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DULLING THE DRAGON'S CLAWS: DETERRING CHINESE MILITARY EXPANSIONISM

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Solo Flight

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By Major Geoffrey Tyrell

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DULLING THE DRAGON'S CLAWS: DETECTING CHINESE MILITARY EXPANSIONISM

INTRODUCTION

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is poised to upend the liberal international order in the coming century. China's impressive economic growth has endowed it with the second-largest economy in the world, and an accompanying increase in power and influence that entices other nations to look to it for global leadership.¹ Its effective use of economic investment, conducted via its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other programs, makes it an attractive partner for many developing nations which seek to emulate China's prosperity model.² As the PRC further evolves into a leading superpower, it is positioned to change the status quo in both Asia and around the world.

Such a change, of course, cannot occur without some degree of competition and conflict in the diplomatic, economic, and military spheres. The United States (US), long the leading champion of the liberal international order, perceives the PRC as a disruptive challenger to the system of global governance that was established after the Second World War. Accordingly, the American government announced its "Pacific pivot" in 2011. As outlined by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in an article for *Foreign Policy* magazine, "harnessing Asia's growth and dynamism is central to American economic and strategic interests."³ The US clearly indicated its intent to maintain its broad influence in the Pacific, bolstering its relationships with old allies while signalling to the PRC that it would not be allowed to become a regional hegemon unchecked.

¹ Stuart Harris, *China's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 120.

² Formerly known as the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) Initiative, the BRI is an infrastructure and investment strategy that is intended to meet the growing market and resources needs of the PRC.

³ Hillary Clinton, "America's Pacific Century," *Foreign Policy*, no. 189 (2011): 56-63.
<https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>

Much of the debate surrounding China's rise occurs in the context of America's perceived decline as the world's preeminent superpower. This is particularly true since the turn of the century, as prolonged and costly engagements in the Middle East and Afghanistan have pressured the American government to reduce its foreign entanglements. Despite this uncertainty, the US remains the world's most powerful nation in both economic and military terms. In 2015, its defence spending accounted for roughly 35 percent of the world's total, placing it well ahead of its "core" adversary states of Russia, China, and Iran.⁴ The PRC, however, is rapidly gaining ground in terms of both hard and soft power capability.

While China apologists contend that the PRC's rise is both benign and natural, several features of the Chinese state are anathema to the liberal international order and its democratic adherents. Under the firm control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), China is an authoritarian state and its current president, Xi Jinping, is a *de facto* dictator.⁵ The PRC maintains a strict surveillance and censorship regime over its citizens, and Beijing has conducted a brutal and repressive crackdown on the ethnic Muslim Uyghur population in the western part of the country.⁶ While not alone in conducting Influence Operations (IO) abroad, the PRC has been particularly aggressive in spreading

⁴ Jude Woodward, *The US vs China: Asia's New Cold War?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 11.

⁵ Tom Phillips, "Dictator for life: Xi Jinping's power grab condemned as step towards tyranny," *The Guardian*, 26 February 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/26/xi-jinping-china-presidential-limit-scrap-dictator-for-life>

⁶ Anand Ram, Adam Miller, Adrienne Arseneault, and Frédéric Zalac, "Secret documents reveal systematic plan to detain and indoctrinate Muslim minority in western China," *CBC News*, 25 November 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/china-uyghurs-camps-secret-documents-1.5368925>

disinformation and subverting free and open democratic societies in order to further its desired narratives.⁷

China's economic rise precipitated an increased investment in its military capability and the adoption of a more aggressive defence policy that furthers its territorial claims.⁸ In order to reduce the likelihood of a major clash of arms in Asia, deterrence – the maintenance of the status quo by persuading a state that the costs of an unwanted action outweigh the potential rewards – is vital.⁹ China's neighbours, and those nations with a vested interest in the Pacific, must be prepared to confront Beijing in such a way as to deter Chinese military expansionism.

This paper will examine the defence and security strategies that China's democratic neighbours may pursue in order to achieve such an end. First, China's strategic goals and related defence policy will be examined in order to develop a clear idea of what the PRC wants and the methods that it may employ to reach its desired end-state. From there, three regional areas of contention will be explored in depth: the East China Sea (ECS), the South China Sea (SCS), and the Sino-Indian border. Within each of these areas, military deterrence options for China's competitors will be identified. If exercised, these strategies may prevent the PRC from giving primacy to military means to achieve its ends.

It must be noted that this paper does not advocate the pursuit of war with the PRC. Such a conflict would be devastating, and could well escalate into an exchange of

⁷ Office of the Secretary of Defence, *Annual Report to Congress – Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2019), i.

⁸ Tilman Pradt, *China's New Foreign Policy: Military Modernization, Multilateralism, and the "China Threat"* (Berlin: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 74.

⁹ Anastasia Filippidou, *Deterrence: Concepts and Approaches for Current and Emerging Threats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.

nuclear weapons; however, the *realpolitik* necessitated by engaging the autocratic communist Chinese state means that military competition and confrontation cannot be disregarded. Rather, the analysis that follows suggests that a proper deterrent strategy on the part of China's neighbours may guide the PRC towards following a truly peaceful path to regional primacy.

WHAT DOES CHINA WANT?

Observing that the PRC wishes to become the dominant power in Asia and a leader abroad is a simplistic view of China's strategic aims, despite its kernel of truth. For the purposes of this paper, two key areas merit examination: China's viewpoint of its place in the world, and the role of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in pursuing the PRC's strategic interests.¹⁰ By considering these, a clearer picture of China's goals – and the role of its armed forces in obtaining them – becomes apparent.

The Chinese Perspective

Since coming to power in 2012, Xi Jinping has promoted the idea of the “Chinese Dream:” the pursuit and achievement of China's national aspiration to become a powerful and prosperous country.¹¹ The espousal of the Chinese Dream, and the CCP's related policies, lays bare China's intent to become the leading power in Asia. This is a position that it views as both its historic and natural right. The PRC's quest for hegemony is closely linked to another key concept within Chinese political discourse: the so-called “Century of Humiliation.” During this period, China suffered at the hands of both the great Western powers and Japan as it was colonized, conquered, and forced to open itself

¹⁰ The PLA is the armed forces of the PRC, and includes its separate land, air, and naval services.

¹¹ Office of the Secretary of Defence, 3.

to the rest of the world.¹² As China becomes stronger, it will grow increasingly hostile towards outside interference in what it regards as its home ground.

As with any nation, history and cultural memory play a critical role in forming China's perspectives. So too does myth. In the PRC's case, its leadership promotes the notion that China's military culture is almost entirely defensive in nature, and that expansion through force of arms runs counter to China's national character.¹³ Indeed, the Chinese government's 1998 Defence White Paper proclaimed that the "defensive nature of China's national defence policy also springs from...a peace-loving tradition."¹⁴ Such a narrative posits that China is an inherently peaceful country, unlike Western nations whose martial traditions are "grounded in the cult of the offense and a thirst for imperial expansion."¹⁵ The implication is clear: Western powers are naturally bloodthirsty, and they constitute a major threat to China's peace and prosperity.

Promoting this notion achieves the CCP's goal of maintaining popular support for its expansionist foreign policy. Combining the concepts of the Chinese Dream, the "Century of Humiliation," and the idea that China is a naturally peaceful state imperilled by violent foreign powers ensures that increased defence expenditures remain palatable to the PRC's civilian population.¹⁶ For China's leaders, a strong, capable, and entirely modern military is vital to achieving supremacy in the 21st century.

¹² Lukas K. Danner, *China's Grand Strategy: Contradictory Foreign Policy?* (Miami: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 16.

¹³ Andrew R. Wilson, "Myth-busting: Challenging the conventional wisdom of Chinese strategic culture" in *China's Strategic Priorities*, eds. Jonathan H. Ping and Brett McCormick (New York: Routledge, 2016), 8.

¹⁴ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defence* (Beijing: People's Republic of China, 1998), 6.

¹⁵ Wilson, 9.

¹⁶ Jonathan Holslag, *China's Coming War with Asia* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2015), 115.

Sharpened Claws: China's Military Modernization

As China has grown in economic prominence, a modernized PLA has become increasingly important for safeguarding the PRC's gains. Within the first two decades of this century, China's defence budget grew to become the second-largest in the world, trailing only that of the US.¹⁷ This reflects the CCP's understanding that in order to truly compete with the great powers (the US in particular), its armed forces must be able to fight and win on a 21st century battlefield. The PLA, once described as a "junkyard army," has evolved into an increasingly professional and capable military.¹⁸ In some regards, it now possesses capabilities that were once unique to first world armies alone.

Since Xi Jinping assumed power nearly a decade ago, the PLA's guiding strategy evolved to become more aggressive in nature. The PLA Air Force's (PLAAF) doctrine shifted from defensive to offensive operations, and the PLA Army (PLAA) placed greater emphasis on conducting long-distance mobility operations. Across the PLA, all services are directed to "informationalize:" that is, to make greater use of information technology (IT) and communications systems in order to achieve an advantage over an adversary.¹⁹ This is analogous to "network-centric" warfare within Western armed forces and reflects the PRC's desire to be able to compete with modern militaries on an equal footing. Particularly noteworthy are its investments in the space and cyber domains, the latter of which furthers its ability to conduct effective IO campaigns against its competitors.²⁰

¹⁷ Christopher Coker, *The Improbable War: China, the United States, and the Continuing Logic of Great Power Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 136.

¹⁸ M.S. Chase et al, *China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2015), 15.

¹⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defence, 13-14.

²⁰ J. Michael Cole, *The Hard Edge of Sharp Power: Understanding China's Influence Operations Abroad* (Ottawa: MacDonald-Laurier Institute, 2018), 9-10.

The PLA's modernization program provides the PRC with an effective means to pursue and defend its aims, even if the CCP tends to be cautious in the application of hard power to diplomatic and economic disputes. The large-scale re-equipping of the PLA has given it the ability to undertake a greater expeditionary role, both along China's borders and within the western Pacific Ocean.²¹ This ability is critical in the event that longstanding territorial disputes, such as those in the ECS and SCS, escalate into an open clash of arms. As the PRC continues along its path towards regional hegemony, the PLA will play an essential role in China's inevitable confrontation with its neighbours.

Summary: Motivations and Military Means

In this section, China's professed goals and motivations have been briefly examined. The pursuit of the Chinese Dream, propelled by resentment following the so-called "Century of Humiliation," caused the PRC to become more openly aggressive in its desire for dominance in Asia. Conscious of the fact that its goals are unlikely to be attained peacefully in the continent's complex geo-political environment, Beijing placed a renewed importance on the PLA's ability to defend China's territory, providing a hard military backbone to the country's diplomatic and economic efforts.²² With these facts in mind, this paper will now turn to an analysis of three critical flashpoints along China's border and options for deterring Chinese military expansionism within them.

OLD ALLIES, NEW PURPOSE: THE EAST CHINA SEA

Situated along China's eastern Pacific border, the ECS contains several potential military flashpoints. Foremost among them is the Taiwan Strait, given the PRC's claim to Taiwan as province of China proper. It is also home to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands,

²¹ Office of the Secretary of Defence, 35.

²² Holslag, 2.

which are the subject of a lengthy territorial dispute between the PRC and Japan.²³

Finally, the spectre of war remains present within the Korean Peninsula, wherein the PRC's client Kim regime repeatedly demonstrates that it will not hesitate to use force to keep itself in power.²⁴ Given these various friction points, the ECS presents a challenging strategic environment for the three democratic nations (and Western allies) most affected by them: Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Each country's bilateral relations with China are unique. In the case of Japan, Beijing is leery of its longstanding alliance with the US, and the garrisons that the latter maintains within the Japanese islands. This suspicion is exacerbated by China's memory of Japan's abuses during the Second World War.²⁵ South Korea occupies a particularly challenging position: like Japan, it enjoys a close alliance with the US. Concurrently, its economy is becoming more integrated with that of the PRC, and its government is fearful of being caught in the middle of any dispute between the two superpowers.²⁶ Lastly, Taiwan lives with the alarming prospect of China using force to bring about the reunification of the two nations, the former of which the PRC regards as an errant province that holds no political legitimacy.²⁷

Despite the complicated relations and histories between Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, all three share the strategic concern that China will increasingly resort to the use of military power in order to further its interests in the ECS. As the PRC's military strength grows, the three nations would benefit from a collaborative defensive

²³ Senkaku is the Japanese, and Diaoyu the Chinese name for the island chain.

²⁴ Woodward, 144.

²⁵ Pradt, 75-76.

²⁶ TongFi Kim, "South Korea's Middle Power Response to the Rise of China" in *Middle Powers and the Rise of China*, eds. Bruce Gilley and Andrew O'Neil (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 88-90.

²⁷ Danner, 21.

partnership. If successful, such an endeavour will strengthen each country and check Chinese military aggression in the region.

Collective Deterrence over Collective Defence

The creation of a trilateral defence partnership between Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan could not be done in haste. A compact in the style of the North Atlantic Treaty would likely increase Chinese hostility towards the three nations, to say nothing of the specific domestic political challenges that their respective governments would face. Such an undertaking would have to proceed incrementally, and in such a way as to avoid provoking Beijing into hostile action. At all times, it is likely that its development would have to be guided by the US, given its strategic influence within with each country.²⁸

To begin, the increased sharing of military technology would benefit all three nations. As identified within its published defence strategy, Japan now regards the PRC as its greatest military threat, overtaking a position long held by North Korea.²⁹ Accordingly, the Japan Self Defence Forces (JSDF) has begun a program of urgent modernization that is intended to improve the country's ability to deter and, if necessary, defeat the PLA.³⁰ Among other efforts, Japan is developing an indigenous fifth generation stealth fighter that will supplement its purchase of F-35 Lighting aircraft from the US. South Korea is following a similar path, developing the KF-X stealth aircraft with Indonesia as it modernizes its own military. Accordingly, there is great potential for Japan and South Korea to both share development efforts and transfer technology

²⁸ David A. Cooper and Toshi Yoshihara, "US Responses to Middle Powers and China" in *Middle Powers and the Rise of China*, eds. Bruce Gilley and Andrew O'Neil (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 77-78.

²⁹ Japanese Ministry of Defence, *National Defence Program Guidelines for FY 2019 and Beyond* (Tokyo: Ministry of Defence, 2018), 5.

³⁰ David Bercuson, "Why Japan is Building its Military, Fast," *National Post*, 6 November 2018. <https://nationalpost.com/opinion/david-j-bercuson-why-japan-is-building-its-military-fast>

between themselves. This would not only decrease their reliance upon America's defence industry, but would demonstrate a shared resolve to counter the PRC.³¹ Taiwan, gradually modernizing its own military, could one day turn to either Japan or South Korea to replace its fighter force. The sharing of military technology between the three nations would act as a critical first step in building a deterrent partnership against China in the ECS.

Beyond sharing military technology, any trilateral defence partnership between the three nations would have to include joint training exercises. This endeavour, if successful, would improve interoperability between the three nations' armed forces. As a first step, Exercise NORTHERN VIPER, a bilateral training event conducted by the US and Japan, could expand to include participation from both South Korean and Taiwanese contingents. A similar adjustment could be applied to the joint South Korean/US Exercise MAX THUNDER. From these beginnings, the partner nations could develop their own trilateral exercises that would address the most likely military threat from the PRC: an joint offensive by air and sea units.³² In this regard, the three nations could develop a shared equivalent to the PRC's Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2AD) strategy that would give Beijing pause for reconsideration before undertaking any offensive military action against any of the three in the ECS.

To further deter Chinese military aggression, intelligence sharing between all three nations would be crucial. From 2016 to 2019, Japan and South Korea were signatories to the the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA),

³¹ The supply chains between the US and its allies in the West Pacific will be severely disrupted in the event of a major conflict.

³² Office of the Secretary of Defence, 53-58.

which enabled them to share military intelligence regarding North Korea without the involvement of the US. While this agreement was dissolved following a degradation of Japan-South Korea relations, it stands as proof that shared intelligence frameworks can be created between the two countries.³³ The sharing of timely and accurate intelligence information between Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan would benefit all three nations by keeping them equally informed regarding the PRC's military actions. Furthermore, it would enable them to develop a coherent, combined military strategy for deterring Chinese military adventurism in the ECS.

Conclusion: A Worthy Challenge

The creation of a trilateral military partnership between Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan would not be easy. Notwithstanding the fact that Taiwan does not enjoy formal diplomatic relations with either country, a long history of shared antagonism means that any agreement between them would have to overcome deep-rooted suspicion and distrust.³⁴ Despite this, the best way forward for the three nations to counter Chinese military aggression is to develop a trilateral defence partnership. By sharing military technology, developing interoperability via combined exercises, and creating intelligence sharing agreements, the three democratic nations of the ECS will be in a strong position to deter the PRC from flexing its military muscle. Such an enterprise will create an effective and enduring bulwark against Chinese expansionism in the West Pacific.

³³ This followed the alleged illumination of a Japanese patrol plane by the fire control radar of a South Korean warship in December 2018. Tetsushi Kajimoto and Hyonbee Shin, "Japan accuses South Korea of 'extremely dangerous' radar lock on plane," *Reuters.com*, 21 December 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-defence-southkorea/japan-accuses-south-korea-of-extremely-dangerous-radar-lock-on-plane-idUSKCN1OK11O>

³⁴ Woodward, 115-118.

ROUGH SAILING AHEAD: THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

The SCS is another critical area of security concern along the PRC's periphery. Over the past thirty years, China became more openly aggressive in asserting its claim to those waters, and has done so in an attempt to ensure that competitor nations' access to them is gained only on terms that Beijing finds acceptable.³⁵ This presents a particularly difficult challenge for China's neighbours and those countries with a vested interest in the SCS, as approximately a third of the world's total maritime commercial traffic passes through it every year.³⁶

The SCS presents a clear demonstration of the PRC's increased willingness to use military means to achieve its ends. As the most visible example, China constructed 3,000 acres of new land upon seven features in the contested Spratly Islands – territory that it has turned into outposts for its air and naval forces in the area.³⁷ PLA units regularly challenge any non-Chinese military elements transiting through the SCS, pushing Beijing's claim that its waters have historically belonged to China alone.³⁸ The PRC exerts this policy despite international legal rulings, such as the Permanent Court of Arbitration's 2016 judgement in favour of the Philippines regarding the SCS, that run counter to its stated position on the matter. As China continues to fortify the SCS as part of its A2AD strategy, the odds of a major clash of arms within it will grow dramatically.

³⁵ Marius Grinius, "South China Sea and the New Great Game." Canadian Global Affairs Institute, June 2016. Accessed 31 March 2020. https://www.cgai.ca/south_china_sea

³⁶ Christopher L. Daniels, *South China Sea: Energy Security and Conflicts* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), 1.

³⁷ Office of the Secretary of Defence, 75.

³⁸ Jian Zhang, "China's South China Sea Policy: Evolutions, claims and challenges" in *The South China Sea Maritime Dispute*, eds. Leszek Buszynski and Christopher B. Roberts (New York: Routledge, 2015), 68.

This is particularly true given the presence of asymmetric Chinese forces in the area, the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia (PAFMM) foremost among them.³⁹

Chinese military expansionism in the SCS cannot be left unchecked. If the PRC is allowed to limit or deny access to those waters by foreign vessels, Beijing will be emboldened to adopt such tactics elsewhere, including the ECS and the Indian Ocean. In order to send a clear message to the PRC that it does not (and shall not) own the SCS, those democratic nations dependent upon the unimpeded flow of maritime traffic through it must be prepared to act in concert to deter China's use of force in the area.

Freedom of Navigation and Forward Presence

The exercise of Freedom of Navigation (FoN) rights by non-PLA Navy (PLAN) warships is critical for the deterrence of Chinese military expansionism in the SCS.⁴⁰ This is particularly true for those Western nations that do not have a physical presence within the SCS, but which rely upon the free movement of shipping through it. The US, the United Kingdom, and Australia are foremost among them. In the case of these three nations, the lack of forward-deployed forces and staging bases within the SCS presents a challenge. This is especially true given the PLA's creation of garrison islands within the Spratlys – islands which, among other capabilities, possess both long-range anti-ship and anti-aircraft weapons systems.⁴¹

In order to project forces forward into the SCS, those democratic states which required unimpeded access to the area must either maintain forces capable of sustained

³⁹ Andrew S. Erickson and Ryan D. Martinson, eds. *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2019), 293.

⁴⁰ The principle of FoN is a key component of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The PRC ratified UNCLOS in 1996.

⁴¹ Office of the Secretary of Defence, 75.

long-range deployments, gain access to friendly ports in the region, or both. For decades, the US and the Philippines exercised a strong degree of military cooperation. Despite this, the relationship between the two nations diminished with the election of Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte as presidents of the respective countries in 2016. Duterte's anti-American streak and willingness to develop closer ties with the PRC places Western nations at a particular disadvantage regarding basing options and a forward presence in the SCS.⁴²

Notwithstanding Duterte's prejudices, the position of South Asian nations which border the SCS regarding China – Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam, specifically – is understandable. The PRC is the region's great power, despite the reach and influence of the US, and those countries must strike a careful balance between China and the West. This is compounded by the PRC's willingness to use economic incentives and investment resources (such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, or AIIB) to persuade developing nations to toe Beijing's line.⁴³ While appearing benign and beneficial, China's investments in its poorer South Asian neighbours furthers its strategic goal of regional hegemony, and its debt-trap diplomacy is a particularly effective tool.

How can the PRC's competitors (including Western nations) maintain a sufficient military footprint forward in the SCS so as to deter China's aggression in those waters? As stated above, the ability of Western nations to build and maintain military forces capable of sustained deployments is crucial. The US Navy's Seventh Fleet, headquartered in Yokosuka, Japan, is America's forward naval presence in the Pacific

⁴² Woodward, 180-181.

⁴³ Danner, 17-18.

Ocean, and its ships regularly conduct FoN missions through the SCS.⁴⁴ If necessary, an American-led intervention force could make use of the Seventh Fleet's facilities to maintain itself in the West Pacific, and then project further forwards into the SCS in the event of a crisis.

Looking beyond the presence of American forces in Japan and South Korea, the US has strengthened its military alliance with Australia, itself concerned by Chinese military expansionism in the SCS. While Australia's close economic ties with the PRC has forced it to walk a careful line as far as official condemnation of Chinese aggression is concerned, it remains committed to the liberal international order and the freedom of all nations to access the SCS.⁴⁵ American naval forces have enjoyed greater access to Australian ports, and collaborative exercises such as TALISMAN SABRE have increased interoperability between the allies, thus creating a greater military deterrent against the PRC in the area.⁴⁶ Such events send a clear message to Beijing: that those Western nations with a stake in the future of the SCS will maintain their ability to both fight together and deploy forward into contested waters in the event that Chinese hostility and over-reach provokes a clash of arms.

Conclusion

The SCS will only grow in geostrategic importance throughout the 21st century. This is due to both the high volume of maritime trade that passes through it and the estimated \$2.5 trillion in unexploited hydrocarbons that are estimated to lie within its

⁴⁴ Jesse Johnson, "U.S. Navy sails warship near disputed islands in South China Sea for first time in 2020," *Japan Times*, 28 January 2020. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/01/28/asia-pacific/us-navy-warship-disputed-islands-south-china-sea-first-2020/#.XoNgr3dFxPY>

⁴⁵ Tuan Ahn Luc, "Decoding Australia's Strange Silence Over China's Transgressions in the South China Sea," *The Diplomat*, 15 August 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/decoding-australias-strange-silence-over-chinas-transgressions-in-the-south-china-sea/>

⁴⁶ Held every two years, the 2019 iteration of this event included participation from Canada and Japan.

seabed.⁴⁷ As the PRC is likely to become more hostile in asserting its claim to the SCS, the continued exercise of FoN and the forward deployment of democratic military forces will be critical to check Chinese military expansionism in the area. Leveraging existing relationships – including defence infrastructure – is essential to blunt Beijing’s use of force in a hotly contested and critical area.

NEW HORIZONS: AN INDIAN PARTNERSHIP

China and India share both a long border and a long history. Since their respective founding as modern states following the end of the Second World War, the relationship between the two countries has ebbed and flowed over time. It reached its nadir with the Sino-Indian War of 1962, when escalating territorial tensions erupted into a short, sharp conflict which the PRC claimed as a victory. Following this clash of arms, what has been termed a “Cold Peace” developed between the two nations.⁴⁸

Beginning with its independence in 1947, India pursued a distinct and highly independent foreign policy. It is a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and opted to maintain a close relationship with the Soviet Union during the Cold War.⁴⁹ Despite India’s historical caution and aversion towards growing too close to Western powers, the PRC’s growth in military and economic might has forced it to become more practical in deterring the strategic threat which it faces from China.

⁴⁷ U.S. Embassy and Consulates in China, “China Escalates Coercion against Vietnam’s Longstanding Oil and Gas Activity in the South China Sea.” Accessed 31 March 2020. <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/china-escalates-coercion-against-vietnams-longstanding-oil-and-gas-activity-in-the-south-china-sea/>

⁴⁸ Jeff M. Smith, *Cold Peace: China-India Rivalry in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Lexington Books, 2014), 93.

⁴⁹ Woodward, 214.

Amongst Indian political and military elites, it is agreed that the PRC has become the foremost danger to the nation's long-term security.⁵⁰

The ongoing rivalry between India and China is multi-faceted and stands despite the close economic integration that has developed between the two since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Extant disputes over unsettled territorial disagreements are compounded by Chinese support for Pakistan, India's provision of sanctuary for the Tibetan government in exile since the 1950s, and competing demands for fresh water. Regarding the latter, the Indian government is concerned that Chinese natural resource management programs, including the creation of new dams, will limit the flow of fresh water into Indian territory from its sources in the Chinese-governed Tibetan Plateau.⁵¹ This issue will only grow in importance as the effects of climate change further the "drying" of the Indian subcontinent.

Given the many challenges that India faces in competing with China, it is a major potential partner for deterring Chinese military expansionism in the 21st century. The varied nature of India's disputes with the PRC, coupled with its ties to those neighbours of China which are wary of Chinese aggression, indicate that it will have a critical role to play in limiting China's use of military power in Asia.

Rejuvenating the Indian Defence Enterprise

India is re-orienting its military to meet the varied security challenges that it will face in the coming century. In an attempt to reduce the negative impacts of decades of inter-service rivalry and to develop truly joint capabilities, the government of Narendra

⁵⁰ Smith, 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 204-207.

Modi created the position of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) in 2019.⁵² This change came about following more than two decades of stalled efforts by senior political and military leaders within the Indian establishment, and reflects New Delhi's realization that its armed forces are ill-prepared for a major conflict.

Further to structural changes within its armed forces, India has invested heavily in modernizing its defence equipment. While it has maintained longstanding military supply arrangements with Russia and various European countries, the US has provided large quantities of new aircraft, vehicles, and weapon systems as part of India's modernization program. During a diplomatic visit to the country in February 2020, President Trump announced that a total of USD \$3 billion in arms sales had been confirmed by the Indian government.⁵³ This follows other major purchases of American defence equipment over the past decade, including strategic transport aircraft, towed howitzers, and precision-guided munitions (PGMs).⁵⁴ In an attempt to keep pace with the PRC's own military modernization, India is moving quickly to ensure that its armed forces remain relevant and effective.

Looking beyond America's growing role as India's arsenal, the two nations should increase both the size, frequency, and scope of combined training events between their respective militaries. This includes both the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) and COPE INDIA exercises.⁵⁵ The former is of particular importance, as it reflects the

⁵² Harsh V. Pant and Kartik Bommakanti, "Modi Reimagines the Indian Military," *Foreign Policy*, 6 September 2019. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/06/modi-reimagines-the-indian-military/>

⁵³ Justin Sink, Archana Chaudhary, Jordan Fabian, and Bloomberg, "U.S. and India to sign \$3 billion in defence deals, Trump Says," *Fortune*, 24 February 2020. <https://fortune.com/2020/02/24/us-india-sign-defense-deal-trade-trump/>

⁵⁴ Smith, 120.

⁵⁵ Vivek Mishra, "India-US Defence Cooperation: Assessing Strategic Imperatives," *Strategic Analysis* 42, no. 1 (January 2018): 1-14.

greater role that the Indian Navy will have to play in an increasingly contested Asian maritime environment. Along India's own borders, this is particularly true in the Indian Ocean, where its armed forces may be called upon to interdict Chinese maritime traffic in the event of a major conflict in the region.

As China-bound oil and gas shipments originating in Africa and the Persian Gulf must transit through the Indian Ocean to reach the Strait of Malacca – a critical chokepoint – Indian forces operating out of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) are strategically placed to disrupt the PRC's sea lines of communication (SLOCs).⁵⁶ Such an act would carry a severe risk of escalation and would likely be enacted only in the event of either war (not necessarily Sino-Indian in nature) or an international embargo against China. To counter India's naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean, China has invested in modernizing Pakistani ports and maintaining access to them for its warships, further escalating Indian fears of Chinese military aggression.

Looking beyond its home waters, India is aware that China's expansionist policy in the ECS and SCS will have an impact upon its own strategic future. Accordingly, the Indian government established close cooperative ties with Japan, including joint military exercises and the espousal of shared regional interests, in an attempt to curb the PRC.⁵⁷ This is part of India's "Look East" policy, which intends to strengthen India's diplomatic and economic ties with those countries which belong to the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).⁵⁸ With continued access to the SCS growing more critical to

⁵⁶ Smith, 164-165.

⁵⁷ Woodward, 217-218,

⁵⁸ Smith, 179.

India's economic growth, its government openly voiced support of the principle of FoN, and transited its own naval forces through those contested waters on several occasions.⁵⁹

Strategically, a rejuvenated Indian defence enterprise, including strengthened relationships with those nations affected by China's rise, is critical in the application of deterrent force against the PRC. As the competition between the two powers continues into the 21st century, what happens along India's borders – to include its maritime domain – will have both regional and global impacts.

Conclusion

India's rejuvenation of its defence enterprise, executed via force restructure and modernization, the pursuit of deeper military relationships with the US and Japan, and its determination to maintain unrestricted access to regional waters, all serve as deterrent measures against the PRC. While the Indian government must continue to balance its relationship with China between its defence and economic interests, it is resolute that the PRC will not be allowed to exercise unrestricted military might in Asia.

CONCLUSION

Barring a major economic reversal, China will continue along its current trajectory to become the dominant power in Asia during the 21st century. What remains uncertain is the degree to which the PRC will employ military options to achieve its strategic aims. This uncertainty has led to concerns that China (a rising power) and its greatest competitor, the US (a ruling power), are locked into the "Thucydides Trap" and thus destined for major armed conflict.⁶⁰ Certainly, Beijing's ongoing efforts to

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 189-190.

⁶⁰ Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *The Atlantic*, 24 September 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>

modernize its military, coupled with its aggressive acts in the ECS and SCS, do not lend credence to Beijing's claims that its country's growth is naturally benign and beneficial for both Asia and the world.

War with the PRC is neither desirable, necessary, nor a foregone conclusion. The adoption of a policy of military deterrence on the part of China's neighbours may do much to curb any impulse on the part of the Chinese government to use force to achieve its goals. As examined above, strengthened defence relationships with Western ally and partner nations in the ECS and SCS can create a deterrent belt around the PRC. Within the West Pacific, greater defence cooperation between Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan may empower those nations with greater security while lessening their dependence on America for assistance in the event of a regional crisis.

Looking to the SCS, the ability of all nations to exercise FoN sends a crucial message to Beijing: despite its dubious claims of ownership over those waters, it will not be allowed to dictate access to them. This principle, coupled with the forward deployment of non-PRC forces into the region, will force the Chinese government to consider the degree to which it will flex its military muscle in the SCS, given the potential unintended consequences of a clash of arms.

Finally, India is crucial for the deterrence of China, given its military might and critical position along the PRC's SLOC from its major energy suppliers. Despite being cautious to avoid any alliance with Western powers, India is concerned at the dangers posed by China should it become an unchecked military hegemon. Collaborative defence relations between India and those nations similarly challenged by the PRC must be

further exploited in order to reduce the odds of military conflict in Asia in the 21st century.

If the deterrent strategies endorsed in this paper are successfully adopted by China's democratic competitor states, then it is likely that the PRC will be forced to reduce its reliance upon military strength to achieve its policy goals in the coming decades. Active deterrence along China's periphery will reduce its military expansionism, and force its rise to regional dominance to remain peaceful in nature. Although this demands a great deal of diplomatic, economic, and military investment on the part of the PRC's competitors, it will reap great benefits for those democratic countries most impacted by China's rise. It is not too late to dull the dragon's claws.

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