



ANALYSIS

UNDERSTANDING CHINA AND U.S. OPPORTUNITIES

Rodger Baker

“The PRC is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world’s most influential power.”

Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States, February 2022¹

“The PRC ... is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective.”

National Security Strategy of the United States, October 2022²

“China has the capability to directly attempt to alter the rules-based global order in every realm and across multiple regions, as a near-peer competitor that is increasingly pushing to change global norms and potentially threatening its neighbors.”

Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S.
Intelligence Community, February 2023³

The United States and China now stand at a strategic crossroads. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the United States government, through its strategic documents, identifies a single state—the People’s Republic of China (PRC)—as the primary competitor to the United States, with both the intent and capacity to reshape the international order. Washington’s reassessment of China has converged with Beijing’s transition from a traditionally continental power to an increasingly amphibious one, creating a moment where each side’s vulnerabilities, ambitions, and competing strategic narratives directly shape the other’s choices. In this environment, misaligned assessments can create real risks of miscalculation. The purpose of this paper is to situate China’s behavior within its geographic and historical compulsions so that the United States can better interpret this moment of risk and opportunity.

¹ White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, February 2022), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/U.S.-Indo-Pacific-Strategy.pdf>.

² White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, October 2022), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

³ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, February 6, 2023* (Washington, D.C.: ODNI, 2023), <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2023-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.



Understanding how Washington arrived at this new assessment of China is the starting point for grasping the stakes of the current moment. This consensus on China's ambitions—that the PRC has the capability to create its own regional sphere of influence, secure its growing international interests, and challenge the status quo global norms—is relatively new. Though there have long been voices warning of China's rise and its intent to challenge or overturn the international system, post-Cold War U.S. attention toward China often centered on economic and political dynamics. The expectation was that integrating China into the global economy would lead to political liberalization, and even if that were only moderate, China's rise could be managed such that Beijing would be a "responsible stakeholder" rather than a strategic competitor.⁴

The U.S. strategic shift in perception toward China has coincided with a renewed focus on peer competition ("Great power conflict"), and away from several decades of hyper-focus on counterterrorism and the occasional rogue nation.⁵ It is not surprising, then, that assessments of China are often hyperbolic—China is either the single biggest threat to the international system, or it is an unbloodied upstart without any real-world military experience.⁶ This ten foot tall versus paper tiger characterization (something seen at various times when assessing the evolving Soviet threat during the Cold War) can lead to disjointed policy and actions that may run at cross purposes to national interests and intent.

If the U.S. operates under the assumption that China is "ten feet tall," for example, it might assume an escalatory posture around Taiwan, or it might take actions that accelerate Chinese nationalism and reinforce Beijing's belief that Washington seeks containment. Overestimation narrows diplomatic off-ramps and drives U.S. commitments in the Indo-Pacific beyond what is strategically or fiscally sustainable. Inflating China's strength risks overextension and heightens the chances of confrontation.

On the other hand, underestimating China can lead the U.S. to respond too slowly to coercive moves, misread Beijing's risk tolerance, and assume deterrence will hold when it may not. It can weaken allied confidence, leave critical vulnerabilities unaddressed, and allow China to shift facts on the ground in places like Taiwan and the South China Sea.

⁴ Robert B. Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State, "Remarks to National Committee on U.S.–China Relations," New York City, September 21, 2005, U.S. Department of State, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm>.

⁵ See for example Congressional Research Service, *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress* (Updated March 10, 2022), https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R43838/R43838.91.pdf; and Ionut Popescu, *No Peer Rivals: American Grand Strategy in the Era of Great Power Competition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2025), pp. 87-110, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3998/mpub.12393858.8>.

⁶ For example, compare Robert Spalding, *War Without Rules: China's Playbook for Global Domination* (New York: Penguin, 2022); Timothy R. Heath, *The Chinese Military's Doubtful Combat Readiness: The People's Liberation Army Remains Focused on Upholding Chinese Communist Party Rule, Not Preparing for War*, RAND Corporation, PEA-830-1 (January 2025), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PEA800/PEA830-1/RAND_PEA830-1.pdf; Kurt M. Campbell and Rush Doshi, "Underestimating China: Why America Needs a New Strategy of Allied Scale to Offset Beijing's Enduring Advantages," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 104, No. 3 (April 10, 2025), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/underestimating-china>; and Michael D. Swaine, *Threat Inflation and the Chinese Military*, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, *Quincy Paper* No. 7, June 2022, <https://quincyinst.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/17214428/QUINCY-PAPER-NO.-7-%E2%80%9494-SWAIN-%E2%80%94JUNE-2022.pdf>.

Downplaying China's capabilities risks complacency and creates openings that China can exploit.

One way to avoid these pitfalls is to look at China holistically: building a framing geopolitical assessment that understands and places China within the context of both time and space, and that seeks to identify the strengths and weaknesses, the constraints and compulsions, that shape modern and future Chinese behavior. This analysis offers policymakers a clear framework for identifying where and how China is likely to act, where it is vulnerable, and how U.S. strategy can deter conflict without accelerating it. Here it is important to note that seeking to understand the "other" is not the same as justifying or supporting behavior; too often those who try to explain the views or perceptions of an opponent are accused of condoning or excusing the opponent's behaviors.⁷

China in Geographic Space⁸

The insecurities driving China's contemporary ambitions and its shift toward maritime power begin with geography. A cursory look at China on a map or globe shows a country roughly the same size as the United States. Yet unlike the United States, China does not dominate a continent. Rather, it sits at the eastern edge of Eurasia, surrounded on land by 14 neighbors (North Korea, Russia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam), with enclosed seas surrounded by a double arc of nations stretching through the Korean Peninsula, Japan, and then again through the Philippine Archipelago, Borneo, the Malay Peninsula, and Vietnam, with Taiwan as the point of intersection between the two arcs. Thus Taiwan, strategically, is the critical point in any containment of China, and in any Chinese strategy to break out of its enclosed seas.

Layering population density on the map, it becomes clear that the nearly 90 percent of the Chinese population lives in the eastern half of the country, primarily concentrated in the northeastern plains along the Yellow River and the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. This is the core of China, the heartland of the Han, a conic section with its point near Xian, and the two ends of the arc around Beijing and Shanghai. The Great Wall roughly marks the northern extent of the 15-inch isohyet, a rainfall line that has long constrained China's ability to significantly populate its vast western half.⁹ In following a climactic line, the Great Wall effectively marked the traditional separation between sedentary agriculture to the south and

⁷ Rodger Baker, "Geopolitics and the Pitfalls of Provocation," *Stratfor Worldview*, October 20, 2015, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/geopolitics-and-pitfalls-provocation>.

⁸ See Rodger Baker, "Revisiting the Geopolitics of China," *Stratfor Worldview*, March 15, 2016, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/revisiting-geopolitics-china>; and Stratfor, *The Geopolitics of China* (Austin, TX: Stratfor, 2017), <https://www.stratfor.com/sites/default/files/geopolitics-of-china-stratfor-report.pdf>.

⁹ Jia Xiao, "Calculating the Hu Huanyong Line," *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, August 6, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24694452.2025.2534549>.

nomadic herdsmen to the north.¹⁰ For centuries, these geographic realities have caused China to think like a continental power, forced to defend a densely populated, economically vital core.

This core is surrounded by a series of buffer spaces. To the north are the mountains of Manchuria and the desert steppe of Inner Mongolia. To the west are the vast desert plains of Xinjiang, the Tianshan Mountains, and the high Tibetan Plateau abutting the Himalayas. To the south are numerous mountains that gave rise to many different ethnic groups; these groups often cross China's current southern borders with Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam. This peripheral ring around the Chinese core traditionally served as buffer space, a series of geographic barriers that could slow invasion and insulate the core from outside power and influence. Historical Chinese empires expanded and contracted, but at their peak their borders often resembled those of modern China. Rarely did China seek conquest beyond its geographic constraints, and when it did, it was usually driven by external powers, not those deriving from the Han core. While this has been a key dynamic shaping Chinese strategic culture over the centuries, as we will see, modern economic patterns are drawing Beijing to break from these historical patterns, even if slowly.

Despite its long eastern coastline, China has traditionally acted as a continental power. The early sedentary agricultural societies along the Yellow River faced threats from nomads to the north and west, as well as incursions by raiders from the sea—all while dealing with significant internal differences and competition. Successive Chinese dynasties dealt with these threats by expanding outward to secure and occupy the geographic buffer spaces around the core, but on the coast they more often moved population and trade inland rather than expanding outward into the maritime domain (though local maritime trade remained important, particularly in Southern China).¹¹ In effect, the sea was seen as a buffer itself, not as a primary route for connectivity and trade. China's tributary system also reflected this orientation: influence was projected through cultural and economic ties rather than through naval power. China's geography did not dictate these pathways, but it set the constraints that repeatedly pushed Chinese leaders toward a continental mindset—a mindset that continues to shape Beijing's behavior today.

China in Time¹²

The rhythm of China's historical dynastic cycles deepened its continental orientation, repeatedly teaching Chinese leaders that security depended on consolidating the core,

¹⁰ Temur Temule, "The Great Wall as Perilous Frontier for the Mongols in 16th Century: Reconsidering Nomadic-Sedentary Relations in Premodern Inner Asia," *International Journal of Korean History* Vol. 21, No. 1 (2016): pp. 121–55, <https://doi.org/10.22372/ijkh.2016.21.1.121>.

¹¹ Robert J. Antony, *The Golden Age of Piracy in China, 1520–1810: A Short History with Documents* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022).

¹² The idea of dynastic cycles is common, but the exact form and cause see many variations. See for example Heng-fu Zou, "Chinese Dynastic Cycles of Corruption and Power," CEMA Working Paper 747, China Economics and Management Academy, Central University of Finance and Economics, 2025; Kenneth S. Chan and Jean-Pierre Laffargue, "A Dynamic

internal cohesion, and control of the periphery—not projecting power at sea. These dynastic cycles can be simplified into a four-phase pattern:

- The cycle is kicked off by the consolidation of power, usually from the Han core, but not always—two significant outside powers, the Mongols and the Manchu, established the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) and the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) respectively.
- This is followed by an expansionist phase, seizing or influencing the buffer space around the core, expanding suzerainty relationships, and securing control over key trade routes.
- This expanded empire requires an expanded bureaucracy, but the bureaucracy over time becomes its own center of power—or, more often, several competing centers—as the political core grows decadent. Focus amplifies on resolving fragmentation and quelling internal rebellion.
- Finally, following an escalating pattern of internal and external economic, social, and political pressure, a shock finally shatters the cohesion of the aging and already fragile empire. Out of these ashes, another power emerges to begin the consolidation phase once again.

The persistent need to reassert internal cohesion and control land borders meant that Chinese dynasties rarely enjoyed the stability or strategic slack required to sustain maritime ambitions, reinforcing a continental mindset over centuries. As we will see, Chinese President Xi Jinping is well aware of these patterns, and has sought to pre-empt the cycle, while simultaneously refocusing China's orientation from Continentalism to a hybrid Amphibious posture.

China's dynastic history is long and varied, but for our purposes, we will focus on just a few key moments—ones that help define the extent of continentalist expansion, and ones where there were early moves to engage in maritime expansion. It was during the Tang Dynasty (618-906) that China firmly ensconced itself as a sprawling empire, enhanced its periphery, established suzerainty with several of its neighbors, and began a broad-based program of sending and receiving diplomatic and trade delegations across Asia.¹³ Yet even during this moment of expanded engagement, China focused primarily on land routes and ties, rather than taking to the seas, further enhancing the continental focus of China's evolving strategic culture.

Model of Taxation, Corruption, and Public Investment in the Dynastic Cycle: The Case of Imperial China," *Macroeconomic Dynamics* Vol. 20, No. 8 (December 2016): pp. 2123–47, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1365100515000218>; Robert Hartwell, "Famine, Revolt, and the Dynastic Cycle: Population Dynamics in Historic China," *Research in Economic History* 7 (1994): pp. 351–78; Qiang Chen, "Climate Shocks, Dynastic Cycles and Nomadic Conquests: Evidence from Historical China," *Oxford Economic Papers* Vol. 67, No. 2 (April 2015): pp. 185–204, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/gpu032>; and Sabin Roman, "Historical Dynamics of the Chinese Dynasties," *Royal Society Open Science* Vol. 7, No. 6 (June 2021): p. e07293, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.07293>. Here the author uses a simplified four-step cycle focused on very broad macro-economic dynamics related to political concentration or decentralization of power.

¹³ Mark Edward Lewis, *China's Cosmopolitan Empire: The Tang Dynasty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 2009), p. 368, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvjnrtgk>.

This choice reflected two structural issues facing Chinese leaders. First, the expanded empire was a hodgepodge of different ethnic and linguistic groups that required constant intervention and active management—all while addressing periodic threats and pressure from outside the imperial borders. Second, although the Chinese state engaged in regional and international trade, the vast Chinese empire largely made external trade redundant—for the most part, China could produce what it consumed and consume what it produced. Although some coastal regions of China were heavily engaged in localized maritime trade, for the central Chinese leadership maritime trade and engagement was a distraction rather than a necessity.¹⁴ Even into the era of European colonialism, China had minimal compulsion to engage in international trade by sea, aside from tribute and luxury goods, including spices. For example, the Opium Wars were triggered in part by the British Empire trying to find a way to force Chinese consumption and reshape the balance of trade; China was taking British silver as payment, but not rebuying equivalent British goods. China simply didn't need (or the average Chinese couldn't afford) European imports and wasn't reliant on exports to Europe. Thus, unlike Europe, China's own internal economic realities reduced the drivers for maritime expansion and adventurism, leaving China vulnerable to the age of colonialism.

Chinese empires embarked on broad-based maritime engagement only twice, and both cases were met with disaster, setting the precedent for viewing the sea as a source of risk rather than opportunity. Both instances also reflected the influence of Southern China over Northern China. The first effort was made by the Southern Song dynasty (1127-1279), which held out longer against the invading Mongols than Northern Song due in part to its relatively large riverine and coastal defense navy.¹⁵ Once the Mongols overran both Southern Song and Korea, they took advantage of the shipbuilding capabilities and maritime heritage of both to launch their ultimately unsuccessful invasions of Japan, before effectively retiring maritime operations and refocusing on internal land-based challenges.

During the early Ming dynasty (1368-1644), which emerged from the southern capital at Nanjing, Chinese Muslim admiral Zheng He led several voyages around Asia and Africa.¹⁶ These so-called treasure fleets held significant potential for catalyzing further maritime operations and expansion by China, and they occurred at a time when—had China sustained maritime activity—would have put it in direct competition (and potentially conflict) with early European maritime expansion. But these voyages were used more as a show of political power than expansion. Treasure fleets, as their name suggests, were known for demanding gifts for the empire rather than establishing or securing trading routes or driving a policy of colonization. And when the capital moved back north to Beijing, and internal social and economic troubles wracked the empire, the fleet was disbanded and disassembled. Once

¹⁴ Hugh R. Clark, "Frontier Discourse and China's Maritime Frontier: China's Frontiers and the Encounter with the Sea through Early Imperial History," *Journal of World History* Vol. 20, No. 1 (March 2009): pp. 1-33, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40542719>.

¹⁵ Jung-Pang Lo, "The Emergence of China as a Sea Power During the Late Sung and Early Yuan Periods," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* Vol. 14, No. 4 (August 1955): pp. 489-503, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2941832>.

¹⁶ Chin-keong Ng, "Managing Maritime Affairs in Late-Ming Times," in *Boundaries and Beyond: China's Maritime Southeast in Late Imperial Times* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv3wdbw4.14>.

again, internal fragmentation demanded that China focus its energy inside the existing border to maintain social cohesion. China's continentalist mindset was reinforced just when it may have finally fallen away.

The Lingering Continentalist Mindset

This quick look at Chinese geography and history highlights a key element of China's long-term evolution, which colors its geopolitical perceptions and strategic culture today. China has, for most of its history, acted as a traditional continental power. Its perception of threat focused on the land, its grand strategy was shaped around finding geographic barriers and gaining strategic depth to insulate the Han core.

Threats from the sea were largely nuisance, rather than existential. Coastal piracy impacted local villages and some intra-China coastal trade, but these could be dealt with by burning coastal villages and moving the population inland to starve the raiders, or by dredging the Grand Canal to keep waterborne trade inland.¹⁷ The sea was simply not a major threat vector and thus could be seen as another geographic buffer. Even Japan's failed attempt to invade China in the late 1500s stalled in Korea and was repelled by a combination of Chinese land forces and Korean maritime forces. In short, until China was "forced" into "unequal treaties" with the Europeans, the sea presented little threat and little incentive to China's leaders.¹⁸

Modern China largely retained the continental focus. While the Qing did try to modernize (read Westernize) its military in the late 1800s, and built up a naval fleet with German weaponry, the first Sino-Japanese war showed how poorly the Chinese had adapted to naval warfare.¹⁹ This followed China's loss of its northern maritime territories to Russia in the 1850s and 60s (which is why today North Korea and Russia meet at a sea border, boxing China out of direct access to the North Pacific), and its loss of sovereignty over key southern Chinese ports.

After decades of European and Japanese assertions of spheres of influence in China, domestic economic troubles, and a failing bureaucracy, the Chinese empire was overthrown in the 1911 revolution led by Sun Yat Sen. By then the damage was done, and the new Republic of China proved incapable of defending Chinese territory against Imperial Japan. Today, this period of Qing decline is called the Century of Humiliation and weighs heavily on

¹⁷ Sui-wai Cheung, "Construction of the Grand Canal and Improvement in Transportation in Late Imperial China," *Asian Social Science* Vol. 4, No. 6 (June 2008): pp. 11–22, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/d921/54b84c7cb4b1b9ee75ad327269bb458d28b7.pdf>.

¹⁸ Charlotte Ku, "Abolition of China's Unequal Treaties and the Search for Regional Stability in Asia, 1919–1943," *Chinese (Taiwan) Yearbook of International Law and Affairs* 12 (1994): pp. 67–86, <https://scholarship.law.tamu.edu/facscholar/413>.

¹⁹ Benjamin A. Elman, "Naval Warfare and the Refraction of China's Self-Strengthening Reforms into Scientific and Technological Failure, 1865–1895," *Modern Asian Studies* Vol. 38, No. 2 (May 2004): pp. 283–326, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3876516>.

Beijing's perceptions of vulnerability to external powers.²⁰ This memory reinforces the core theme of China's strategic history: when China loses internal cohesion or control of its periphery, foreign powers can penetrate its borders and dictate outcomes. Xi Jinping's project of "national rejuvenation" is an attempt to ensure the "Century of Humiliation" never happens again, that the vulnerabilities which allowed foreign powers to dominate Chinese territory have been vanquished. This conviction now underpins Beijing's efforts to shape the regional balance and redefine great-power competition.

Further emphasizing its continentalist roots, the Chinese Communist revolution, like many revolts of the past, came from the Chinese interior, not the coastal regions. The rise of the Chinese Communists in the 1930s and 40s contrasted with the attempt by the Nanjing-based Nationalist government to build out a maritime capability to address China's weakness in the modern maritime age.²¹ Both the Communists and Nationalists focused their efforts against Japan, but soon this alliance of convenience broke down, and the Communist forces drove the Nationalists out, the latter settling in Taiwan. Chinese forces delayed trying to conquer the Nationalist redoubt in Taiwan, instead securing Xinjiang in 1950 and Tibet in 1951. The outbreak of the Korean War focused Chinese efforts on the vulnerable land border, undermining plans for a final assault on the Nationalists in Taiwan. This sequence ensured that China's modern state was built on landward insecurities rather than maritime strength—and that the vulnerability of an independent or foreign-aligned Taiwan loomed in the future.

Politically and economically, China under Mao Zedong doubled down on its continentalist mindset.²² The Great Leap Forward was a failed attempt to ensure domestic self-sufficiency and insulate China from any international dependencies. The Cultural Revolution pitted competing factions within China against one another, fighting over influence and policy control. Even when Deng Xiaoping took control, launching China's "opening and reform" era, government and security forces' attention focused on internal ethnic and social challenges, or on issues around its land periphery (including a brief and largely unsuccessful conflict with Vietnam).²³ Deng's decision to open diplomatic relations with the United States was driven by mutual concerns over the Soviet Union. Beijing saw the USSR as a strategic challenger, a continental empire that challenged Chinese security. In this context, U.S. maritime power was less of a concern for Beijing than the menace of Soviet land power.

²⁰ Zheng Wang, "National Humiliation, History Education, and the Politics of Historical Memory: Patriotic Education Campaign in China," *International Studies Quarterly* Vol. 52, No. 4 (December 2008): pp. 783–806, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29734264>.

²¹ Kuan-Jen Chen, "Finding a Local Partner in Post-war Maritime East Asia," in *Charting America's Cold War Waters in East Asia Sovereignty, Local Interests, and International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

²² Bernard Cole, "The History of the Twenty-first Century Chinese Navy," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 67, No. 3, Article 5 (Summer 2014), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol67/iss3/5>.

²³ Xiaoming Zhang, "China's 1979 War with Vietnam: A Reassessment," *The China Quarterly*, No. 184 (December 2005): pp. 851–74, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20192542>.

Under both Mao and Deng, the People's Liberation Army, which answers to the Party and not the state, was dominated by large-scale land forces, with little if any attention paid to maritime forces aside from nearshore defense. China, like the Soviet Union, considered its population a nearly unlimited military resource, focusing less on modernized weapons systems than large-scale defensive capabilities through massed forces. China also used its military forces for internal security, only recently restructuring to focus the PLA outward and shifting most internal threat management to the People's Armed Police (PAP). Even in the nuclear age, China initially built little more than a minimal deterrent and put few resources into strategic air or maritime assets. The old strategy of insulating and isolating the Chinese core from outside threats remained the primary driver of strategic policy.

China's Maritime Awakening

Today, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has more ships than the U.S. Navy, and these ships are concentrated in a regional rather than global role.²⁴ China's commercial port development, infrastructure, and management stretches around the globe. China's first formal overseas base in Djibouti is firmly established, and Beijing appears to be capable of quickly adding another in Cambodia, Pakistan, or even Nicaragua. Chinese submarines sail the world's oceans, its research vessels regularly traverse the polar regions and map the deep seabed, and the PLAN has taken part in (and led) multilateral counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden.²⁵ China's naval buildup is matched in pace and scope only by its more recent nuclear breakout. Less than a quarter century ago it was the norm to scoff at Chinese naval pretensions. Today the Chinese Navy is seen as the pacing challenge for the U.S. military. None of this seems to fit with China's long history of continentalism. So what happened?

China's turn to the maritime space came swiftly, driven by a convergence of compulsions and capabilities. On the compulsion side, China's rapid economic rise brought with it a fundamental change in dependency on maritime trade. In the decade and a half after China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001, China's economic miracle brought with it a massive seaborne dependence on imports—of raw materials and technology—and on the exports of finished goods.²⁶ Internal or external problems could no longer be dealt with through isolation, because China could no longer afford to break off access to foreign markets and resources.

²⁴ Stephen Biddle and Eric Labs, "Does America Face a 'Ship Gap' With China?" *Foreign Affairs*, March 19, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/does-america-face-ship-gap-china>.

²⁵ Andrew S. Erickson and Justin D. Mikolay, "Welcome China to the Fight Against Pirates," *Proceedings*, March 2009, https://www.andrewerickson.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/China-Anti-Piracy_Proceedings_2009-March.pdf.

²⁶ Anas Rakha and Khadiga El-Aasar, "The Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on the Suez Canal Cargo Trade," *Journal of Shipping and Trade* Vol. 9, No. 9 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41072-024-00167-y>.

As with most countries, China's trade is dependent upon maritime routes—and the United States remains the predominant global naval power. The seas remain open because the United States maintains freedom of navigation and trade as a critical mission for its navy.²⁷ Most countries accept this U.S. role, rather than challenging it. But for China, rising tensions with the United States meant that Beijing started to rethink its effective dependency upon the goodwill of the United States to secure its own economic future. Looking seaward, China saw U.S. treaty allies in South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, close security relations between Washington and Singapore, and increasing cooperation between the United States and Indonesia and Malaysia, all while Washington was restoring ties with Hanoi and discussing potential defense cooperation. Add in Washington's longstanding military equipment support to Taiwan and, from Beijing's perspective, China's maritime frontier was enclosed by the U.S. security architecture, leaving Chinese trade at the mercy of U.S. largess.

Facing this dynamic, China's leadership saw three basic choices. First, they could simply assume that the United States had little interest in interfering with Chinese trade and do nothing. Second, they could seek alternative (though more costly and less efficient) routes via land to bypass maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca.²⁸ Third, they could develop a robust naval force that would allow China to protect its supply lines not only in its near seas, but in far-sea operations around the globe. Ultimately Beijing chose a combination of the latter two options—and in doing so reinvigorated the strategic need to finally resolve “the Taiwan problem.” As it had been for centuries, protecting itself against vulnerabilities catalyzed Chinese strategic action—this time, though, those priorities demanded a maritime presence.

Under Jiang Zemin (1989 - 2003), China had begun a series of military reforms and modernization efforts, taking business operations away from the military and, in return, refocusing and modernizing the force.²⁹ Jiang also began the process of shifting away from the traditional manpower-heavy technology-light military to one that embraced modern technology (and thus required changes in military education, training, and recruitment) and a reduction in total troop numbers.

In the maritime space, China began building out its navy and took an early turn at occupying and building out reefs in the South China Sea to assert its territorial claims. This came in the context of the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which wasn't ratified and implemented until 1994. The Convention clarified a 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone for countries and sought to address increasing maritime clashes over fishing rights.³⁰ In doing so, the treaty compelled countries to define their

²⁷ Jonathan Masters, “Sea Power: The U.S. Navy and Foreign Policy,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, updated June 12, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/background/sea-power-us-navy-and-foreign-policy>.

²⁸ East-West Center, “Belt and Road Initiative: What's in It for China,” *East-West Wire*, <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/news/east-west-wire/belt-and-road-initiative-what%E2%80%99s-in-it-china>.

²⁹ Andrew Scobell, *Chinese Army Building in the Era of Jiang Zemin* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2000), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/133>.

³⁰ United Nations, *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*, 1982, https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/unclos_e.pdf.

claims; in the South China Sea, this led to numerous overlapping and competing claims, removing any neutral space. By occupying and building up reefs (some of which were considered only low water elevations), Beijing was, in effect, expanding the maritime territory it could claim as its own. China was thus increasing its buffer space and its access to maritime resources while simultaneously pushing back against the maritime territory of regional U.S. allies and partners.³¹ It was also laying the groundwork to position forces around Taiwan and to interdict foreign support for the island.

In the late 1990s and into the first few years of the 2000s, this initial Chinese reef building operation triggered competition with the Philippines and Vietnam. The former, a U.S. treaty ally, sought a clear U.S. position and action to defend its territorial claims.³² Rather than take direct action, however, the United States took a nominally neutral position on maritime territorial disputes (something that applied not only to Philippine-Chinese disputes, but China's disputes with Japan and South Korea, and those between allies South Korea and Japan). China's perceived aggressiveness did shape the early plans of the George W. Bush administration, which came into office with the intent to push back against Chinese economic and maritime gains.³³ The first major crisis of the Bush administration was the EP-3 incident in April 2001, which showcased a more confident China and a still somewhat cautious U.S.³⁴

Ultimately, a more active showdown between Washington and Beijing was sidelined following the September 11 al Qaeda attacks on the United States. Washington quickly shifted attention to Afghanistan and later Iraq, and the military focused on counterterrorism and counter-insurgency, rather than traditional great power conflict. China, which had been facing serious social and economic challenges at home, largely abandoned its initial island building projects (some of which quickly eroded back into the sea), and refocused its attention internally.³⁵

At this point, Chinese capability had not yet reached a point where it was able to directly address the newfound compulsion of maritime security while simultaneously maintaining social cohesion on the continent. Instead of looking to the seas, Beijing sought to secure secondary alternative routes to bypass the Strait of Malacca, signing on to the Gwadar port project in 2001—a maritime-access project intended to create a land-based alternative—and, later, the Myanmar-China natural gas pipeline in 2009 under then Chinese President Hu

³¹ Michael Paul, *A "Great Wall of Sand" in the South China Sea? Political, Legal and Military Aspects of the Island Dispute*, SWP Research Paper 8 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, July 2016), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2016RP08_pau.pdf.

³² Shee Poon Kim, "The South China Sea in China's Strategic Thinking," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* Vol. 19, No. 4 (March 1998): 369–87, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25798398>.

³³ Jim Vandehei, "Bush Signals Hard Line To China's Vice Premier," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2001, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB985240065134087952>.

³⁴ Shirley A. Kan, et al, *China-U.S. Aircraft Collision Incident of April 2001: Assessments and Policy Implications*, CRS Report No. RL30946 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2010), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL30946>.

³⁵ Kei Koga, "Four Phases of South China Sea Disputes 1990–2020," in *Managing Great Power Politics: ASEAN, Institutional Strategy, and the South China Sea* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022) https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-19-2611-2_3.

Jintao. Beijing also sought to entice through economic access key regional U.S. partners, including South Korea, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines to counterbalance U.S. pressure and weaken incentives for countries to strengthen and arm Taiwan.

In the background, however, China was taking steps to beef up its military capabilities. Under Hu, the military reform efforts that began under Jiang took on a new focus on maritime operations.³⁶ China's rapid shipbuilding program expanded, the country sent the first of many naval escort task forces (NETF) to the Gulf of Aden in 2008, and the PLAN began restructuring its naval training and interoperability between its three fleets. The anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden were used by China to speed learning of naval operations and best practices from other countries, as well as to test different combinations of ships and replenishment vessels—a lesson that was rapidly translated into China's naval construction programs. This was a period both of rapid naval expansion in numbers and of real-world training and operations for the PLAN. In 2002 China received delivery of the old Soviet-era *Varyag*, and by the early 2010s, it was refit, renamed *Liaoning*, and placed into active service as China's first aircraft carrier of the PLAN. At the time, it was seen as a wasteful move, but it pointed to a future expeditionary orientation for the PLAN, well beyond its traditional coastal or emerging regional defense.

Building on the work of Hu, Xi Jinping (2012 - present) took an even more aggressive stance toward China's naval ambitions. Under Xi, the PLAN commissioned China's first fully indigenous aircraft carrier, the *Shandong*, in 2019, and the second domestic carrier, the *Fujian*, began final sea trials in 2024, with several other aircraft carriers under construction.³⁷ China reinvigorated its island building campaign in the South China Sea and took advantage of the U.S. policy of neutrality in maritime territorial disputes, as well as the political shift in the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte. In 2017, China formally opened its first overseas base in Djibouti.³⁸ The PLAN and PLAAF expanded military exercises and training with Russia, including air patrols over the North Pacific, intentionally overflying the disputed Dokdo/Takeshima islands between South Korea and Japan and, more recently, the U.S. Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) near Alaska.³⁹ China also began trilateral maritime exercises with Russia and Iran. Under Xi, China has shown both the compulsion and—finally—the *capacity* to rapidly expand its maritime capabilities, supplementing these with a buildup of its air forces (including strategic bombers) and nuclear forces.

³⁶ Howard Wang, "Toward a Sea-Power Strategy—Chinese Communist Party Debates and Consensus Building under Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (Summer/Autumn 2024), <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol77/iss3/5>.

³⁷ ChinaPower Team, "What Do We Know (So Far) about China's Second Aircraft Carrier?," *ChinaPower* (Center for Strategic and International Studies), December 17, 2017, updated June 15, 2021, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-aircraft-carrier-type-001a/>.

³⁸ Joel Wuthnow, "The PLA Beyond Asia: China's Growing Military Presence in the Red Sea Region," *Strategic Forums* No. 8 (2020), National Defense University Press, <https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/strategic-forums/8>.

³⁹ Dzirhan Mahadzir, "UPDATED: Joint Russian, Chinese Pacific Bomber Flight Prompts Japan and South Korea to Scramble Fighters," *USNI News*, November 29, 2024, <https://news.usni.org/2024/11/29/joint-russian-chinese-pacific-bomber-flight-prompts-japan-and-south-korea-to-scramble-fighters>.

In parallel to the military buildup, China accelerated its land-route projects, now under the renamed Belt and Road Initiative. The BRI seeks to build a network of east-west and north-south corridors throughout Eurasia, allowing the rapid reconfiguring of supply lines in time of war, natural disasters, or political challenges. It also ties together China's expanding overseas port management and infrastructure—in some ways a reverse engineering of the old routes of the British Empire. The BRI is perhaps also a partial fulfillment of Halford Mackinder's concern about a unified "World Island" of Eurasia and Africa tied together by rail and roads, linking the resource base and human capital of this vast space under a centrally controlling interest.⁴⁰ An added component is China's expanded interest in the polar regions, including the use of Russia's Northern Sea Route, Coast Guard agreements for Chinese operations in the Russian Arctic, and expansions of China's Antarctic and near-Antarctic infrastructure.⁴¹

An Amphibious China

Despite China's rapid and wide-scale expansion of maritime military capabilities, Beijing remains trapped between its two identities—as a traditional continental land power, and as a burgeoning maritime power. Few countries have proven adept at balancing these two very different modes of power. The United States, after conquering a continent and effectively neutralizing any significant threats from its two land borders, was able to pour the resources of that continent into an expeditionary maritime power base. But Germany failed to do so twice (during the two World Wars), and neither the Soviet Union nor Russia before it ever really overcame its land challenges to develop a robust naval power. As Alfred Thayer Mahan had pointed out when comparing British and French power, amphibious nations have a tough time overcoming their continental vulnerabilities.⁴²

China still faces many geographical challenges along its long land borders, forcing Beijing to split its priorities. To remain secure, the Chinese leadership must ensure that unstable areas like Afghanistan (and increasingly Pakistan) do not interrupt or interfere with the flow of goods and services across Eurasia. Beijing's growing presence in Central Asia is always with a cautious eye on Russia, which sees these states as buffers to its own core. China's growing economic dependencies on Eurasia and Africa—for resources, for markets, and for alternative transit routes—create new vulnerabilities for Beijing to manage, particularly as the leadership remains reticent to employ active military force abroad. Instability in Baluchistan continues to dog CPEC development, yet Beijing refrains from active

⁴⁰ Halford J. Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1919).

⁴¹ Thomas Nilsen, "Russia's Coast Guard Cooperation with China Is a Big Step, Arctic Security Expert Says," *The Barents Observer*, April 28, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/security/russias-coast-guard-cooperation-with-china-is-a-big-step-arctic-security-expert-says/164360>.

⁴² Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1890). A later exploration of the challenges of France's "amphibious geography" can be found in Walter L. Dorn, *Competition for Empire, 1740–1763* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1940).

intervention. In Myanmar, Beijing has signed agreements with ethnic rebel groups to manage border trade, in parallel to expanding military aid and assistance to the military government, thus choosing not to intervene in a decisive manner.⁴³

In the maritime space, China's actions to assert its influence and buffer space continue to trigger counteractions by both regional and extra regional countries. China is changing the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific, and as such is drawing responses not only from the United States, but from Japan, Australia, and European nations—in addition to the regional countries upon whose territory China encroaches. Fear of China pursuing Mackinder's World Island, and ripples of Nicholas Spykman's 1944 warning that "dominant power in the Far East will undoubtedly be China, providing she achieves real unification and provided that Japan's military power is completely destroyed" shape the subconscious of those watching China's "rise."⁴⁴ Any perception of the change in balance of power, whether militarily, economically, or politically, is seen as an erosion of U.S. (and North Atlantic) supremacy and security.

At the center of Beijing's effort is Taiwan. If Taiwan is formally independent or serves as a forward base of operations for foreign powers, the island can serve to cut the Chinese coastline in half, to interdict and control Chinese maritime access. Should China reclaim Taiwan, it could dictate the maritime trade that transits the South and East China Seas, effectively controlling the economic fate of South Korea and Japan and pushing the United States back to the eastern Pacific.⁴⁵ China's attention on the Philippines, seen as the politically and economically weak link in the regional U.S. security architecture, showcases Beijing's attempts to coerce regional players to abandon Washington and accept Chinese regional hegemony. It also showcases Beijing's ongoing strategy to reshape the relative power balance in the region, and ultimately to convince Taiwan's leadership and population that the United States and its partners would be unwilling and unable to face off against Chinese regional power to rescue Taiwan. If China can make this case convincingly, it will never need to take on the costly and risky prospect of a Taiwan invasion.

But as China faces external challenges along its land and sea frontiers, it remains constrained by internal structural problems. China's rapid economic rise was shaped by the unspoken but commonly accepted promise to its people that everyone would get rich, though some faster than others. The hope of a brighter future served to tamp down instability in a country where there is no electoral outlet to relieve social frustrations. The problem is that Chinese economic growth was built on two ideological foundations: Mao's legacy of a dispersed economy to avoid any vulnerable center of gravity and Deng's idea of unrestricted growth. In practice, this meant that economic growth was not logical; there was no initial concentration of economic activity in regions matching their strengths. Instead,

⁴³ Bertil Lintner, "China and the Wars in Myanmar," *The Irrawaddy*, January 21, 2025, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/china-and-the-wars-in-myanmar.html>.

⁴⁴ Nicholas John Spykman, *The Geography of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944).

⁴⁵ Rodger Baker, "China's Evolving Taiwan Policy: Disrupt, Isolate and Constrain," *Stratfor Worldview*, June 11, 2020, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/chinas-evolving-taiwan-policy-disrupt-isolate-and-constrain>.

there were numerous duplicate efforts across the country, often leading to massive redundancies and internal competition that drained resources rather than promoting the survival of the fittest corporations.

As one example, Chinese steel production at times grew so fast that Chinese companies, uncoordinated and competing against one another, drove skyrocketing iron ore import prices and at the same time collapsed export steel prices. This destroyed any profit margins and often led to operating at a loss.⁴⁶ Rather than competition driving the uninventive and unsuccessful out of business, China's leaders sought to avoid social instability, and failing companies were kept alive to keep employment up. China's dual ideals meant that the deadwood just kept building up, and the larger the debts, the less likely Beijing was to allow companies to go under. By the time Xi took power, there was a general acceptance of the need to radically alter the system—something that seemed to require consolidation of power and a strongman leadership.

Today, China's leadership faces an aging population demanding a greater share of state resources. It faces an interior that never did grow at the rate of the coasts yet has now been told it must accept the entrenched wealth gap. It faces a housing crisis built on the backbone of national taxation policies, distrust in banks and the stock market, and local government drives for growth at all costs.⁴⁷ China faces the very real challenge of economic reform, compounded by the fear of social instability, all at a time when the United States, Europe, and others are growing wary of economic and political cooperation with Beijing. The consolidation of power under Xi also risks reviving the traditional factional system of Chinese politics, something that could further undermine central cohesion. In effect, Xi Jinping, who rose to power as a renewed centralizer, one who sought to rehabilitate the Party as the core of the nation and simultaneously reinvigorate a sense of broader Chinese nationalism, is growing less and less likely to avoid the stresses of the traditional pattern of Chinese dynastic collapse. Even as economic realities drive China's expansion of maritime operations to secure its far-flung economic vulnerabilities, these same forces drive instability at home, leaving Beijing facing the classic challenge of an amphibious, rather than truly maritime, power.

As an amphibious power, one undergoing a wrenching domestic economic transition, the challenges are myriad.⁴⁸ Beijing has found itself negotiating with the military junta and ethnic rebels in Myanmar's north to keep key trading routes open.⁴⁹ It is balancing the

⁴⁶ Alan H. Price, Christopher B. Weld, and Laura El-Sabaawi, *Government Intervention and Overcapacity: Causes and Consequences for the Global Steel Industry* (July 2013), prepared for the American Iron and Steel Institute and the Steel Manufacturers Association, <https://www.wiley.law/assets/htmldocuments/Government%20Intervention%20and%20Overcapacity%20Causes%20and%20Consequences%20for%20the%20Global%20Steel%20Industry.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Kenneth Rogoff and Yuanchen Yang, "China's Real Estate Challenge," *Finance & Development* (December 2024), <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/fandd/issues/2024/12/chinas-real-estate-challenge-kenneth-rogoff>.

⁴⁸ Rodger Baker, "China's Amphibian Dilemma: Straddling Land and Sea Ambitions," *Stratfor Worldview*, September 7, 2020, <https://library.stratfor.com/article/china-s-amphibian-dilemma-straddling-land-and-sea-ambitions>.

⁴⁹ Bertil Lintner, "China and the Wars in Myanmar," *The Irrawaddy*, January 21, 2025, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/china-and-the-wars-in-myanmar.html>.

political sensitivities of Islamabad with its own security needs in its Pakistan development and transport projects. Chinese counter-terrorism forces are taking a more active role in Tajikistan and other Central Asian neighbors to reduce spillover risks in Xinjiang and keep threats pushed even further back (increasing its traditional buffer space).⁵⁰ Beijing and Moscow are renegotiating Chinese access to the Russian Far East, something Moscow feels compelled to do amid international responses to the Ukraine war and despite longer-term national security concerns. China and India have come to blows over border disagreements several times in the past decade, and New Delhi has embarked on a large-scale counter-construction operation along the disputed frontier in response to Chinese infrastructure projects that reinforce Beijing's territorial claims and strengthen its hold.

At sea Beijing is facing a reinvigorated Japan, new bi- and mini-lateral agreements for joint maritime operations, renewed European naval presence, and a growing challenge to its expanding maritime relations from the Pacific Islands to Latin America. These are the challenges of an amphibious power; it has no real center of gravity for attention and forces—they are spread out on land and at sea and are increasingly reactive in their approach. Yet the Chinese forces remain constrained by Beijing's reticence to act like a traditional military power. If China pushes its claims in the South China Sea, Washington can enhance defense ties with India or Kazakhstan, reorienting Beijing's focus. If China presses on India, Washington can move forces south along Japan's Ryukyu Island chain, re-engage the Pacific Islands, or engage Australia in the development of nuclear-powered submarines. In short, the compulsions that have driven Beijing to pursue a parallel maritime strategy to its traditional continental orientation create numerous new vulnerabilities, stretching the country's ability to manage all these issues at once.

At the same time, China sees its window of opportunity with Taiwan closing. Each successive generation of Taiwanese is less connected politically, culturally, and historically to the Mainland.⁵¹ Taipei's political trajectory is moving steadily toward independence and away not only from unification, but even from the status quo. The United States and its partners are reengaging in the region, most notably in the case of Japan, which is working—both with the United States and on its own—to expand military cooperation arrangements and arms transfers. China's coercive maritime and air exercises around Taiwan are growing more frequent and more intense; as Beijing sees these tools losing their potency, Chinese leadership is being driven to ever bolder moves to try and reshape regional perceptions of Chinese strength and U.S. weakness. Long-touted assertions of a 2027 invasion plan are off the mark, largely because they came from external assertions of closing windows or key anniversaries, and not from any significant need for a move by a particular date, and they don't take into consideration changing global balances and events, or the lessons Beijing is

⁵⁰ Dante Schulz, "China Advances Security Apparatus in Tajikistan in the Aftermath of the Taliban Takeover," *Caspian Policy Center Research / Security & Politics Program*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security-and-politics-program-spp/china-advances-security-apparatus-in-tajikistan-in-the-aftermath-of-the-taliban-takeover-13254>.

⁵¹ Election Study Center, National Chengchi University, "Taiwanese / Chinese Identity (1992/06–2025/06)," <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7800&id=6961>.

drawing from Russia's Ukraine war. Nonetheless, Beijing is increasingly reliant on the military as the only tool of persuasion for managing Taiwan, raising the likelihood for unintended events to trigger a rapid climb up the escalation ladder.⁵²

China's Risky Moment

The most dangerous time for a rising power is when it is powerful enough economically, militarily, and politically to draw the attention of the status quo powers yet has not actually achieved the capabilities to live up to the expectations. It is at this moment that countries frequently turn to nationalism and ideology for social cohesion during perilous times, but this turn can exacerbate foreign perceptions. And it is at this moment that China now stands.⁵³ China has a powerful, largely externally oriented, but untested military. Beijing remains reluctant to use its military abroad for fear of undermining its diplomatic position with much of the developing world and being painted as just another imperialist in the pattern of Europe (and the United States). It also fears that using the military aggressively could consolidate American will, and that of America's allies. It has a large and growing economy, but one mired in internal contradictions and is increasingly being targeted by Western powers, challenging Beijing's ability to maintain technological parity with the West. It has shaped itself as the voice of the Global South and a lender of money without political strings, yet the former is waning in the face of aggressive international behavior, the latter losing its efficacy as countries default or force renegotiation of debt.

China is an empire in the modern sense: a nation at the core of a vast international trading and influence architecture, dependent upon far-flung supply lines and export partners. China has no ability to isolate itself from the world's troubles, just as the United States can no longer rely on the protective barriers of the sea and retreat to its own hemisphere. With international engagement comes international entanglement and dependencies, and thus international responsibilities, even if only to one's own national security interests. China remains reliant on the United States as the responder of first resort and the purveyor of international stability, while at the same time stands as the leading voice criticizing and challenging the U.S.'s right to that role.

China's vulnerability breeds a certain hubris, prompting Beijing to overstate its capabilities in an effort to strengthen its deterrence and bolster coercive leverage. China believes it has the right to (re-)claim its place among the leading powers of the world, yet feels vulnerable and threatened, and this contradictory sense of destiny and insecurity can convince Chinese leaders to take greater risks, compel them to accelerate down paths that are dangerous, and ultimately lead to what it seeks to avoid: international confrontation.

⁵² Ian M. Sullivan, "Three Dates, Three Windows, and All of DOTMLPF-P: How the People's Liberation Army Poses an All-of-Army Challenge," *Military Review* (January–February 2024), <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/January-February-2024/Sullivan/>.

⁵³ Rodger Baker, "China's Rise as a Global Power Reaches Its Riskiest Point Yet," *Stratfor Worldview*, July 3, 2020, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/china-s-rise-global-power-reaches-its-riskiest-point-yet>.

Just as Japan's vulnerability played a large role in its decision to attack the United States in 1941, so too may China soon feel not just the desire but the need to physically degrade U.S. capabilities in China's near abroad in order to secure its own sphere of influence. Today's empires are different from those of the 19th and early 20th centuries: they are less about physical conquest of territory (perhaps Russia and some small powers aside) and more about general control of access to resources, markets, manpower, routes, and political influence. China doesn't necessarily need to physically control the Philippines to remove Manila from the table as a potential vector for strategic threat. But it does need to convince the Philippines, convince Taiwan, convince Vietnam—or the United States, Japan, and Australia—that it has both the capabilities and the will to utilize all aspects of its power to assert its interests. Coercion and deterrence both walk a fine line between being politically effective and altering the threat perception of others to compel preemptive action.⁵⁴

China no longer sits in an ambiguous political space. Few in western political establishments argue for engagement as the main way to manage China's rise and keep Beijing within the North Atlantic's assertion of international norms. Where the United States once tried to manage and cajole China into following a Western path of economic, political, and social development following the end of the Cold War, today that framework has been roundly rejected, and coercion is the name of the game. The continued actions of Russia in Ukraine and around its periphery are also forcing Western nations to reassess whether avoiding confrontation should be the driving theme of national strategic policy, or whether such policies are ultimately capitulation that fail to deter and only delay responses. China's leaders, as well as those of its regional neighbors and the West, are studying the failure of Western deterrence in Ukraine and applying the lessons learned to Taiwan. There is a race between the West and China in the South and East China Sea to see who can out deter and out coerce the other.

China and the West appear locked in a cycle where each feels compelled to respond to the other, each seeks advantage, and smaller powers find themselves the primary arena of competition. Beijing is using history (or its own interpretation of history), as well as a general global discomfort with the asserted universalism of U.S. and Western European ideals to assert its own right to not only rewrite global norms but reclaim its perceived place as a (if not the) central power.⁵⁵ In asserting this global role and responsibility, Xi Jinping has firmly rejected Deng Xiaoping's admonition to walk softly—or perhaps he has recognized that Deng didn't mean forever, he meant that China should bide its time until it could convincingly assert itself on the global stage. Xi has declared China is there already, that it has the capabilities.

It is not clear that this is the case. The last five years have demonstrated that, despite China's amazing economic story and significant military buildup, it remains wracked with

⁵⁴ Tami Davis Biddle, "Coercion Theory: A Basic Introduction for Practitioners," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 3, Issue 2 (Spring 2020). <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/8864>.

⁵⁵ Nicholas Ross Smith and Tracey Fallon, "How the CCP Uses History," *The Diplomat*, July 1, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/07/how-the-ccp-uses-history/>.

internal challenges, surrounded by instability and unfriendly neighbors on land and at sea, and may well have overreached its economic and military ambitions. If history is any indicator, China will continue to wrestle with these competing continental and maritime pressures.

This has led to contradictory policies from China as Beijing tries to adapt to its changing political, economic, and security fortunes. China's former strength was the ability to undermine Western coalitions, to remain important enough to some key actors to keep the United States from assembling a cohesive coalition to constrain China's activities.⁵⁶ This strategy is eroding, though not entirely gone. As it erodes, China may become more assertive in shaping perceptions of the risk of opposing China, not merely of the rewards for staying neutral. China's evolution is at its riskiest moment: its ambitions exceed its capabilities, and foreign assessments assume its ambitions and capabilities are even greater than they are. As with previous moments in history, this situation may well lead to overcompensation by China's opponents, and a greater sense of urgency and risk tolerance on the part of China's leadership. While there is no deterministic "Thucydides Trap" at play, there is an international environment increasingly fraught with risks of miscalculation, overambitious assertions, and blunt coercive and deterrent moves.

For China, this is the moment to break with past historical cycles, to avoid the dynastic collapse and to claim a role as a global great power. For the United States, it is a moment of challenge to a decades-long strategic policy of balance of power in Eurasia, of keeping risks far from U.S. shores through a forward deployed navy, and of an ideological economic and political policy imposed upon the international system. A clash is not inevitable, but the sense of the inevitable may well make it a reality.

Rodger Baker serves as a Senior Advisor at RANE (formerly Stratfor), the Chairman of the advisory body at the Society for Geopolitics (SAGEO), and the Managing Director for Geopolitics at Periplous LLC.

⁵⁶ Rodger Baker, "The U.S.-China Ideological Divide and the Challenge of Cohesion," *Stratfor Worldview*, July 30, 2020, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/us-china-ideological-divide-and-challenge-cohesion>.