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Beijing turns to the seas. Combining assertive postures with cooperation

Abstract

China's effort to build itself up into a maritime superpower has drawn scholars' attention. Questions arise whether the Chinese maritime turn can be considered in terms of potential destabilization of the maritime border in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean region, or rather, as a contributor to maintaining such an order. Those who believe that China's maritime rise represents a destabilizing force, point at Beijing's assertive posture in the East and South China seas. Other scholars argue, that Chinese navy (PLAN) has taken part in humanitarian assistance, disaster relief (HA/DR) and anti-piracy missions in the Indo-Pacific region, contributing to the international maritime cooperation. State-of-the-art analyses have focused either on China's assertiveness, chiefly in regional seas, or on Beijing's difficulties to catching up with a blue-water navy status in a global scenario. Rather than assuming China's maritime projection as a uniform pattern, this study empasizes that Beijing pursues a twofold strategy. On regional waters, where its navy is capable of exercising effective military might, China operates assertively and does not seek multilateral cooperation. On the high seas, where PLAN's forays suffer from weaker preparedness and training, Beijing has joined the international community in maintaining the world order. China pursued naval diplomacy efforts, as demonstrated by its participation in anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden since 2008 and its contribution to numerous HA/DR initiatives. China's regional assertiveness and its global cooperative posture reinforce Beijing's maritime projection.

Keywords: *China, South China Sea, East China Sea, seapower*

1. Introduction

China's commitment to developing a modern naval apparatus is relatively new. In the wake of Deng Xiaoping's unveiling of economic reforms in the late 1970s, Chinese authorities came to recognize that acquiring some maritime projection is highly beneficial for sustaining economic development. Nonetheless, naval modernization served to acquire military capabilities, which proved essential in safeguarding what the People's Republic of China (PRC) considers its maritime sovereignty. Hence, China gained control of the Paracel (1974) and Spratly islands (1988) in the South China Sea (SCS) after the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) obtained key military victories in naval conflicts with Southern Vietnamese and Vietnamese forces, respectively. In 1995, China occupied Mischief reef in the Spratly archipelago, further expanding its strategic footprint in the SCS (Chellaney 2016). Concurrently, China's naval modernization has gained swift and impressive momentum, improving the PLAN's military and training capabilities along with its maritime projection.

Against this backdrop, Beijing's turn to the seas has triggered widespread concerns over its potential for bringing detrimental consequences for the stability of the maritime order. Such is the case of East Asia, a regional scenario where China is involved in maritime disputes with countries ranging from Japan in the North-East to Malaysia in the South-East. By some accounts China's naval rise is considered the sole potential source of concern *vis-à-vis* the US unrivaled role as a global maritime superpower after the collapse of the USSR (Scholik 2016). Along with augmenting the PLAN's force projection, China's naval capabilities have served military cooperation and diplomatic purposes. Since 2008, the PLAN has taken part in several anti-piracy missions and confidence-building measures (CBMs) along with foreign navies, displaying a remarkable willingness to contribute to the stability of the global maritime domain. Such contributions, while certainly serving China's own interests, make Beijing's naval rise a complex phenomenon, as both assertive and cooperative stances are endorsed by China's strategy. Interestingly, China displays an assertive posture in the regional domain, chiefly in the SCS, whereas the PLAN contributes to cooperative and diplomatic frameworks in the global maritime domain.

2. A classical theoretical framework

Alfred Thayer Mahan, frequently referred to as "the father of seapower," is often associated with warmongering naval strategies. He has stressed obsessively 'command of the sea' as the cornerstone of naval projection. Several analysts consider his approach as that of an offensiv realist, focusing on the importance of acquiring the greatest military might in order to build up a powerful navy and establish an unrivaled command of the sea. From such a perspective, Mahan's attention to the use of seapower for peaceful purposes has been frequently overlooked. In fact, Mahan considers to seapower as a projection for winning naval wars, as much as developing commerce in the times of peace (Mahan 2015). In this sense, Mahan views seapower not merely as a "naval" question. On the contrary, the "naval" component is but one within the broader "maritime" dimension, including 'national policy, national security and national obligation' (Mahan 1911, p. 512). Tellingly, "national obligations" are to be considered as national responsibilities regarding the international system. By including them among the components of seapower, Mahan suggests that maritime strategies are likely to focus on national duties towards the global maritime domain. In addition, Mahan underlines that naval forces cannot purse military prowess alone, as military might should have "strongly represented interests" to safeguard (Mahan 2015, pp. 60–61). In other words, Mahan urges national authorities to build up a "legitimate navy," not merely a powerful force (ibid.).

The question of seapower as a diplomatic and political tool has been further elaborated by Sir Julian Corbett, a key figure in early 1900s theoretical studies on naval strategy. Compared to Mahan's prescriptions, Corbett's understanding of seapower is narrower, as the latter is considered as a tool to support diplomatic purposes. As he considered naval strategy part of a broader military strategy focused on the landmass, Corbett describes naval wars as limited conflicts, implying their suitability as diplomatic leverages to be employed in order to obtain (or prevent the rival from obtaining) political "victories." According to this view, seapower is highly functional as it supports diplomatic efforts in military conflicts (Corbett 1918; Till 2009). Therefore, Corbett's framing of seapower is relevant as naval strategy is not merely a component of the overall military strategy aimed at winning wars; rather, naval projection is to be considered a military tool for pursuing diplomatic goals.

More recently, a key contribution to the theoretical studies on naval diplomacy has been introduced by Geoffrey Till. Acknowledging its capacity to influence other actors' behavior through maritime actions, Till (2009) describes seapower not merely in terms of military projection, framing it into a comprehensive dimension in which a naval force's reputation plays a key role. Against this backdrop, navies are deemed navies crucial for implementing foreign policy, rather than representing a military apparatus simply serving diplomatic purposes (ibid.). England's naval hegemony during the *Pax Britannica* (*circa* 1815–1914) is a case in point, as London's maritime superiority was accepted and prized by other countries in the international system, thus portraying England as a benign hegemon (Hattendorf 2015). Therefore, according to such theoretical perspectives, military activities are to be considered potential tools of soft power, not least because they might convey prestige as a consequence of force projection and improved military capabilities (Nye 2004, 2011). In other words, notwithstanding their significance as a means for power projection notwithstanding military operations can be intended as initiatives bringing about both hard and soft power gains. That is particularly relevant with respect to naval forces, as they might be employed for fighting rival navies as well as for international assistance, rescue missions and safeguarding the overall maritime stability (Yoshihara 2010; Nye 2011).

Till's contribution is crucial as it frames navies into two different types, whose discrepancies lay chiefly in a different interpretation of seapower within a globalized maritime order (Webb 2011). So-called "modern navies" operate under realist assumptions as they view the international order as a competitive system. Against this backdrop, modern naval forces focus on the defense of national waters, a goal they pursue by resorting to traditional naval tactics, such as maintaining a nuclear deterrent at sea and fleet-to-fleet engagement postures. On the other hand, "post-modern navies" contribute to the stability of the maritime order, as they are driven by the belief that such a stability is highly beneficial for national interests as well. Post-modern forces uphold the protection of the maritime order as it is essential for prosperous international commerce. That goal is pursued by resorting to multilateral frameworks and navy-to-navy cooperation. Post-modern strategies assume that national navies navies worldwide face common threats such as piracy, terrorism and international crime; therefore, a common effort is required for the support of the maritime stability. As to military doctrine, post-modern navies focus on preventing conflict and supporting diplomatic and consensus-oriented

efforts to settle disputes (ibid.; Till 2009). Whereas the two types are not to be considered mutually exclusive, such a classification serves to identify different sets of values, strategic goals and military doctrines upholding different naval postures and doctrinal settings.

3. China's military cooperation at sea

China's participation in naval cooperation frameworks is a relatively new phenomenon. In December 2008, a PLAN task force was deployed for the first time to the Gulf of Aden as a part of multilateral anti-piracy mission. China's first anti-piracy foray took place during Hu Jintao's (2002–2012), a presidency which proved crucial for China's naval development and the construction of a "maritime great power." This strategy did not overlook the need of contributing to maritime military cooperation (Tobin 2018). In addition, the 2008 escort mission in the Gulf of Aden marked the first time Chinese naval forces were used overseas to safeguard both national and international interests (Hui & Cao 2016). The mission is particularly relevant as it was not merely aimed at supporting China's strategic interests, such as safeguarding vital sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), but represented an opportunity for showcasing Beijing's goodwill and promoting its maritime status as a responsible and cooperative power (Yoshihara 2010).

Chinese official publications have stressed the importance of cooperation as a key means for upholding national strategic objectives. In 2015, the National Defense White Paper (NDWP) called for the adoption of a distinct maritime orientation in China's strategy, setting aside the traditional continental flavor of China's strategic culture (State Council Information Office of the PRC 2015). In this regard, the NDWP called upon the PLAN to contribute to the so-called "open sea protection," a vague but relevant task as it implies the commitment to operating in the "open sea" domain to "protect" maritime stability (ibid.). In addition, the unveiling of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 has made maritime cooperation even more urgent. As the BRI's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) is expected to stretch across troubled waters (i.e. the SCS) and distant seas where China's naval projection is yet to obtain full consolidation (i.e. the Indian Ocean), China cannot proceed without reaching a consensus on cooperation and the safeguarding of maritime order, lest the failure of the MSR. Not surprisingly, China has urged the implementation of frameworks of

bilateral and multilateral cooperation in order to ensure a successful development of the MSR, with the so-called "win-win cooperation" as both a leading principle and a common goal (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Ministry of Commerce of the PRC 2015; National Development and Reform Commission of the PRC & State Oceanic Administration 2017; Tobin 2018).

As of 2017, PLAN has conducted 26 escort missions in the Gulf of Aden and more than 160 port calls, displaying a surge in military diplomacy initiatives after Xi Jinping took office in 2013 (China Power Team 2017a). As a corollary, the 27th and 28th escort task forces have visited strategic locations in Ghana, Morocco and South Africa (Legarda 2018). Between January and June 2018, China's navy took part in 12 joint drills focused on humanitarian rescue and passage exercise (ibid.). Against this backdrop, China's naval forces are more frequently involved in non-combatant evacuation operations (NEOs), as the evacuations of Chinese citizens from war-torn Libya (2011) and Yemen (2015) have demonstrated (Cole 2016). In 2010 the PLAN undertook "Mission Harmony-2010," a medical care initiative providing free medical assistance and training to Bangladesh, Djibouti, Kenya, the Seychelles and Tanzania. The mission is conducted by the "Peace Ark," a specialized hospital vessel (Heng 2017). Moreover, the anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden has proved beneficial for improving China-Japan naval cooperation, a sensitive issue as both countries are involved in maritime disputes over the Diaoyu/Senkaku islands in the East China Sea. In May 2010, for instance, PLAN's task force Commander Zhang Wendan boarded a Japanese vessel to exchange information on anti-piracy methods. The move reciprocated Japanese Captain Minami Takanobu's boarding on a Chinese vessel a few weeks earlier (ibid.).

While displaying a growing readiness to support naval cooperation frameworks – and a peaceful and stable maritime environment – China's contribution to humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HA/DR) missions also provides evidence of the PLAN's growing military capabilities (ibid.; Tobin 2018). Supporting the management of a peaceful maritime domain, Beijing is concurrently serving a larger range of strategic goals. In fact, naval cooperation initiatives provide the PLAN with the opportunity to improve its operational skills, intelligence capabilities and technological know-how. Nonetheless, navy-to-navy exchanges and communication mechanisms contribute to strengthening ties between China's naval forces, on the one hand, and weaker navies on the other. While the PLAN would eventually gain little in terms of hard power, China's maritime

strategy could improve its projection *vis-à-vis* its strategic rivals. Pakistan is a case in point, as the Sino-Pakistani naval cooperation is a source of concern for India, a longstanding rival from Beijing's perspective (Cooper 2018). Finally, maritime cooperation could help Chinese strategists display their willingness to deploy naval forces for peaceful purposes, portraying China as a responsible and peaceful maritime power.

In conclusion, whereas China's participation in maritime cooperative frameworks has been on the rise for a decade, with diplomatic activities more than doubling since 2003, critical questions are yet to be answered (China Power Team 2017a). Particularly, Beijing's stance on the SCS enmeshment proved to be a constraining factor for China's international reputation. Chinese authorities have repeatedly stated that maritime disputes in the SCS are a question of bilateral negotiations, refusing to discuss them through multilateral frameworks (Yahuda 2012). More broadly, China's assertiveness in the SCS (discussed in section 3) could bring about relevant setbacks to Beijing's international reliability as a responsible maritime actor and its commitment within cooperative platforms. In July 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) condemned China's extensive claims in the SCS as legally void, but China did not abide by the ruling and claimed the PCA did not have the legitimacy over what Chinese authorities consider an issue of national sovereignty (Almond 2018; Hayton 2018). In this scenario, since 2002 Beijing has taken part in negotiations for a Code of Conduct (COC) in the SCS; though that represents a remarkable demonstration of goodwill, China's move is to be considered as a symbolic gesture rather than a substantial move towards a multilateral settlement of the SCS enmeshment (Yoshihara & Holmes 2010; Yahuda 2012). Particularly, China has refused to convey the COC a legally binding status and to extend its application to maritime disputes, acknowledging its usefulness as a tool for preventing conflicts and promoting good practices rather than a legal platform for dispute resolution. However Beijing may now point at its participation in the negotiation rounds as a showcase of its reliability (Till 2009; McVadon 2011; Townshend & Medcalf 2016; Thayer 2018).

China's assertive stance in the SCS holds a key influence on its naval clout in the broader maritime domain. For instance, in May 2018 the US disinvited China from the RIMPAC naval exercise in the Pacific Ocean, the world's biggest joint naval drill, a decision US authorities motivated with the incompatibility between RIMPAC's principles and China's "destabilizing behavior" in the SCS (Gallo 2018). China has taken part

in RIMPAC since 2014, enjoying the opportunity to train its naval forces within a prestigious multilateral naval framework. Against this backdrop, whereas Beijing and Washington are committed to managing potential maritime frictions in a peaceful manner, as China's 2015 NDWP has called for the improvement of CBM mechanisms to boost bilateral maritime cooperation, the SCS issue appears increasingly detrimental for China's global image as a responsible naval power (Townshend & Medcalf 2016; Zha & Sutter 2017). More generally, the US views China's assertiveness in the SCS as a destabilizing force for American interest in East Asia. Within the US administration, some strategists already consider the Chinese control over the SCS as a *fait accompli*. According to former US Indo-Pacific Command's Commander, Adm. Philip Davidson, China has already acquired enough military capabilities and strategic projection for 'controlling the South China Sea in all scenarios short of war with the US' (Ni 2018). In other words, the US is growing increasingly worried that China's consolidated footprint in the SCS could be challenged only at the cost of resorting to open war (Chellaney 2018).

Eventually, China's increasing momentum in maritime cooperation is still far from providing the PLAN with the potential to catching up with the US proficiency in naval diplomacy. In 2016, the Chinese navy conducted 124 military exercises and 22 port calls, roughly matching the US Navy Seventh Fleet alone (China Power Team 2017a). In addition, while China's naval diplomacy looks pale compared to the US', PLAN's military vulnerabilities could prove critical should a conflict occur while its forces are involved in diplomatic initiatives on distant seas. This is particularly significant in the context of the Indian Ocean, where China's reach is yet to obtain strategic consolidation (Cooper 2018).

4. China's assertiveness in the SCS

Before examining how China is projecting its naval power in the SCS, this section will briefly address Beijing's maritime assertiveness in the SCS. Also, it will try to answer why the SCS has been chosen as a benchmark of China's assertiveness on the maritime domain. The reason for such a choice lays in the specific characteristics of the SCS and the key interests China purses therein. Whereas Beijing has resorted to provocative actions in other regional seas – namely the East China Sea – it is in the SCS that China has displayed its resolve most prominently. Importantly,

in 2010 Chinese officials referred to the SCS as a key national interest for the first time. Dai Bingguo, then State Councilor of the PRC, has reportedly branded the SCS a national "core interest" during a meeting with the US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton (Chen & Wang 2011; Nie 2016). From the Chinese perspective, gaining undisputable projection over the SCS is key for fulfilling some of its most important strategic requirements. In fact, the SCS displays a range of maritime disputes in which Beijing is involved along with Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam and, to a lesser extent, Brunei Darussalam. Beijing claims 80 to 90% of the SCS waters, creating overlapping maritime claims with Southeast Asian nations. China resorted to historical justifications to uphold its stance, whose geographic extent is yet to be precisely defined (Cole 2016). Against this backdrop, China has not abided by the PCA ruling which deemed its claims as illegitimate, as Beijing considers the SCS an issue of national sovereignty, a Chinese "blue territory" (Chubb 2016).

The strategic significance of the SCS stems also from its location at the center of energy and commercial lifelines in East Asia (Ju 2015). The SCS is crucial for international commerce: as of 2016, goods worth some 3,4 trillion USD were transported through its waters, a figure particularly interesting as China's maritime trade amount to roughly 40% of the SCS total trade volume (China Power Team 2017b). In this scenario, the SCS displays two key concerns for Beijing's energy security. On the one hand, it represents a critical passage for energy imports, while on the other its seabed is believed to host huge deposits of oil and gas (Zha & Sutter 2017). Estimates presented by different countries vary from China's 125 billion barrels of oil and 500 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, to US' 11 to 22 billion barrels of oil and 90 trillion cubic feet (US Energy Information Administration 2013; Cole 2016). Furthermore, the presence of plenty fisheries in the SCS represents an additional source of interest for Beijing, as fish products are increasingly important for Chinese economy. In addition maritime disputes in the SCS have gained further significance as they have contributed to igniting Chinese nationalism.

China's conduct in the SCS has been widely debated. Notably, after Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, Beijing's projection in the SCS has become important in protecting what China considers its own pertinent waters. From the Chinese perspective, its naval presence in the SCS is a defensive strategy aimed at safeguarding maritime sovereignty within the so-called "nine-dash line," a perimeter Beijing refers to as the boundary of its national waters. Whereas debating the historical origins of China's claims in

the SCS lays beyond the purpose of this study, it is worth noting that Beijing grounds its claims in centuries-old naval expeditions and maritime activities pursued over the SCS by Chinese nationals. As to the nine-dash line, it was allegedly introduced for the first time by Chiang Kai-shek in 1947, while its first appearance in a PRC official publication dates back to 1951 (Garofano 2008). Eventually, the adoption of the national law on territorial sea and the contiguous zone in 1992 vindicated China's view of its exclusive sovereignty over the SCS and the disputed land features in both the SCS and the East China Sea (ibid.; Tobin 2018). China's claims have been hitherto reiterated; the NDWP, issued in 2015, which while calling for deeper engagement in military cooperation, did not substantially modify China's focus on safeguarding territorial rights and maritime sovereignty (State Council Information Office of the PRC 2015).

China has resorted to assertive tactics aiming to expand its naval reach in the SCS. Such a strategy has created remarkable military inroads, and China's control over the SCS has been widely acknowledged as a *fait accompli*. US authorities, for instance, appeared to see China as consolidating its power projection in the SCS up to the point that the US itself could not resort to any option short of an open conflict to confront Beijing's strategic reach. As to countries involved in maritime disputes, their capability to challenge China's projection is considered negligible (McVadon 2011; US Office of the Secretary of Defense 2017; Ni 2018). In order to strengthen its control, China has been building new islands in the Spratlys and, to a lesser extent, in the Paracel archipelago. According to some statistics, since 2014 Beijing has built 3,200 acres of new land in what has been deemed the artificial creation of "state sovereignty at sea" (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative n.d.; Chubb 2017). The creation of artificial land features has been accomplished by heavy dredging of the seabed sand, which some reports have deemed responsible of an environmental disaster (Mahanta 2015).

After creating artificial islands and constructing new land features in the SCS, China has proceeded to the militarization of territories under its control (Casarini 2018). Airstrips have been constructed in the Spratly islands, and anti-ship missile systems have been installed in Fiery Cross, Mischief and Subi reef. Additionally, military personnel has been deployed to Woody island, where the H6-K strategic bomber landed for the first time in May 2018, providing further momentum for China's militarization of the area (Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative 2018; Ghiasy, Su & Saalman 2018; Panda 2018). Moreover China is equipping its naval

forces with large numbers of submarines and anti-ship cruise missiles, potential military tools in a regional conflict scenario in the SCS. In order to chase away foreign vessels, China has frequently deployed its coast guard units and the so-called "maritime militia," a paramilitary force consisting of fishing and civilian vessels, to harass foreign boats operating in the SCS. While working as a military force backup, the coast guard and the maritime militia have contributed to preventing potential clashes from escalating into open conflict, as their offensive capabilities look pale compared to the PLAN's (Townshend & Medcalf 2016; US Office of the Secretary of Defense 2017). Finally, the Sino-Russian joint naval drill in 2016, frequent training exercises of China's sole operational aircraft carrier (the Liaoning), and the growing military capabilities of the PLAN South Sea Fleet (in charge of patrolling and safeguarding the SCS), have served Beijing's purpose of showcasing its force in the SCS, as well as deterring disturbing actions from regional opponents and third parties.

In conclusion, China's posture in the SCS has been remarkably influenced by Beijing's proneness to contribute to maritime stability in the broader maritime domain. As naval assertiveness in the SCS has brought about some setbacks to China's ambition to improve its global reputation as a responsible rising maritime power, the PLAN's contribution to international cooperation has had positive implications for Beijing's stance in the SCS. In fact, by participating in maritime cooperation frameworks, China has promoted its image as a trustworthy power in the East Asian seas (Yoshihara & Holmes 2010). Therefore, China has partially changed its assertiveness in the regional domain as it is growing aware that, up to a certain extent, engaging regional opponents in territorial disputes could have proved more beneficial than resorting to a staunch confrontational stance. As a result, the PLAN has pursued a number of cooperation initiatives with Southeast Asian countries, and its visits to ASEAN nations' ports have concurrently grown more frequent (McVadon 2011). China seems to be recalibrating its assertiveness in the SCS as a beneficial factor for its interests in the region. A number of reasons may explain the process firstly, along with economic cooperation, it could persuade regional disputants to accept – or, at least, not to openly oppose – China's maritime claims in the area; secondly, it supports China's naval prestige in the regional context; thirdly, it maintains a stable maritime domain where the PLAN has already overpowered its neighbors; lastly, it prevents such neighbors to seek vocal US diplomatic support in the SCS (ibid.; Townshend & Medcalf 2016). In this context China is gaining support in

both South and Southeast Asia, providing evidence of the beneficial effects that naval cooperation is bringing about to Beijing's projection in the SCS (Till 2009).

5. Conclusion

China's maritime projection presents both assertive postures and a remarkable proneness to contribute to maritime stability. Naval assertiveness has been apparent in the SCS, where China feels reasonably confident about its capability to project military might end exerting control. Nonetheless, China is pursuing military and security diplomacy initiatives and contributes to upholding the order and stability of the broader maritime domain. Their relevant differences notwithstanding, the regional scenario – namely, the SCS – and the global domains exert significant mutual influence: whereas international maritime cooperation is proving beneficial for Beijing's attempt to gain diplomatic support in the SCS, its assertive posture *vis-à-vis* other claimants in the regional seas has brought about detrimental effects to China's image as a peaceful maritime power.

In China's strategy, naval assertiveness and maritime cooperation are not mutually exclusive, and their interplay serves multifold purposes. China's naval development has enabled the PLAN to exert military power. In this context, maritime diplomacy and cooperation have served to improve China's reputation as a reliable rising power committed to supporting stability and order at sea. In addition, participating in cooperative missions has pushed the PLAN to distant seas and contributed to improving its military training, navigational skills and know-how. In a nutshell, China's maritime cooperation has resulted in hard power gains as well as the promotion of the PLAN's reputation. Eventually, maritime cooperation is a convenient choice in those maritime domains where China has not achieved significant momentum and didn't consolidate strategic reach; military diplomacy engagements and cooperative missions have been chiefly pursued on distant seas, as the anti-piracy activities in the Gulf of Aden showcase. Consequently, China seems to turn to cooperation when it felt it to be the only "viable alternative" to its military shortcomings especially in the open seas (Hui & Cao 2016, p. 346).

Current trends in China's naval strategy display a growing assertiveness in the SCS, as well as eminent contributions to safeguarding stability in the open seas and tackling international crime, piracy and other

sources of potential maritime discruption. Both components have been on the rise since Xi Jinping became China's top leader; as the 2015 NDWP prescribes, China's maritime strategy is to switch from "offshore waters defense" to a combination of "offshore waters defense" and "open sea protection." Therefore China's naval forces are called upon to safeguard Beijing's maritime sovereignty over its national "blue territory" and to support the stability of the open seas. On these foundations, China's maritime projection will likely continue to display assertive postures in the SCS while contributing to multilateral security frameworks in the global maritime domain.

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