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How China and the U.S. Are Spawning a New Great Power Naval Rivalry



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Amid the intense coverage of Russian cyber-maneuvering and North Korean missile threats, another kind of great-power rivalry has been playing out quietly in the Indian and Pacific oceans. The U.S. and Chinese navies have been repositioning warships and establishing naval bases as if they were so many pawns on a geopolitical chessboard. To some it might seem curious, even quaint, that gunboats and naval bastions, once

emblematic of the Victorian age, remain even remotely relevant in our own era of cyber-threats and space warfare.

Yet if you examine, even briefly, the central role that naval power has played and still plays in the fate of empires, the deadly serious nature of this new naval competition makes more sense. Indeed, if war were to break out among the major powers today, don't discount the possibility that it might come from a naval clash over Chinese bases in the South China Sea rather than a missile strike against North Korea or a Russian cyber attack.

The Age of Empire

For the past 500 years, from the 50 fortified Portuguese ports that dotted the world in the sixteenth century to the [800](#) U.S. military bases that dominate much of it today, empires have used such enclaves as Archimedean levers to move the globe. Viewed historically, naval bastions were invaluable when it came to the aspirations of any would-be hegemonic power, yet also surprisingly vulnerable to capture in times of conflict.

Throughout the twentieth century and the first years of this one, military bases in the South China Sea in particular have been flashpoints for geopolitical change. The U.S. victory at Manila Bay in 1898, the fall of the British bastion of Singapore to the Japanese in 1942, America's withdrawal from Subic Bay in the Philippines in 1992, and China's construction of airstrips and missile launchers in the Spratly Islands since 2014 — all have been iconic markers for both geopolitical dominion and imperial transition.

Indeed, in his 1890 study of naval history, that famed advocate of seapower Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, arguably America's only original strategic thinker, [stated](#) that “the maintenance of suitable naval stations..., when combined with decided preponderance at sea, makes a scattered and extensive empire, like that of England, secure.” In marked contrast to the British Navy's 300 ships and 30 bases circling the globe, he worried that U.S. warships with “no foreign establishments, either colonial or military... will be like land birds, unable to fly far from their own shores. To provide resting-places for them... would be one of the first duties of a government proposing to itself the development of the power of the nation at sea.”

So important did Captain Mahan consider naval bases for America's defense that he [argued](#) “it should be an inviolable resolution of our national policy that no European state should henceforth acquire a coaling position within three thousand miles of San Francisco” — a span that reached the Hawaiian Islands, which Washington would soon seize. In a series of influential dictums, he also argued that a large fleet and overseas bases were essential to both the exercise of global power and national defense.

Although Mahan was read as gospel by everyone from American President Teddy Roosevelt to German Kaiser Wilhelm II, his observations do not explain the persistent geopolitical significance of such naval bases. Especially in periods between wars, these bastions seem to allow empires to project their power in crucial ways.

Historian Paul Kennedy has suggested that Britain's "naval mastery" in the nineteenth century made it "extremely difficult for other lesser states to undertake maritime operations or trade without at least its tacit consent." But modern bases do even more. Naval bastions and the warships they serve can weave a web of dominion across an open sea, transforming an unbounded ocean into de facto territorial waters. Even in an age of cyberwarfare, they remain essential to geopolitical gambits of almost any sort, as the United States has shown repeatedly during its tumultuous century as a Pacific power.

America as a Pacific Power

As the U.S. began its ascent to global power by expanding its navy in the 1890s, Captain Mahan, then head of the Naval War College, argued that Washington had to build a battle fleet and capture island bastions, particularly in the Pacific, that could control the surrounding sea-lanes. Influenced in part by his doctrine, Admiral George Dewey's squadron sank the Spanish fleet and seized the key harbor of Manila Bay in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War of 1898.

In 1905, however, Japan's stunning victory over the Russian Baltic Fleet in the Tsushima Strait (between southern Japan and Korea) suddenly revealed the vulnerability of the slender string of bases the U.S. then possessed, stretching from Panama to the Philippines. Under the pressure of the imperial Japanese navy, Washington soon abandoned its plans for a major naval presence in the Western Pacific. Within a year, President Theodore Roosevelt had removed the last Navy battleship from the region and later authorized the construction of a new Pacific bastion not in distant Manila Bay but at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, insisting that "the Philippines form our heel of Achilles." When the Versailles settlement at the end of World War I awarded Micronesia in the Western Pacific to Japan, the dispatch of any fleet from Pearl Harbor to Manila Bay became problematic in time of war and rendered the Philippines essentially indefensible.

It was partly for this reason, in mid-1941, that Secretary of War Henry Stimson decided that the B-17 bomber, aptly named the "Flying Fortress," would be the wonder weapon capable of countering the Japanese navy's control of the Western Pacific and sent 35 of these new aircraft to Manila. Stimson's strategy was, however, a flight of imperial fantasy that condemned most of those planes to destruction by Japanese fighters in the first days of

World War II in the Pacific and doomed General Douglas MacArthur's army in the Philippines to a humiliating defeat at Bataan.

As bomber ranges tripled during that global conflict, however, the War Department decided in 1943 that the country's postwar defense required retaining forward bases in the Philippines. These ambitions were fully realized in 1947 when the newly independent republic signed the Military Bases Agreement granting the U.S. a 99-year lease on 23 military installations, including the Seventh Fleet's future homeport at Subic Bay and the massive Clark Air Base near Manila.

Simultaneously, during its postwar occupation of Japan, the U.S. acquired more than a hundred military facilities that stretched from Misawa Air Base in the north of that country to Sasebo Naval Base in the south. With its strategic location, the island of Okinawa had 32 active U.S. installations covering about 20% of its entire area.

As the Cold War came to Asia in 1951, Washington concluded mutual defense pacts with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia that made the Pacific littoral the eastern anchor for its strategic dominion over Eurasia. By 1955, the early enclaves in Japan and the Philippines had been integrated into a global network of 450 overseas bases aimed largely at containing the Sino-Soviet bloc behind an Iron Curtain that bisected the vast Eurasian continent.

After surveying the rise and fall of Eurasian empires for the past 600 years, Oxford historian John Darwin concluded that Washington had achieved its "colossal Imperium... on an unprecedented scale" by becoming the first power to control the strategic axial points "at both ends of Eurasia" — in the west through the NATO alliance and in the east via those four mutual security pacts. During the later decades of the Cold War, moreover, the U.S. Navy completed its encirclement of the continent, taking over the old British base at Bahrain in 1971 and later building a multibillion-dollar base at the epicenter of the Indian Ocean on the island of Diego Garcia for its air and naval patrols.

Among these many bases ringing Eurasia, those along the Pacific littoral were of particular strategic import before, during, and after the Cold War. As the geopolitical fulcrum between the defense of one continent (North America) and control of another (Asia), the Pacific littoral has remained a constant focus in Washington's century-long effort to extend and maintain its global power.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, as Washington elites reveled in their role as leaders of the world's sole superpower, former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, a master of Eurasia's unforgiving geopolitics, warned that the U.S. could preserve its global

power only as long as the eastern end of that vast Eurasian landmass did not unify itself in a way that might lead to “the expulsion of America from its offshore bases.” Otherwise, he asserted with some prescience, “a potential rival to America might at some point arise.”

In fact, the weakening of those “offshore bases” had already begun in 1991, the very year the Soviet Union imploded, when the Philippines refused to extend the U.S. lease on the Seventh Fleet’s bastion at Subic Bay. As Navy tugs towed Subic’s floating dry docks home to Pearl Harbor, the Philippines assumed full responsibility for its own defense without actually putting any more of its funds into air or naval power. Consequently, during a raging typhoon in 1994, China was able to suddenly occupy some shoals in the nearby Spratly Islands that went by the name of Mischief Reef — and that would turn out to be just its first step in a bid to control the South China Sea. Without the ability to launch its own air and navy patrols, in 1998 the Philippine military, in an attempt to reassert its claim to the area, grounded a rusting U.S.-surplus ship on nearby Ayungin Shoal as a “base” for a squad of barefoot soldiers who were forced to fish for their rations.

In the meantime, the U.S. Navy suffered its own decline with a 40% reduction in surface warships and attack submarines from 1990 to 1996. Over the next two decades, the Navy’s Pacific posture weakened further as the focus of naval deployments shifted to wars in the Middle East, the service’s overall size shrank by an additional 20% (to just 271 ships), and crews strained under the pressure of ever-extending deployments — leaving the Seventh Fleet ill-prepared to meet China’s unexpected challenge.

China’s Naval Gambit

After years of seeming compliance with Washington’s rules for good global citizenship, China’s recent actions in Central Asia and the continent’s surrounding seas have revealed a two-phase strategy that would, if successful, undercut the perpetuation of American global power. First, China is spending a trillion dollars to fund a vast transcontinental grid of new railroads, highways, and oil and natural gas pipelines that could harness Eurasia’s vast resources as an economic engine to drive its ascent to world power.

In a parallel move, China is building a blue-water navy and creating its first overseas bases in the Arabian and South China seas. As Beijing stated in a 2015 white paper, “The traditional mentality that land outweighs the sea must be abandoned... It is necessary for China to develop a modern maritime military force structure commensurate with its national security.” Though the force it contemplates will hardly compete with the U.S. Navy’s global presence, China seems determined to dominate a significant arc of waters around Asia, from the horn of Africa, across the Indian Ocean, all the way to Korea.

Beijing's bid for overseas bases began quietly in 2011 when it started investing almost \$250 million in the [transformation](#) of a sleepy fishing village at Gwadar, Pakistan, on the shores of the Arabian Sea, into a modern commercial port only 370 miles from the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Four years later, President Xi Jinping committed another \$46 billion to the [building](#) of a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of roads, railways, and pipelines stretching for 2,000 miles from western China to the now-modernized port at Gwadar. It still avoided any admission that military aims might be involved so as not to alarm New Delhi or Washington. In 2016, however, Pakistan's Navy [announced](#) that it was indeed opening a naval base at Gwadar (soon strengthened with [two warships](#) donated by China) and added that Beijing was [welcome](#) to base its own ships there as well.

That same year, China began building a major [military facility](#) at Djibouti on the Horn of Africa and, in August 2017, opened its first official overseas base there, giving its navy access to the oil-rich Arabian Sea. Simultaneously, Sri Lanka, located at a midpoint in the Indian Ocean, settled a billion-dollar debt to China by ceding it a [strategic port](#) at Hambantota, creating a future potential for dual military use there, too — in effect, the Gwadar stealth strategy revisited.

As controversial as these enclaves might be (at least from an American point of view), they paled before China's attempts to claim an entire ocean. Starting in April 2014, Beijing escalated its bid for exclusive territorial control over the South China Sea by [expanding](#) Longpo Naval Base on its own Hainan Island into a homeport for its four nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. Without any announcement, the Chinese also began dredging seven artificial atolls in the disputed Spratly Islands to create military airfields and future anchorages. In just four years, Beijing's armada of dredges had sucked up countless tons of sand from the ocean floor, slowly transforming those minimalist reefs and atolls into active military bases. Today, China's army [operates](#) a jet runway protected by HQ-9 anti-aircraft missile batteries on Woody Island, a radar base on Cuareton Reef, and has mobile missile launchers near runways ready for jet fighters at three more of these "islands."

While fighter planes and submarines are pawns in China's opening gambit in the contest for the South China Sea, Beijing hopes one day to at least check (if not checkmate) Washington with a growing armada of aircraft carriers, the modern dreadnaughts in this latter-day game of empires. After acquiring an unfinished Soviet *Kuznetsov*-class carrier from Ukraine in 1998, the naval dockyard at Dalian retrofitted the rusting hulk and launched it in 2012 as the *Liaoning*, China's first aircraft carrier. That hull was already 30

years old, an age that would normally have assured such a warship a place in some scrap metal yard. Though not combat capable, it was a platform for training China's first generation of naval aviators in landing speeding jets on heaving decks in high seas. In marked contrast to the 15 years needed to retrofit this first ship, the Dalian yards took just five years to [construct](#), from the keel up, a much-improved second carrier capable of full combat operations.

The narrow hulls and ski-jump prows that limit these first two carriers to just 24 "Flying Shark" fighter planes won't hold for the country's third carrier, now [being built](#) from indigenous designs in Shanghai. When launched next year, it will be able to carry on-board fuel reserves that will give it a longer cruising range and a complement of 40 aircraft, as well as electromagnetic systems for faster launches. Thanks to an accelerating tempo of training, technology, and construction, by 2030 China should have enough aircraft carriers to ensure that the South China Sea will become what the [Pentagon has termed](#) a "Chinese lake."

Such carriers are the vanguard of a sustained naval expansion that, by 2017, had already given China a [modern navy](#) of 320 ships, backed by land-based missiles, jet fighters, and a global system of surveillance satellites. Its current anti-ship ballistic missiles have a range of 2,500 miles and so could strike U.S. Navy vessels anywhere in the Western Pacific. Beijing has also made strides in [mastering](#) the volatile technology for hypersonic missiles with speeds of up to 5,000 miles per hour, making them impossible to stop. By building two new submarines every year, China has already [assembled a fleet](#) of 57, both diesel- and nuclear-powered, and is projected to reach 80 soon. Each of its four nuclear submarines carries 12 ballistic missiles that could reach anywhere in the western United States. In addition, Beijing has [launched](#) dozens of amphibious ships and coastal corvettes, giving it naval dominance in its own waters.

Within just five years, according to the U.S. [Office of Naval Intelligence](#), China "will complete its transition" from the coastal force of the 1990s to a modern navy capable of "sustained blue water operations" and "multiple missions around the world," including full-spectrum warfare. In other words, China is forging a future capacity to control its "home" waters from the East China Sea to the South China Sea. In the process, it will become the first power in 70 years to challenge the U.S. Navy's dominion over the Pacific basin.

The American Response

After taking office in 2009, President Barack Obama came to the conclusion that China's rise represented a serious threat and so he developed a geopolitical strategy to counter it. First, he promoted the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a 12-nation commercial pact that would direct 40% of world trade toward the United States. Then, in March 2014, after announcing a military "pivot to Asia" in an address to the Australian parliament, he deployed a full battalion of Marines to a base at the city of Darwin on the Timor Sea. A month later, the U.S. ambassador to the Philippines signed an enhanced defense cooperation agreement with that country allowing U.S. forces to be stationed at five of its bases.

Combining existing installations in Japan with access to naval bases in Subic Bay, Darwin, and Singapore, Obama rebuilt America's chain of military enclaves along the Asian littoral. To make full use of these installations, the Pentagon began [planning](#) to "forward base 60% of [its] naval assets in the Pacific by 2020" and launched its first regular "freedom of navigation" patrols in the South China Sea as a challenge to the Chinese navy, even sending in full carrier strike groups.

President Trump, however, cancelled the Trans-Pacific Partnership right after his inauguration and, with the endless war on terror in the Greater Middle East grinding on, the shift of naval forces to the Pacific slowed. More broadly, Trump's unilateral, America-first foreign policy has damaged relations with the four allies that underpin its line of defense in the Pacific: [Japan](#), South Korea, the Philippines, and Australia. Moreover, in his obsessive courtship of Beijing's help in the Korean crisis, the president even suspended, for five months, those naval patrols into the South China Sea.

The administration's new \$700 billion defense budget will [fund](#) 46 new ships for the Navy by 2023 (for a total of 326), but the White House seems incapable, as reflected in its [recent National Security Strategy](#), of grasping the geostrategic importance of Eurasia or devising an effective scheme for the deployment of its expanding military to check China's rise. After declaring Obama's "pivot to Asia" officially [dead](#), the Trump administration has instead [offered](#) its own "free and open Indo-Pacific" founded on an unworkable alliance of four supposedly kindred democracies — Australia, India, Japan, and the United States.

While Trump stumbles from one foreign policy crisis to the next, his admirals, mindful of Mahan's strategic dictums, are acutely aware of the geopolitical requisites of American imperial power and have been vocal about their determination to preserve it. Indeed, China's naval expansion, along with advances in Russia's submarine fleet, have led the

Navy to a fundamental [strategic shift](#) from limited operations against regional powers like Iran to full-spectrum readiness for “a return to great power competition.” After a sweeping strategic review of his forces in 2017, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson [reported](#) that China’s “growing and modernized fleet” was “shrinking” the traditional American advantage in the Pacific. “The competition is on,” he warned, “and pace dominates. In an exponential competition, the winner takes all. We must shake off any vestiges of comfort or complacency.”

In a parallel review of the Navy’s surface force, its commander, Vice Admiral Thomas Rowden, [proclaimed](#) “a new age of seapower” with a return to “great power dynamics” from “near-peer competitors.” Any potential naval attack, he added, must be met with a “distributed lethality” capable of “inflicting damage of such magnitude that it compels an adversary to cease hostilities.” Summoning the ghost of Captain Mahan, the admiral warned: “From Europe to Asia, history is replete with nations that rose to global power only to cede it back through lack of seapower.”

Great Power Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century

As such rhetoric indicates, there is already a rising tempo of naval competition in the South China Sea. Just last month, after a protracted hiatus in freedom-of-navigation patrols, the Trump administration sent the [supercarrier](#) *USS Carl Vinson*, with its full complement of 5,000 sailors and 90 aircraft, steaming across the South China Sea for a symbolic visit to Vietnam, which has its own long-running dispute with China over oil rights in those waters.

Just three weeks later, [satellite imagery](#) captured an extraordinary “display of maritime might” as a flotilla of some 40 Chinese warships, including the carrier *Liaoning*, steamed through that same sea in a formation that stretched for miles. Combined with the [maneuvers](#) it staged in those waters with the Cambodian and Russian navies in 2016, China, like empires past, is clearly planning to use its gunboats and future naval bases to weave a web of de facto imperial control across the waters of Asia.

Naysayers who dismiss China’s challenge might remind us that its navy only operates in two of the metaphoric “seven seas,” a pale imitation of the U.S. Navy’s robust global posture. Yet China’s rising presence in the Indian and Pacific oceans has far-reaching geostrategic implications for our world order. In a cascading series of consequences, China’s future dominance over significant parts of those oceans will compromise the U.S. position on the Pacific littoral, shatter its control over that axial end of Eurasia, and open that vast continental expanse, home to 70% of the world’s population and resources, to

China's dominion. Just as Brzezinski once warned, Washington's failure to control Eurasia could well mean the end of its global hegemony and the rise of a new world empire based in Beijing.

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