

NATIONALISM AT SEA: RETHINKING CHINA'S NAVAL EXPANSION SINCE THE 1980S

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Abstract: *China's dramatic naval expansion and increasing assertiveness in maritime affairs over recent decades mark a significant departure from its historically continental strategic orientation. Chinese strategists and experts often attribute this transformation to a shifting threat environment and growing economic interdependence with maritime trade since the launch of economic reforms in 1978 and the end of the Cold War in 1991. While both factors held explanatory value in the late 20th century, their relevance has diminished since the 2010s, and remains insufficient to account for China's continued pursuit of a carrier-based, blue-water navy capable of global power projection. Drawing on Robert Ross's concept of naval nationalism, this paper offers a complementary perspective to these conventional explanations. Through a critical analysis of China's strategic behaviour from the 1980s to the present, this paper argues that naval nationalism has been a consistent—though not exclusive—driving force behind China's naval development. Its influence is closely tied to Beijing's perception of its global position: the more China perceives itself as occupying a strong position or operating within a favourable international environment, the more salient naval nationalism becomes in shaping its maritime strategy. Fuelled by nationalist sentiment and symbolized by aircraft carriers and far-sea operations, China's ambition to become a global sea power is increasingly accompanied by a determination to "reclaim" its maritime territory and challenge US naval dominance in the Western Pacific.*

Despite the political polarization in the United States, perhaps one of the few issues that can draw consensus from both Republicans and Democrats is the strategic priority toward China. Both the Trump and Biden administrations have been determined to confront China by strengthening the US naval presence in the Western Pacific,¹ which is reasonable given China's shocking pace in building up its naval strength. While the US has long been the leading naval power, China has been rapidly expanding its navy over the last decades. In 2022, the number of Chinese active warships surpassed that of the US, and China is currently operating the world's largest navy.² Although the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) still lags behind the US in terms of total tonnage, according to some naval intelligence, China's ships are increasingly of comparable quality to those of the US.³

While China grows more confident in its expanding naval capability, in addition to its most notable assertive operations over disputed regions in the East China Sea, Taiwan, and the South China Sea,⁴ the country is also more eager to send its fleet beyond its

immediate maritime region. In February 2025, China's unnoticed live-fire military drill in the waters between Australia and New Zealand showcased both the country's ability and willingness to project its power to distant regions.⁵

Though historically a continental power, China is now directing its security focus seaward, determined to challenge the US maritime dominance that has prevailed since the end of the Second World War. It is no coincidence that, despite bordering fourteen countries along its over 22,000km land border, China appears to be more assertive in maritime disputes.

This paper examines the factors that have been driving China's maritime ambition and naval expansion since the 1980s. The following section examines two key factors, often highlighted by Chinese naval strategists and experts, that explain China's shift in security focus toward the sea. The first widely cited factor is the changing threat environment, which compels China to focus more on potential threats from the sea. The second is economic: since the 1978 economic reforms, China's integration with the maritime economy has made it necessary to protect its expanding sea lines of communications (SLOCs) to safeguard its economic and energy security. While these two factors hold some explanatory power, they both nonetheless show weakness, with their explanatory power starting to fade in the 2010s.

The latter part of this paper will examine how naval nationalism has been a consistent, though not exclusive, driving force behind China's naval development since the 1980s and has played an incrementally prominent role since the early 2010s. As conceptualized by Robert Ross, naval nationalism refers to nationalist "prestige strategies" to enhance the regime's domestic legitimacy by satisfying the nation's self-perception as a great power.⁶ While Ross laid the conceptual framework of naval nationalism, he did not fully contextualize it in the case of China. In particular, he did not examine what factors, beyond the personal ambitions of autocratic leaders,⁷ support China's naval nationalism, nor how its significance in the country's strategic thinking has varied across different periods. This paper argues that naval nationalism stems from China's desire to project itself as a great power, but its influence on naval development depends on how Beijing perceives its global position. The stronger or more favourable China views its international environment, the more dominant naval nationalism becomes in shaping its maritime strategy and naval development.

Evaluating Conventional Explanations

This section will examine two factors that are widely used, especially among Chinese strategists, to explain or justify China's shifting strategic focus toward maritime affairs, and therefore the country's rapid expansion of PLAN, over the last decades. The first factor is what I call the threat environment theory, and the second factor is economic security.

Threat Environment Theory

The threat environment theory suggests that China's shifting strategic focus toward the sea was mainly driven by the change in the geopolitical landscape in East Asia since the end of the Cold War, and that the development of the PLAN as an essential response

to the country's evolving threat environment. As pointed out by a PLAN strategist, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 provided "historical opportunities" for China as it eliminated the nation's greatest continental security threat at the time.⁸ In the decade following, China successively settled its border disputes with neighbouring countries and signed a "Friendship Cooperation Treaty" with Russia, leading to a period when the security environment of its land border was seen in the country as "the best in China's history."⁹ As a result, China could safely reallocate more resources and security focus on the sea.

At the same time, China found itself facing a different geopolitical challenge—expanding US hegemony as a unipolar power. Following the end of the Cold War, the US sought to secure its global dominance through a series of military interventions and destabilizing acts, which the research institute of the PLA even calls "the root causes of contemporary warfare."¹⁰ Similar concern was also expressed by the Chinese government, which stated in 1998 that the US's "expanding military bloc and strengthening military alliance create uncertainty for international security."¹¹ At a 2005 Peking University seminar attended by over 20 prominent Chinese scholars, experts, and officials, participants agreed that while the US sought to maintain global hegemony, "China must prepare for the US's persistent attempt to suppress China."¹²

During the same period, the political development in Taiwan was another nerve-touching issue for China. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Beijing has persistently claimed sovereignty of Taiwan. The island, at the time, was under control of the Kuomintang (KMT) which was defeated by the CCP during the Chinese civil war, and thus viewed by the PRC as part of its territory yet to be "reunified." In the 1990s, Taiwan underwent a democratic transition, which was seen by authoritarian China as a "separatist" initiative to "make Taiwan an independent political entity."¹³ Meanwhile, Lee Teng-hui, Taiwan's first democratically elected president, advocated for the "Two-state theory" and refused to endorse the "One China Principle." Beijing perceived this move as a rejection of China's proposal for "peaceful reunification," contributing to China's belief that it had to respond forcefully.¹⁴ However, Beijing's attempt to deter the "separatists" in Taiwan through large-scale military exercises and missile launches received counter-deterrence responses from the US. As observed by Ian McCaslin and Andrew Erickson, China's inability to respond to the US deployment of two aircraft carriers to waters off the Chinese coast during the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996 pressed Chinese leadership to increase funding for PLAN modernization.¹⁵

As China began to perceive its primary source of threat shifting from land to sea, its coastal regions simultaneously emerged as strategically vital yet increasingly vulnerable to maritime threats. Under Deng Xiaoping's policy of "allowing some to get rich first" (让一部分人先富起来),¹⁶ China prioritized the modernization and urbanization of its densely populated coastal regions. These areas were designed to serve as the country's economic gateway to global markets, pooling together factories, cheap labour, and well-developed infrastructure.¹⁷ This strategy successfully attracted foreign direct investment (FDI), which played a pivotal role in capital formation and economic growth. Subsequently, by the early 1990s, the coastal regions accounted for about 90% of China's

FDI projects.¹⁸ Wu Zhengyu from the Renmin University of China observed, one of the motives behind China's drive to develop sea power was to "expand its strategic depth in the Western Pacific, and thereby maximize the security of China's most economically vibrant eastern region."¹⁹ Another Chinese strategist even asserted that, "if Taiwan and other islands are not within China's control, China will not be able to guarantee the border security of commercial centres such as Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen."²⁰

In short, with the changing geopolitical landscape in the post-Cold War 1990s, marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union, successive settlements of land border disputes with its neighbours, expansion of US hegemony, and the deteriorating relationship with Taipei, the threat environment theory suggests that China's major security threats were no longer from its land border, but from the sea. Meanwhile, after a decade of economic reform, China's flourishing coastal regions became vital to the country's economy, such that any attack on those regions from the sea would be devastating. As a result, China's shift in security focus toward the sea and its naval buildup were a response to the change in threat environment.

This argument is convincing in that it was largely compatible with the trajectory of the development of China's naval strategy in the late 20th century. At the time when China's economy started to surge under Deng's economic reform, the PLAN was still adopting the strategy of "coastal defense" (海岸防御) as directed by Mao Zedong since the early years of the establishment of the PRC.²¹ The role of the PLAN in the military throughout the early decades of the PRC was largely as a supporter to the PLA ground force,²² such that some may see the strategy of "coastal defense" as a "limited extent of ground operation" rather than a genuine naval operation.²³ In the early years of economic reform, Deng still used "coastal defense" as the navy's guiding principle,²⁴ but this began to change in the mid-1980s.

In 1983, Liu Huaqing, then Commander of PLAN, proposed the revised naval strategy of "active defense and near-sea operations" (积极防御, 近海作战), which was later refined in 1985 as "near-sea active defense," also sometimes referred to as "near-sea defense."²⁵ As categorized by Liu, "near-sea defense" is a "regional defensive strategy" (区域防御型战略), marking a departure from China's traditional "coastal defense" strategy.²⁶ While "coastal defense" is a ground-based operation focused on securing China's shoreline, "near-sea defense" aims to create a buffer zone across the broader maritime region. Recognizing the economic vulnerability of China's coastal regions, Liu sought to keep potential conflict zones at a safe distance from these economic hubs.

Liu's proposal was officially endorsed by Deng in 1985; the year China normalized its relations with the Soviet Union.²⁷ The vitality of "near-sea defense" as PLAN's primary strategy was further consolidated due to Liu's subsequent elevation to the Central Military Commission and the CCP Politburo Standing Committee in the 1990s. Even after Liu retired, "near-sea defense" remained central to the country's strategic thinking. Subsequently, throughout the 2000s, advancing the capability of "near-sea defense" had been one of the primary tasks for the PLAN.²⁸

While the strategy of “near-sea defense” had been dominant at the time, China’s naval strategy has never been purely about “near-sea defense,” with its centrality starting to fade by the end of the 2010s. Since 2008, developing a capability to operate in the far-sea has been another major task for the PLAN alongside “near-sea defense.”²⁹ Meanwhile, discussion in China regarding the construction of a blue-water navy and an aircraft carrier became popular,³⁰ such that China eventually launched its first aircraft carrier in 2012.

As pointed out by Robert Ross, it is unnecessary for a country to develop a carrier-based blue-water navy to protect its maritime security in its immediate waters, as it is far less cost-effective than focusing its resources on advancing its submarine-based access-denial capability.³¹ While the strategy of “near-sea defense” addressed the new threat environment by denying potential invaders access to China’s coastal regions, the subsequent emphasis on “far-sea protection” clearly deviated from this strategic purpose.

In parallel to his proposal of “near-sea defense,” significant efforts were also made by Liu to advocate for the construction of an aircraft carrier, such that he was also known as the “Father of the Chinese Aircraft Carrier.”³² Although the Chinese leadership had not been publicly vocal regarding aircraft carriers until the late 2000s, studies found that as early as the mid-1990s, President Jiang Zemin had already quietly approved the research and development of China’s capability to build an aircraft carrier.³³ Even at the time when the trajectory of Chinese naval development was largely in line with the evolving threat environment in the late 20th century, Chinese naval strategists believed the country’s navy should do more than just respond to the threat environment.

One risk of overly stressing the threat environment theory is that it may lead to an oversight of China’s overall attitude toward territorial disputes. While diplomatic efforts were made by China throughout the 1990s to settle its border disputes and to improve relationships with its land neighbours, similar efforts were also made regarding its maritime neighbours. As a signal to show its willingness to uphold the international maritime order, China ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea in 1996. Meanwhile, a series of bilateral negotiations with other claimants of the South China Sea also took place during the period.³⁴ Most notably, China reached an agreement with Vietnam in 2000, establishing a mutually agreed maritime boundary in the Tonkin Gulf, which some even saw as “a model of conflict resolution.”³⁵

It is also an overstatement to say China has well-settled its border disputes with its land neighbours. For example, China continues to have several unresolved border disputes with India and Bhutan.³⁶ Interestingly, compared to China’s attitude and behaviour when dealing with disputes on the sea, it appears more restrained regarding disputes on land. Despite China and India occasionally engaging in border clashes, those clashes rarely escalated seriously³⁷ and were settled in line with the Agreement on Confidence-Building Measures both countries signed in 1996, which explicitly prohibited the use of guns and bombs along the Line of Actual Control.³⁸

Therefore, it is fair to say that instead of the lack of disputes on land allowing China

to shift its focus to the sea, it is more likely the case that China chooses to be more assertive in maritime disputes while keeping those on land latent. As Ross observed, border disputes are not the cause of security conflicts, but rather “security conflicts cause border disputes.”³⁹ While it is true that the geopolitical development by the end of the 20th century marked a relief in China's land-based security threat, and, at least to some extent, a relatively more unfriendly environment on the sea, China did take part in that change of environment.

Economic Security

Another commonly discussed factor besides the threat environment theory is the significance of China's maritime security to its economic security. In addition to the growing economic significance of the coastal regions, another effect of China's economic reform since 1978 is the integration of the country's economy into the global market. Benefiting from its vast supply of cheap labour and lax industrial regulations in the 1980s, China rapidly developed as the world's largest manufacturer, often being referred to as the “world's factory,”⁴⁰ exporting manufactured goods across the globe. Following the announcement of the “Go Global” strategy (走出去) in 1999, which encouraged Chinese enterprises to seek markets abroad, and China's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, exports further emerged to become an unshakable pillar of China's economic growth.⁴¹

At the same time, China's energy demand was also on the rapid rise. By the mid-1990s, China's energy consumption had doubled from the time when economic reform began, while the population growth during the same period was just about 8%.⁴² The expansion in China's energy demand was mainly driven by the continued expansion of the manufacturing sector, which accounted for more than half of the country's total energy consumption.⁴³ In response to its growing energy demand, the country also found itself increasingly reliant on imported oil. Since 2006, China has been a net importer of oil.⁴⁴

Given China's growing reliance on access to global markets, as well as imported energy, maritime security became more vital to the country's economic security. It is estimated that over 80% of global trade by volume and 70% by value is conducted via maritime transport.⁴⁵ As coastal regions were designed to be the engine of China's export-oriented economy under economic reform, maritime trade is even more relevant in China, such that over 90% of the country's international trade depends on maritime transport.⁴⁶ As another indicator demonstrating the significance of maritime trade to China, as of 2023, seven of the world's top ten busiest ports were in China, accounting for a quarter of global maritime traffic.⁴⁷

The economic reliance on maritime access has long been stressed by Chinese naval strategists. After studying different naval theories, Liu Huaqing admitted that he was particularly convinced by Mahan's belief that a strong navy which can exclusively command over strategically important SLOCs is imperative to a country's prosperity and national strength.⁴⁸ Consequently, “to effectively and timely control over SLOCs nearby China's maritime region” became one of the major thoughts when designing his “near-sea defense” strategy.⁴⁹ For decades since then, the belief that there is an essential linkage between China's economy and SLOC security has been widely shared by the

Chinese leadership and strategists. In 2011, a Senior Captain of the PLAN published a book, *On Maritime Strategic Access*, systematically theorizing the importance of SLOCs to China's national interests, by which she asserted that since "China's economic external dependence is increasing year by year, maintaining the security of strategic SLOCs is related to the maintenance and expansion of the national interests [...] and has become a major strategic concern of the Party and the State."⁵⁰ As observed by a Taiwanese expert, the book reflected that "the Chinese leadership has a certain level of expectation toward strategic SLOCs," and the subsequent Maritime Silk Road initiative advocated by Xi Jinping in 2013 "puts the theory of strategic SLOCs into practice."⁵¹

However, similar to that of the threat environment theory, while the linkage between China's maritime security and economic development is evident, the vitality of maritime trade should not be overstated. As shown in Figure 1, although the weight of exports to China's GDP was in general climbing since 1978, and accounted for a third of the country's GDP in the mid-2000s, its importance has declined thereafter. The sharp decline in 2008 was indeed contributed by the shrinking international consumption market due to the global financial crisis that year. Following the financial crisis, the Chinese leadership realized the risk of being overly reliant on foreign markets, and efforts were made to boost domestic consumption throughout the 2010s.⁵² By the end of the 2010s, geopolitical tension with the US had continued to grow. As the US was one of China's major foreign markets, this tension led Xi Jinping to direct further reforms. In 2020, Xi initiated a "dual circulation" strategy, which attempted to make the country's domestic demand and innovation the primary driver of the economy while keeping foreign markets and investors as a secondary driver.⁵³ Due to uncertainty in the global trading system following the COVID-19 pandemic and the global trade war in 2025, there is currently a prevalent sentiment of trade protectionism worldwide; it is reasonable to expect that China is seeking to further reduce economic reliance on foreign markets.⁵⁴

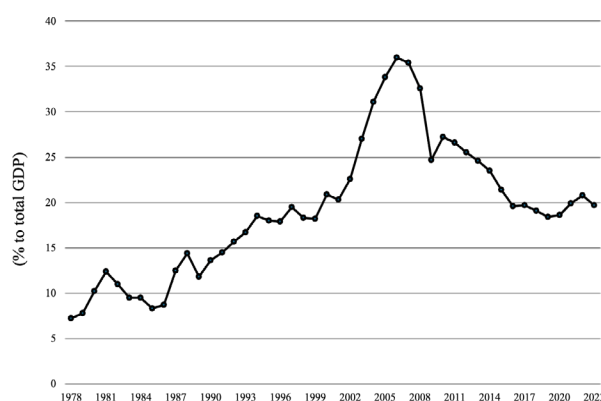


Figure 1: China's exports of goods and services (1978-2023)

imported coal only accounts for a small portion of China's coal consumption, with most imported from neighbouring countries like Indonesia, Russia, and Australia, which do not necessarily involve SLOCs in the far-sea.⁵⁷

As for oil, the Middle East was traditionally the major source of China's oil. However, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia, where maritime logistics are not required, has emerged as China's major source of oil, marking a relative decline

Additionally, China's energy reliance on maritime access is also prone to overstatement. For decades, coal, rather than oil, has been China's major energy source. While coal accounts for over 60% of China's energy supply, oil accounts for no more than 18%.⁵⁵ Being the world's largest coal producer, China's coal is largely domestically supplied.⁵⁶ Despite being a net coal importer since 2009 due to the country's surging energy demand,

in China's reliance on oil from the Middle East.⁵⁸ In the meantime, as China is in the process of energy transition: many sectors that used to rely exclusively on oil are gradually being transformed. As indicated by many observers, while China is boosting its electric vehicles (EV) industry, traditional fossil fuel vehicles are being displaced at an accelerating pace, which has already led to a decline in the country's oil demand.⁵⁹

Despite economic security having long been an argument taken by Chinese strategists and officials to stress the strategic significance of maritime security and SLOCs to the country, the strategic value of the sea from an economic perspective is exaggerated. With Xi Jinping's goal to make the country's economy more self-reliant, the relevance of economic security to China's maritime ambition has been fading over the last decade. It is not to say that economic security has never been a genuine factor in China's naval strategic thinking—specially before 2008, when the significance of exports to China's economic growth was too evident—but as both China's economic growth and energy security are now less reliant on SLOCs in the far seas, the argument of economic security is more and more unconvincing.

Naval Nationalism: A Complementary Lens

Both threat environment theory and economic security can only partly explain China's naval development in certain periods of time, and both are unable to justify the need to consume vast resources to develop a carrier-based blue-water navy for far-sea operations instead of focusing on its "near-sea defense" capability. As argued in the latter part of this paper, China's maritime ambition and naval expansion can only make sense with the complementary explanation of naval nationalism. This does not mean that China's maritime ambition and naval expansion can exclusively be explained by naval nationalism, as it is clear that other factors, including threat environment theory and economic security, also contribute to China's strategic thinking and naval development. Rather, naval nationalism is a complement, which has consistently contributed to China's naval development since the 1980s, while the level of influence varied across different periods of time.

Referencing Robert Ross's discussion on the concept, this paper adopts his understanding of naval nationalism as nationalist "prestige strategies" to enhance the regime's domestic legitimacy by satisfying the nation's self-perception as a great power.⁶⁰ However, as Ross didn't explicitly define the concept,⁶¹ this paper will list some characteristics of naval nationalism, followed by contextualizing the relevance of the concept in the specific case of China.

First, the military is often considered as a symbol of national strength, which is often applied as an effective tool to arouse national pride in the people, and therefore cement the leadership of the nation. There are substantial studies demonstrating the positive correlation between the development of military strength and the construction of nationalism,⁶² with some scholars arguing that military culture can provide a "significant and long-lasting influence" on the development of national identity in a modern context.⁶³ The navy, as an essential part of the military strength, can also serve as a nationalist tool to consolidate national identity.

One characteristic that makes the navy stand out from other military branches is its diplomatic facet. It is agreed that in the modern context, the nature of the navy as a military branch has already departed from its military origin, such that it is more often used to serve diplomatic purposes during peace-time or crisis by sending political signals to other countries.⁶⁴ Due to the cost and military implications of naval deployment, deploying a navy is thus seen to be a “credible means of signaling,” which could give the country more leverage in international politics especially when powerful and highly-visible vessels, namely aircraft carriers, are deployed.⁶⁵ For example, during the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996, the US deployment of two aircraft carriers to the Taiwan Strait was a strong signal sent not only to China, but also to Taiwan and other US allies in the region, as well as to Americans, demonstrating the US security commitment and its military supremacy in the Western Pacific.

Therefore, a visibly powerful navy is not only a military asset to a country, but also a diplomatic asset⁶⁶ which can in turn also be translated as fuel for national pride by presenting a sense of “international success” to its people.⁶⁷ When advocating for the construction of a Chinese aircraft carrier, Liu Huaqing was apparently an active supporter of such a perspective, believing that a carrier would enhance the country's political influence, as well as raise its “military and national prestige.”⁶⁸ Such a perspective is echoed by many Chinese strategists, with some stressing that the navy has “an important international role because naval vessels are symbols of state power and authority,” and therefore the mission of the naval forces is not to be limited to “near-sea defense.”⁶⁹ As a result, some experts concluded that having a strong navy with capability to project power globally has naturally been “the ‘blue dream’ of every great power since technology made such fleets possible.”⁷⁰

In the Chinese context, naval strength also has another meaning. Within China's official narrative, the long period between the outbreak of the first Opium War in 1839 and the end of the Second World War in 1945 is often referred to as the “century of humiliation,” a period when China had been repeatedly “invaded and suppressed” by imperial powers.⁷¹ While this sense of humiliation has long served as a vital political motivation in China, over the last decade, it has been frequently cited as an important source to justify the necessity of Xi Jinping's “China's dream” and “national rejuvenation” visions.⁷² During the “century of humiliation,” China was mostly invaded by sea, and it successively lost its coastal regions. An article in Chinese state media writes that throughout the “century of humiliation,” China suffered “470 invasions from the sea [...] leaving an unforgettable shame on the Chinese nation,” and China's naval strength is therefore “a matter of the survival of the state and the nation.”⁷³ Similarly an article published by the PLA media states that “during the century of humiliation, China had been invaded by foreign powers from the sea several hundred times [...] deeply confirming the unwavering rule: embracing the sea would lead to prosperity, giving up the sea would lead to decline.”⁷⁴ One expert notes that the Chinese “deep-rooted desire” to recover from the national humiliation is something that “should not be underestimated.”⁷⁵

The nationalist sentiment has grown important to the Chinese leadership ever since the economic reform began. The communist ideology had essentially served as an indispensable source of the Communist Party's leadership since the Civil War, which

was even explicitly praised as the central component of the PLA's military doctrine under the Maoist era.⁷⁶ Following the death of Mao and Deng's assumption of power in the late 1970s, however, the party-state officially gave up its emphasis on the communist ideology and focused on national development and modernization. Since then, economic growth and national strength have become the vital source of legitimacy for the Chinese leadership.⁷⁷

As China emerged as a great power with rising international status, naval strength, as a demonstrative symbol of national strength, also received considerable attention. In 2019, the Academy of Ocean of China published an article with the title "Build a Strong Navy Commensurate with China's Role," stating that as "China is entering a new period of 'from big to strong' [...] the country's development and security interests call for a strong blue-water navy" which "should have the capability to project our sea power to any maritime regions in the world."⁷⁸ A state media article from the same period also argued that it is necessary for China to develop a carrier-based blue-water navy because an aircraft carrier is a "manifestation of a country's comprehensive strength, and also a military symbol of great power status [and it] does not match China's national strength if the country does not have an aircraft carrier."⁷⁹ With the Chinese desire, and eventual success, to develop the country as a strong nation with global influence, the desire to possess a strong navy capable of global projection has also become too much to ignore.

Despite the growing emphasis on a blue-water navy, this nationalist perspective also drives the country to perceive the necessity of asserting its claims over disputed maritime territories in the near-sea, in addition to actual security considerations. First, it essentially satisfies the nationalist desire to recover from the national humiliation. As claimed in the Chinese official narrative, those disputed maritime regions, including the Senkaku Islands, Taiwan, and the South China Sea, have been "China's territory since time immemorial," which were invaded and occupied by foreign forces during the century of humiliation.⁸⁰ Since China is no longer a weak state that can be suppressed by foreign powers, it is therefore necessary for the country to "reclaim" and to "defend [these] 'Chinese territory' from foreign encroachment," which "appeals to political and emotional sensibilities."⁸¹

Another layer in these territorial disputes is their strategic value to the ambition of global projection. As shown in Map 1, despite having a long coastline, China's near-sea is geographically surrounded by peninsular, island, and archipelagic nations. Most notably, as often referred to by Chinese strategists, the country's maritime access is contained by the US "first island chain," stretching from South Korea and Japan at its northernmost, passing through the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Singapore at its southernmost.⁸² It is therefore a prerequisite for China to control these maritime regions, in order to secure its naval deploy to the far sea without the risk of being blocked in by the island chain. Taiwan, as the closest island among the island chain to the Chinese continent, is particularly valuable in the sense that it would naturally dismiss the containment effect of the island chain if China could seize and set up a military base on the island.

Therefore, from the perspective of naval nationalism, China's assertive claims in the near

sea and its naval ambition of global projection are not two diverging issues but are instead intertwined. As China's naval development and maritime strategy have been influenced by naval nationalism, the level to which naval nationalism influences varies across different periods, and is primarily determined by Beijing's perception of its national strength relative to that of the international environment and balance of power.⁸³ The more Beijing



Map 1: China "contained" by the "first island chain"

perceives itself as enjoying a strong position or a friendly international environment, the more influential naval nationalism is, and vice versa.

Historical Stages of China's Naval Nationalism

The 1980s was perhaps the period when the international environment was most favourable to the PRC, therefore also marking the first historical stage of its naval nationalism since its establishment. When Liu Huaqing initiated the advancement of naval strategy and modernization of the PLAN, China had normalized its diplomatic relations with both the US and the Soviet Union. As China's economy and naval capabilities began to surge, it also appeared more assertive regarding its maritime claims, particularly in the South China Sea. During this period, China advanced its naval presence from the Paracel Islands to the Spratly Islands, followed by the construction of permanent structures on the reefs and naval patrols. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea throughout the 1980s was seen to be emboldened by the "minimal adverse international reaction."⁸⁴ While great powers, namely the US and the Soviet Union, remained silent, regional countries in Southeast Asia also failed to take meaningful joint action to push back against China.

In sharp contrast, the 1990s began with a significant backlash in the international environment for China. Following the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, China faced severe international sanctions initiated by the US, leading to rapidly deteriorating US-China relations and a diplomatically isolated China. After that, the Gulf War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 demonstrated the political and military supremacy of the US. These incidents collectively, referred to by Rush Doshi as the "traumatic trifecta,"⁸⁵ led to a sense of an inferior international status in China. This was especially vivid when the size of the US economy at that time was nearly 17 times that of China's. Subsequently, China became more restrained not only diplomatically but also in maritime affairs. As discussed earlier, throughout the 1990s, China not only worked on resolving its border disputes with land neighbours but also attempted to improve relationships with maritime neighbours by presenting a more cooperative attitude toward maritime disputes. Even during the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1996, while China behaved aggressively toward Taiwan, it immediately stepped back after US naval intervention.

However, China would soon find itself in a better position entering the 21st century, with accession to the WTO marking a significant step in China's rising international status. During the 16th Party Congress in 2002, President Hu Jintao stated that "with the development of China's economy and the enhancement of our comprehensive national strength [...] China would be more flexible and confident in handling China-US relations."⁸⁶ The gradual shift in foreign policy was also translated into growing confidence surrounding the navy. As Beijing officially acknowledged in the early 2000s that the PLAN had already achieved the capability of "near-sea defense,"⁸⁷ there was also increasing official emphasis on the navy's role in safeguarding the country's "maritime rights and interests" (海洋权益).⁸⁸ Meanwhile, China was once again stepping up its assertiveness regarding maritime claims. In 2005, China passed the "Anti-Secession Law," further providing legal tools to legitimize potential invasion of Taiwan by stating that China "shall adopt non-peaceful or other necessary measures to defend state sovereignty and territorial integrity" once "the possibility of peaceful reunification has been completely exhausted."⁸⁹

Four incidents in 2008 made the year remarkable for Chinese nationalists. First, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) lost the presidential election in Taiwan, which Beijing saw as a failure of "Taiwanese separatists" and therefore a victory for Chinese who wished for "peaceful reunification."⁹⁰ The second was the successful organization of the Beijing Olympics, which received extensive global media coverage and created the image of "China's 'coming out' on the world stage."⁹¹ The third incident was the global financial crisis, which was widely seen as "a sign of the weakening of the United States' economic might and international prestige."⁹²

The fourth incident, which is also most relevant to China's naval nationalism, was the country's participation in the international campaign to counter piracy in the Gulf of Aden. It was China's first naval operation in the far seas contributing to global maritime affairs, and was promoted domestically as a huge progression in the country's naval development. As emphasized by a naval officer during an interview with PLA media, the success of the country's "first meaningful military operations in the far sea" would "accelerate the progress of the PLAN moving toward the far sea," adding that "during the operation, our officers and soldiers demonstrated the image of the Chinese navy to the world with good military qualities."⁹³ Propaganda efforts continued almost six years after the naval deployment. In 2014, China Central Television (CCTV) aired a TV drama series "In the Gulf of Aden" (舰在亚丁湾),⁹⁴ which Andrew Erickson and Austin Strange observed reflected the regime's effort to further promote the country as a strong and responsible global power both internationally and domestically through its navy.⁹⁵

While all these incidents contributed to a greater sense in China that the country had "stood up" and emerged as a great power with global significance, the easing of the external threat environment also suggested the limitations of threat environment theory in explaining China's continued naval expansion. Therefore, from this point onward, it is even clear that naval nationalism began to assume a more dominant position in driving the country's naval development, signified by the rising interest in building a world-class blue-water navy with an aircraft carrier. As reported in a cover story of *World Knowledge*, a Chinese magazine owned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "the largest-

ever discussion of China's sea power is enthusiastically developing on the internet, in the media, research seminars, policy circles, and even in casual street conversation," followed by the observation that "building China's own aircraft carrier is a dream for countless Chinese people."⁹⁶ Amid rising demand for a carrier-based blue-water navy in China, a Major General of PLAN clearly stated during an interview in late 2008 that "the navy of any great power [...] has the dream to have one or more aircraft carriers."⁹⁷ That year also marked the first time China included far-sea operations in its national defense strategy. As stated in China's Defense in 2008, the white paper document published by the Chinese government, in addition to working "to comprehensively improve the capability of fighting in the near sea," the PLAN should also "gradually develop the capability of responding to non-traditional security threats in the far sea, and promote the overall transformation of naval construction."⁹⁸

In the following years, China became increasingly blatant about its maritime ambitions. In 2009, China submitted its infamous nine-dash line claim to the United Nations, claiming virtually the entire South China Sea as its maritime territory.⁹⁹ During the same period, a US ocean surveillance ship was harassed by five Chinese vessels in the South China Sea, with the latter warning the US ship to leave the waters or "suffer the consequences."¹⁰⁰ Beyond asserting maritime claims, China unveiled its ambition to possess a carrier-based blue-water navy. In September 2012, China announced the commissioning of the country's first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning, which also fueled nationalist sentiment. A report by Chinese state media claimed that the induction of an aircraft carrier held great significance not only for comprehensively enhancing Chinese naval capabilities but also for "safeguarding national sovereignty, security and development interests, and promoting world peace."¹⁰¹ Less than two months after commissioning its first aircraft carrier, during his final report as CCP general secretary, Hu Jintao declared the national goal to "construct a strong sea power" (建设海洋强国).¹⁰²

Since the 1980s, China's maritime ambitions have been largely proportionated to the country's national strength and self-perceived international status. By the time China's first aircraft carrier was commissioned and Hu Jintao declared his ambition to make China a strong sea power, China had surpassed Japan and emerged as the world's second-largest economy.¹⁰³ However, it would not be until Xi Jinping assumed power that naval nationalism would achieve an unprecedented dominant position in China's strategic thinking. Extensive studies have demonstrated how Xi's rhetorical vision of "national rejuvenation" is indeed a nationalist approach to consolidate his power and legitimacy.¹⁰⁴ Soon after Xi became the president of China, he not only endorsed the national goal to make China a strong sea power as declared by his predecessor but also cited it as "having huge and deep significance for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."¹⁰⁵

Xi's enthusiasm for sea power proved to be serious. As discussed earlier in this paper, by the early 2010s, China's economy had become less reliant on exports, with its energy security never truly relying on SLOCs in the far seas; meanwhile, the PLAN had already established its capability to conduct "near-sea defense" to protect its flourishing coastal regions. However, driven by the desire to construct a strong sea power, in the 2013 white

paper document *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces*, the navy received unprecedented focus, justified by the statement that “constructing a strong sea power is the country's vital development strategy; to firmly safeguard the country's maritime rights and interests is the vital duty of the PLA.”¹⁰⁶ The maritime-focused position was further enhanced two years later, by which the white paper document *China's Military Strategy* directed that “the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance must be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests.”¹⁰⁷ The country's blue-water navy ambitions were further evident in 2019, when it stated that the PLAN must “accelerate the shift from near-sea defense to far-sea protection” to become a “strong and modernized navy.”¹⁰⁸

As Xi Jinping was determined to position China as a sea power, the maritime-oriented shift was systematized through PLA reforms in the mid-2010s. Under the reforms, the PLA ground forces were primarily targeted, with significant resources being pulled and reallocated, breaking traditional ground force dominance.¹⁰⁹ Meanwhile, the PLAN continued to expand its fleet. Two more aircraft carriers were successively launched in 2017 and 2022,¹¹⁰ and China is reportedly building its fourth carrier.¹¹¹ There is also evidence that China is working on its first nuclear icebreaker, enabling the country to project power to the Arctic.¹¹² Few would now doubt China's intention to build a strong blue-water navy capable of projecting power globally.

Conclusion

As presented in this paper, while threat environment theory and economic security have made considerable contributions to China's naval development, especially in the early years of the PLAN modernization, their actual significance is overstated. Their explanatory power has also faded by the 2010s. As a complement, naval nationalism has consistently contributed to the country's maritime ambitions and naval expansion, suggesting that China's desire to possess a strong navy with global projection capability, in order to match the country's self-perception as a great global power, has been among the major factors driving China's naval development since the 1980s.

The prevalence of rhetoric in China in recent years, such as “the East is rising and the West is declining” (东升西降) and “thriving China and the chaotic West” (中治西乱),¹¹³ suggests that China increasingly sees itself as superior to the declining Western world. This sense of superiority, along with the sense of urgency due to Xi's expressed goal to achieve the “rejuvenation of the Chinese nation on all fronts” by mid-21st century,¹¹⁴ may further translate into additional growth of naval nationalism, pushing the country to aim for having the world's strongest navy compatible with its superior international status. This is a dangerous geopolitical sign, as it indicates growing impatience in China toward the status quo in the Western Pacific, which still remains dominated by the US. There is currently little indication that China would stop pushing forward at sea, nor that the US would abandon its naval presence in the region. Therefore, it is sensible for the world to prepare for the time when Beijing decides to take steps to challenge US naval supremacy, “reclaiming” the waters and islands it believes to be Chinese territory, and completing the final piece to realize its maritime ambitions.

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