILITARY-TO-MILITARY RELATIONS

The expansion of military-to-military relations and related confidence building measures as a way to promote stable naval relations engender cooperation, and decreasing tensions are often pointed to as important topics for US-Sino maritime relations (Bergin, 2002). However, one should be wary of overstating their importance. As noted time and again throughout this essay, maritime

strategy and policy are the purview of policymakers, not mariners.²⁰ Therefore, the existence of ties between the latter on both sides of the Pacific, while having some benefits, would be of marginal and limited utility in the event of a conflict. Nevertheless, the push by the United States in setting up military-to-military relationships with their Chinese counterparts at various levels and through different forums is to be welcomed, as is China's engagement and participation in these. Although they are different in scope, the envisaged personnel exchanges, port visits, high-level officers' meetings, and joint military exercises such as RIMPAC can all have positive feedback loops in terms of how China's maritime strategy is considered by the United States and its neighbors (Turnbull, 2014). In essence, the existence of these and other types of CBM must not be an end point, nor can they be detached from policy. It can, however, provide a positive feedback loop within the naval community, ameliorate fears, and increase trust.

In conclusion, these are some of the key areas in which cooperation is possible and advantageous to all parties (Capie, 2015). Naturally, it is often easy to cooperate when trust already exists, much harder when there is little. Still, the self-interest of the concerned parties should provide a reason for conducting such confidence-building measures. While navy-to-navy connections are important at the more immediate level, this article finds that a much greater impact at the strategic and foreign-policy levels would be possible if measures related to piracy, disaster relief, and pollution incidents could have global and regional responses.

After a somber and darker analysis of the rise of China's capabilities and potential for conflict, we believe that there are a number of areas in which the United States and Asian naval powers can pursue joint interests. Unfortunately, China sometimes seems to believe that trust must be achieved prior to the start of confidence-building mechanisms, even though this reasoning is self-defeating, as a relationship in which trust exists does not need confidence-building mechanisms, at least to the same degree as a relationship without such trust (Heinrichs et al., 2011). Strategic trust should be built from the ground up, while recognizing that it is ultimately a policy decision to change the overall systemic environment in which strategy operates.

20 This is not to say that military officers' views do not feed into the policy-making process. They do, and to a significant degree in both the United States and China. The point here however is that in the case of conflict escalation after a certain threshold, relationships built over military-to-military exchanges will be of limited utility. They can however be extremely useful before a critical point in the conflict spiral is reached.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to add further credence to the potential for a new security framework based on systemic security. Its main argument, that China's rising sea power is not necessarily a source for conflict but can actually enhance the prospects for cooperation, was made first by analyzing the concept of sea power itself, and second through an analysis of some of the potential avenues for trust building. Through an inductive reasoning based on the analysis of the modernization and development of China's maritime force, it was argued that China's growing capabilities have been a direct result of a decision-making process based on its foreign policy objectives – and that sea power must always be the result of a policy decision – while at the same time also being a potential source for the development of new policy goals. Means and ends at the strategic level have a dialectical nature that must be considered in such an analysis.

The PLAN represents a challenge to American naval primacy, but also an opportunity to build a new partnership for the global common good and to ensure the stability and safety of and in the world's oceans. There are a number of areas in which conflict can occur, the primary ones being those that touch upon the core national interests of China. This presents the main difficulty in undertaking such a change in the overall framework toward a new partnership, particularly when considering that China has changed its views on its core national interests to encompass the maritime disputes, stemming from its feeling that it had the necessary leverage to do so at the international level, and the need to do so due to domestic constraints. While China's assertiveness is not really new, it has placed a higher degree of importance on its maritime territory. It has confounded its neighbors and given some credence to those arguing for a more assertive American position. It would be wrong, however, to assume either the inevitability of conflict in these cases or, more importantly, that a Chinese Navy is predominantly threatening to America's and its neighbors interests. As showcased by the arguments given throughout this article, sea power can be an avenue for cooperation and the mitigation of the security dilemma can be partly accomplished through shared maritime goals.

Ultimately, the rise of China – if it continues – will inevitably alter the balance of power on the global stage, but this is a far cry from seeing this state-of-affairs as a definite threat to the United States, its interests, or to those of its allies. A balanced critique in this article of the potential for cooperation was thus achieved, highlighting the main risks in such an undertaking; first by focusing on the need to replace the current narrative which uncritically

positions China's maritime modernization in a conflict frame of reference, and second in analyzing how China's threat perceptions and the actions it takes to mitigate these ought to be reanalyzed on the basis of how they will be perceived by the United States and China's East Asian neighbors.

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Received 27-10-2014. Accepted for publication 15-07-2015.

SILVA, D. R. e (2015), "The role of sea power in China's rise: is maritime conflict inevitable?". *Análise Social*, 217, L (4.º), pp. 708-732.

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