Underway—Beijing’s Strategy to Build China into a Maritime Great Power

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Strategists and onlookers seeking to anticipate China’s next moves in the South China Sea (SCS) often have focused on aspects of the problem that are near term, security-centric, and geographically specific—such as whether and when China will seize or deploy military platforms on disputed features. These are important questions, but they are only pieces of a much bigger puzzle. Authoritative Chinese documents make clear that China’s activity in the SCS, East China Sea, and Indian Ocean and elsewhere in the maritime realm is part of a larger strategy to build China into a “maritime great power” (MGP)—an end state that Chinese leaders define in the broadest possible terms and view as an essential component of their overall strategy to achieve national rejuvenation.

This article provides an account of how Beijing itself depicts its maritime strategy in public, authoritative statements. The author acknowledges the robust body of research that exists on China’s maritime development, activities, and capabilities, particularly security-related aspects, and does not seek to duplicate it. Rather, the focus here is on understanding these phenomena through the lens of Beijing’s own stated objectives and approach, which tend to be exceptionally wide-ranging in focus and not limited to the security realm. The intent here is to increase understanding of China’s strategic intentions and priorities in the maritime realm and to equip U.S. policy makers and national security professionals with a more precise and powerful lexicon for engaging their Chinese counterparts on maritime issues.

The article is organized as follows. First, it describes the end state that Beijing envisions achieving in the maritime realm and how this end state is linked directly to China’s higher-order national strategy. The article then traces the origins of China’s maritime strategy, demonstrating that China’s aspirations for maritime
power are not recent developments but are rooted in long-standing concern for China’s security and development interests. Next, the article examines the country’s maritime strategy in its current form, arguing that China’s approach is exceptionally broad and uses every available tool of statecraft to achieve its objectives. The article then considers the strategy’s future prospects by examining how Beijing’s conception of its maritime rights and interests is expanding.

CHINA’S STRATEGIC END STATE: MARITIME GREAT POWER

The first step in grasping China’s maritime strategy is to understand how Beijing envisions its end state in the maritime domain. In Beijing’s own words, it is striving to build China into a maritime great power. People’s Republic of China (PRC) authoritative documents cite this key term—海洋强国—frequently, as an overarching mission statement for a host of maritime programs, ranging across deep-sea exploration, littoral diplomacy, law-enforcement patrols, fishing industry development, public relations campaigns to promote China’s maritime territorial claims, naval development, and construction on South China Sea features.3

While Chinese government documents from as early as 2003 list “building China into an MGP” (or simply “building MGP”) as a strategic imperative, the term surged in political significance on November 8, 2012. That day, General Secretary Hu Jintao called for “building China into an MGP” in his work report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China, a gathering of top party officials held every five years that issues authoritative guidance on all major policy priorities.4 Hu’s statement at this venue indicated that the goal of MGP had been elevated as a national priority.

Hu’s speech listed four characteristics of MGP; together they frame Beijing’s overall strategic approach to the maritime realm:5

- The ability to exploit ocean resources
- A developed maritime economy
- Preservation of the marine environment
- Resolute protection of maritime rights and interests

Authoritative commentary on Hu’s speech makes clear that Beijing views the mastery of all manner of ocean-related endeavors as a requirement for achieving China’s strategic ambitions. State Oceanic Administration (SOA) director Liu Cigui, in an article published shortly after Hu’s speech, defined an MGP as a country with a “powerful and comprehensive ability to develop, use, protect, and control the ocean.” He did not elaborate on what “control” (管控) meant, geographically or operationally. However, he did not use the term that Chinese strategists use to express the Western military concept of sea control or sea command.
rather, he used a more general term with managerial or administrative connotations. Liu did elaborate further on what MGP should look like: marine industries should constitute a relatively large proportion of China’s overall economy; large numbers of maritime professionals should be achieving scientific and technological breakthroughs; exploitation of marine resources should be done sustainably; and defense capabilities should be formidable enough to defend national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests and play an important role in safeguarding peace and promoting the development of international maritime affairs. He was painting a comprehensive and ambitious picture.

General Secretary Xi Jinping subsequently amplified and clarified the connection between MGP and China’s overall strategic goals, making clear that maritime power is both a requirement for and an expression of China’s emergence as a well-rounded great power. Xi explicitly linked the maritime strategy to the achievement of China’s interim and long-term national strategic goals: “building a moderately prosperous society in all respects” (全面建成小康社会) by 2021 (the centenary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party); and “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people” (中华民族伟大复兴), or national rejuvenation, by 2049 (the centenary of the founding of the PRC). In July 2013, Xi led a politburo study session on maritime issues, during which he stressed that MGP was key to “sustained and healthy economic development” (经济持续健康发展) and “protection of national sovereignty, security, and development interests” (维护国家主权，安全，发展利益). This set up his next statement: that MGP was a significant factor in achieving a moderately prosperous society and national rejuvenation.

Liu, expounding further on MGP in 2014, clarified the benchmarks Xi had established: the interim goal was, by around 2020, to “lay a decent foundation for building maritime power.” After this, according to Liu, China would “ascend in the ranks of the world’s maritime powers and become [the] world’s main maritime power” by around 2049. It was an unusually explicit statement of China’s long-term aspirations, and one that Beijing may not care to articulate publicly on a frequent basis, perhaps aware that doing so would sound provocative.

THE STRATEGY’S LONG-STANDING ORIGINS
China’s modern quest for MGP stretches back decades. The following section is not a comprehensive history of China’s MGP aspirations; rather, it attempts to (1) shed light on the deep-seated strategic and psychological concerns that drive China’s maritime goals and behavior to this day; (2) show how the maritime strategy has gained coherence over time, but remains a work in progress; and (3) highlight examples of key doctrinal changes, laws, and other authoritative guidance that laid the groundwork for Chinese behavior many years later.
Victimized, Disadvantaged, and Late

China’s maritime strategy is rooted in historical baggage accumulated over centuries. According to one Chinese scholar, “China’s bitter modern historical experience began with the sea.” Chinese scholars assess that in the late twentieth century, China rejoined the international maritime realm victimized, disadvantaged, and late. First, Chinese strategists lament that China was subjected to ill-treatment by Western and Japanese aggressors approaching from the sea during China’s “century of humiliation” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These writers describe this victimization as a major setback that must be overcome with accurate understanding, careful planning, and persistent effort.

A second source of anguish is China’s “geographic disadvantage”; strategists point out that China is “besieged” by island chains in the western Pacific that could be used as springboards for foreign aggression, and nearby straits and waterways could turn into choke points for cutting off supplies. Third, scholars heap blame on Chinese rulers, noting with regret that China turned its back on the sea in the fifteenth century, and as a result arrived late to the race for rights and influence in the twentieth century, when other nations already had made great strides in exploiting the oceans for wealth, power, and prestige.

This sense of victimhood, disadvantage, and lateness is still relevant in China. It played out in Beijing’s public messaging on SCS issues in the lead-up to and aftermath of the ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) in July 2016 on the Philippines’ case against China’s nine-dash-line claims. According to Beijing, China was a victim of outside powers’ territorial invasion, but itself showed restraint when responding to provocations. Wu Shicun, a leading Chinese SCS commentator, asserted in June 2016 that “China’s sovereignty and sovereign rights over the SCS . . . [are] defined by the struggle against imperialist aggression.” In May of that year, China’s ambassador to the United Kingdom contended, “Whichever angle one chooses to look at the [SCS] issue, China has never been the troublemaker. Quite the opposite, China has been a victim.” China’s insistence on its victimhood may sound discordant to outside observers of growing PRC maritime clout (a rapidly growing navy, coast guard, and maritime militia; a network of reclaimed features and military outposts in the SCS; and an outsize role in global shipbuilding, shipping, and fishing). But China’s confidence in its increasing capabilities is juxtaposed to genuine angst over lingering vulnerabilities and past strategic blunders. The trend for China is toward strength—but feelings of exposure persist and are a powerful motivator for Beijing.

Returning to the Sea

For nearly six hundred years, Beijing embraced a defensive continental focus, viewing the ocean as a monolithic source of danger against which China must protect itself. Then, starting in the late 1970s, China emerged from decades of
relative international isolation, and as its engagement with the world grew its interest in the strategic role of the ocean expanded dramatically. Beijing gradually adopted a dualistic view of the ocean as a source of opportunity and danger.

Economics drove China to renew its strategic interest in the ocean in the 1980s. Deng Xiaoping’s Reform and Opening policies set China on a course to integrate with the international economy, boost exports, and develop industrial and technological capacity along its coast. International legal developments unfolding concurrently also helped to spark China’s reawakening. Chinese strategists highlight the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in 1982, which “established an all-new legal framework for the modern world ocean,” as particularly important.  

UNCLOS drove Beijing’s realization that other nations had surged ahead of China in exploiting the ocean’s potential. Catching up with—and eventually getting ahead of the curve on—international legal developments, so as to capture strategic benefits from the sea, remains a focus for China’s maritime strategy to this day.

The codification of China’s maritime ambitions into laws and guiding documents gained momentum. In February 1992, China enacted its Law of the People’s Republic of China Concerning the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone of 1992, which defined the PRC’s territorial sea expansively, to include disputed areas covering Taiwan and all its islands, the Diaoyu Islands (Senkakus), the Paracels, Macclesfield Bank, and the Spratlys.  

It also introduced a phrase to China’s lexicon that would become central to China’s maritime strategy: maritime rights and interests (海洋权益). Other laws followed, such as the Law of the PRC on the Exclusive Economic Zone and the Continental Shelf, in 1998. These laws would become very significant; Beijing was laying down markers in domestic legislation that it would cite later to assert its claims to contested maritime areas. For example, China cited the 1992 law as a rationale for delineating its claimed baselines around the Senkakus in 2012. In 2016, it cited the 1992 and 1998 laws to support its SCS claims against Manila at the PCA. In particular, it cited article 14 of the 1998 law: “The provisions of this Act shall not affect the historical rights of the People’s Republic of China.”

Another contributing factor to China’s maritime awakening in the mid-1980s and onward was that fears of ground invasion by the Soviets were receding. Liu Huaqing, during his tenure as commander of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA)
Navy (PLAN) from 1982 to 1987, oversaw a shift in the navy’s strategic focus from coastal defense to near-seas defense (or offshore defense), expanding the PLAN’s mission to waters farther from China’s coast. In 1992, Jiang Zemin’s work report to the party congress stated that the PLA must improve its ability to perform the sacred mission of “defending China’s sovereignty over its territory, airspace, and territorial waters and maritime rights and interests, and safeguarding the unity and security of the motherland” (emphasis added). In 1993, the Central Military Commission—China’s top military body, of which Liu was a vice-chairman—issued new Military Strategic Guidelines, a rare and seminal event for the PLA. The guidelines formally introduced the concept of near-seas defense into military doctrine. Furthermore, according to U.S. scholars, the guidelines redirected the PLA’s main strategic direction—a doctrinal concept determining the geographic direction that poses the highest risk to China—from a territorial focus (premised on a Soviet threat) to a maritime one. This paradigm shift provided significant impetus and focus to naval modernization and laid the groundwork for the PLAs increasingly distant missions (such as its antipiracy missions to the Gulf of Aden) years later.

In 1998, which the United Nations designated the International Year of the Ocean, China’s top government body, the State Council, issued the country’s first maritime white paper, an early step toward a maritime strategy. The document outlined “a sustainable development strategy” and called for overall planning to develop and control marine resources and “safeguard the new international maritime order and the state’s maritime rights and interests.” This signaled Beijing’s desire both to participate constructively in the international system and to ensure that China did not continue to miss out on benefits from the ocean. Later that year, China followed the white paper with the establishment of the Marine Surveillance Force, a paramilitary law-enforcement agency and precursor to the China Coast Guard (CCG), to “protect maritime resource rights and interests from encroachment.” In 2001, China included maritime development goals for the first time in its Tenth Five-Year Plan (FYP) (2001–2005), ensuring that relevant government units at all levels would have maritime tasks to fulfill.

**Refining a Maritime Vision**

Hu Jintao’s tenure as general secretary (2002–12) was pivotal in the development of China’s maritime strategy in several areas. These included the ideological, military, and government-planning fronts.

With regard to ideology, Hu in 2003 held a politburo study session to examine factors that enabled the rise of global powers. Maritime power was one such factor. The session was followed by government-sponsored scholarly study and a television series that aired in 2006. Beijing was seeking to popularize the idea
that maritime power was essential to the rise of historical great powers, and thereby to create a domestic base of support for its maritime power project—an effort that continues to the present.

Hu oversaw an expansion of the PLAN’s geographic and functional missions, paving the way for its eventual forays far from China’s periphery years later. In December 2004, having officially taken over military authority from his predecessor just a few months prior, Hu gave a speech stating that the PLA’s “historic missions” (历史使命) for the current period of the new century would include (1) guaranteeing the rule of the Party, (2) safeguarding China’s strategic period of opportunity for development, (3) safeguarding national interests, and (4) safeguarding world peace and promoting common development. Many outside observers understood the latter two points as a broadening of the PLA’s mission. Beijing reiterated these four missions in its 2006 defense white paper and provided additional detail on how it intended to develop PLAN operational capabilities to support the missions.

The white paper also emphasized that “conflicting claims over maritime rights and interests” were an important factor in China’s security environment—one that would prove a crucial sticking point years later when China sought to defend its “rights and interests” in the SCS. A Chinese military expert commented that “safeguarding national unity and the state’s ocean rights and interests as well as protecting China’s maritime supply lines is becoming increasingly challenging, putting even greater demands on the development of the navy, and particularly operational capabilities at sea.” Some of the strategic implications of Hu’s evolution in military doctrine became obvious in December 2008, when the PLAN deployed its inaugural antipiracy missions to the Indian Ocean to defend trade routes linking Asia to the Middle East, and again in July 2017 when China officially opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti.

Government planners also devoted growing attention to maritime issues under Hu. China’s Eleventh FYP (2006–10) gave more space to maritime issues than the previous plan. A section entitled “Protect and Develop Ocean Resources” began with a call to “strengthen awareness of the seas and oceans, protect maritime rights and interests, protect the maritime environment, develop maritime resources, implement integrated maritime management, and promote the development of the maritime economy”; each of these themes endures to the present. In line with this growing attention to the sea, China in 2006 expanded its law-enforcement deployments in the Yellow Sea and SCS. Then in 2008 a State Council–approved document on maritime development noted plans to construct marine-surveillance vessels capable of navigating coastal, medium-range, and distant waters to conduct law enforcement. The Twelfth FYP (2011–15) called
for drawing up a “national maritime development strategy focused on building China into a maritime great power”—a preview of what was to come.40

In 2012, Beijing established the Maritime Rights and Interests Leading Small Group—an informal, senior-level coordinating body with representation from multiple ministries and the military. The move most likely was intended to improve coordination among the multiple, scattered bureaucratic entities involved with China’s maritime policy. Xi Jinping, then vice president, was appointed office director for the group.41 This role would have put him in position to exert significant influence over the group’s agenda—just as the Party was preparing for its upcoming congress, at which Xi would take the helm.

**A Watershed Moment**

November 8, 2012, marked a high point in the emergence of China’s maritime strategy, as noted earlier. Hu’s call in his report to the Eighteenth Party Congress for China to “build a maritime great power” signaled that pursuit of MGP was enshrined as an integral component of China’s grand strategy, and that Beijing was committing itself to a long-term effort to achieve this end. Since then, Chinese officials have cited Hu’s statement regularly as a rationale for their maritime plans and programs and to signal their alignment with leadership priorities.42

The MGP strategy not only survived the political transition from Hu to Xi but gained increased emphasis and clarity. At his 2013 study session on maritime issues, discussed previously, Xi laid out “four transformations” (四个转变) to guide the country’s maritime work. Paraphrased, these were as follows: (1) transforming the maritime economy toward quality and efficiency, (2) transforming marine-development methods toward sustainable use, (3) transforming marine science and technology so that innovation would play the leading role, and (4) transforming the protection of national maritime rights and interests so that planning would be unified.43 The four transformations overlapped significantly with Hu’s four characteristics of MGP, but gave greater emphasis to enhancing and upgrading China’s approach to the ocean—in line with Beijing’s broader emphasis on transitioning its economic development model to be more “innovative, coordinated, green, open, and shared,” in the words of China’s national Thirteenth FYP. That plan, ratified in March 2016, was the next major programmatic push for the maritime strategy.

**THE STRATEGY’S COMPREHENSIVE SCOPE**

For China, building MGP is a comprehensive, whole-nation pursuit touching on all ocean-related issues that Beijing considers necessary for China to achieve national rejuvenation. Security issues (including the roles of the PLAN, the CCG, the maritime militia, and military facilities on reclaimed SCS features) are only facets of the strategy, which also addresses economic, environmental, political,
diplomatic, cultural, legal, scientific, and other issues. The following summary uses the U.S. military’s definition of strategy—ends, ways, and means—to translate and organize key aspects of China’s maritime strategy for audiences familiar with this construct.

- **End:** maritime great power (**海洋强国**)
- **Ways:**
  - Expand the maritime economy (**壮大海洋经济**)
  - Strengthen protection of marine resources and environments (**加强海洋资源环境保护**)
  - Safeguard maritime rights and interests (**维护海洋权益**)
- **Means:**
  - All relevant institutions of national power, including government, Party, military, civilian, and commercial entities
  - Media, diplomatic, cultural, people-to-people, and academic outreach
  - Scientific and technical programs
  - Economic incentives
  - Legal development
  - Other

The above elements of China’s strategy are derived primarily from the maritime-focused chapter (chapter 41) in China’s national Thirteenth FYP (2016–20), which at the time of this writing was the most recent, top-level, authoritative articulation of Beijing’s maritime strategy available. This article uses chapter 41’s organizational scheme to lay out the ways, or major lines of effort, in China’s maritime strategy. To fill out the picture, and because national FYPs focus mainly on economic and social development rather than security issues, it also references other documents, such as China’s 2015 defense white paper (Beijing’s most recent public articulation of its military strategy), China’s “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative,” SOA statements, and official readouts of Xi’s 2013 study session on MGP.

It should be noted that, to date, China has not published a stand-alone, national-level maritime strategy (**国家海洋战略**) that, in theory, would bring together the numerous strategic threads scattered in multiple Party, government, and military documents. However, momentum in Beijing appears to be building to do just that; in July 2016, China’s top Party, government, and military bodies jointly issued guidance calling for a national maritime strategy, although they specified...
no target date for completion. Importantly, such a document would require the PLA and other security entities to wrangle with civilian maritime entities over priorities—a major bureaucratic hurdle in China’s system. Indeed, the July 2016 guidance noted that Beijing was seeking to achieve a more appropriate balance between two often-contradictory priorities in the maritime strategy: the development of the maritime economy and the defense of maritime rights and interests.47

Chapter 41 of the Thirteenth FYP begins with the overall title “Expand the Blue Economic Space” (拓展蓝色经济空间), followed by a preamble and three subsections. This title points to Beijing’s central concern with maximizing China’s economic benefit from the sea. The preamble highlights the need for “coordinated land and maritime development,” lists the maritime strategy’s major lines of effort, and links these ways back to the overall objective—“building China into a maritime great power.” The chapter then is divided into three sections, to which this article refers as “the ways.” The third way—protection of maritime rights and interests—bears most directly on China’s use of coercion and hard power at sea, and thus will be discussed in the greatest detail, given the article’s intended audience within the national security field. However, this is not to suggest that this way is a higher priority for Beijing; in fact, for Beijing, order often indicates priority, suggesting that economic expansion, rather than the protection of rights and interests, is the fundamental concern of Beijing’s maritime strategy. Regardless, the three ways are mutually reinforcing and should be considered together to understand China’s vision of the sea properly and holistically.

Expand the Maritime Economy

Beijing sees the ocean as a new frontier for China’s long-term economic growth, and the title of the first section of the plan’s maritime chapter, “Expand the Maritime Economy,” is an exhortation to push further and deeper into this new frontier. The imperatives here have significant overlap with other Chinese policy efforts, including transitioning China’s economy to a more sustainable growth model and one of Xi’s signature initiatives, the Silk Road Economic Belt and Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road (simplified to Belt and Road Initiative [BRI]).

Upgrading China’s Growth Model. Beijing portrays the ocean as a partial solution to one of China’s most nagging domestic challenges: slowing and imbalanced economic growth. For more than a decade, Chinese leaders have recognized the need to rebalance the domestic economy away from an excessive reliance on pollution-intensive, debt-fueled investment in infrastructure and industrial capacity.
However, the standard alternatives have proved insufficient: the rapid export growth China experienced at the beginning to middle of last decade has tapered off, and Chinese households’ consumption is not growing fast enough to pick up the slack from waning investment. Given these shortfalls, policy makers are trying to boost growth by raising productivity: pushing indigenous innovation, transitioning from low-end to high-end industry, and building a more robust services sector.

Beijing sees the ocean as an important domain in which all these upgrades can take place. The section on expanding the maritime economy thus has a heavy emphasis on innovation, science and technology, and industrial upgrades; attention to the first of Xi’s four transformations (improving marine resource development to improve economic quality and efficiency) is apparent. Specifically, this section calls for advancements in areas such as desalination, marine biomedicine, marine environmental technology, and deep-sea operations. It also calls for establishing maritime economic development experimentation zones in major cities along China’s coast.

Building the Belt and Road. With a flair for historical narrative, Xi has promoted BRI as a policy initiative that harks back to China’s golden era as “a resplendent maritime civilization.” According to the narrative, China used the ancient Silk Road to facilitate trade and spread Chinese civilization throughout the world—before China turned its back to the sea several hundred years ago. BRI is not a strategy per se, and it occupies its own chapter (separate from chapter 41) in the five-year plan, but it and the maritime strategy are intended to reinforce each other, and BRI’s intense focus on external outreach makes it a rich source of insight into Chinese maritime concerns and ambitions. Chinese maritime officials note that advancing and defending the Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road is one of their key tasks during the Thirteenth FYP period. BRI, according to China’s State Council, is a “systematic project . . . to integrate development strategies” and “connect Asian, European, and African countries more closely and promote mutually beneficial cooperation to a new high in new forms.”

China thus far has used the Silk Road primarily to promote maritime connectivity between China and Europe via the SCS and the Indian Ocean, and between China and the South Pacific via a second route southeast, but its intended reach is expanding. Chapter 51 calls for “advancing the construction of strategic maritime hubs” along the road, and these presumably are intended to help safeguard China’s international maritime rights and interests. Beijing has expanded its aspirations beyond BRI’s original geographic focus to include virtually the entire world. Xi emphasized in May 2017 that “Latin America is the natural extension of the Twenty-First-Century Maritime Silk Road.” Chinese officials also affirm that BRI is “open to all countries, and international and regional organizations.”
Like the maritime strategy, BRI is multidisciplinary, with implications for China’s deepening penetration into all aspects of global affairs. BRI includes, but is not limited to, economics (promoting trade, development, and capital flows) and infrastructure (improving land, sea, and air connectivity). In addition, Beijing emphasizes that cooperative efforts in the diplomatic, cultural, and scientific and technological fields are all integral parts of the initiative. Beijing borrows from its own core diplomatic precepts when expressing its principles for BRI (e.g., “new-type international relations” oriented toward win-win cooperation). Security and governance are areas of focus in both BRI and the maritime strategy. In June 2017, Beijing published its “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative,” which listed “maritime security” (including search and rescue, navigational security, law enforcement, and disaster response) and “collaborative governance” (such as policy coordination and dialogue mechanisms) as priority areas for cooperation. The multidisciplinary aspirations of BRI suggest that Beijing will measure the initiative’s long-term success not merely in economic return on investment but also in terms of how much leverage the initiative affords Beijing over the evolution of global rules, norms, and standards and how BRI—hand in hand with the maritime strategy—advances China toward great-power status.

Strengthen Protection of Marine Resources and Environments
Beijing describes the ocean as “a basket of life, a treasure trove of resources” and recognizes that environmental degradation caused by excessive resource exploitation could constrain China’s long-term development significantly. The first way addresses China’s approach to harnessing the ocean to drive sustainable and innovative economic growth; this next way addresses two conditions that will determine China’s ability to do so: the health of the maritime environment, and China’s access to maritime resources, including fish, oil and gas, and minerals. The plan addresses these two conditions (resource exploitation and environmental protection) in one section, or way—a change from how Hu categorized them in 2012, when he listed them separately as two of the four characteristics of MGP. The spirit of Xi’s second transformation (toward sustainable ocean development) is visible here.

Specific exhortations include “controlling the scale of land reclamation from the sea”—possibly a reference to SCS island-building projects—as well as controlling pollution, strengthening China’s ability to exploit and develop marine resources, expanding expeditions to polar regions, researching climate change, protecting rare marine species, restoring wetlands, and improving disaster preparedness and response. The SOA lists additional projects for the five-year period, including promoting Shanghai, Tianjin, Dalian, Xiamen, and other cities as international shipping centers with “intelligent ports” technology, and numerous
projects related to the exploration and use of tight oil, oil sands, deepwater oil, and shale oil.\textsuperscript{58}

The fishing industry is an important focus in China’s maritime strategy and is addressed specifically in both the first and second ways (and is implicitly part of the third way, as an element of the “rights and interests” China needs to safeguard). Demand for fish—a treasured part of the Chinese diet—has risen dramatically as Chinese standards of living have increased, leading to overfishing and declining stocks and driving China’s fishing industry farther and farther from China’s periphery in search of new sources of supply. According to an in-depth assessment of China’s fishing industry, “Chinese fishermen, encouraged by government policy, now venture into disputed waters in the East and South China Seas, as well as other countries’ exclusive economic zones and the high seas, to ply their trade.”\textsuperscript{59} This trend has contributed to tensions with other countries and clashes between fishing vessels. The first way called for “developing high-seas fishing”—providing political backing for the industry’s outward expansion—but the second way acknowledges the need for stricter conservation measures, calling for “strictly controlling the intensity of fishing and enforcing a fishing prohibition period.” The tension is apparent between China’s voracious appetite for fish and its recognition of the need to conserve fisheries and exercise tighter control over the industry’s activities.

The Thirteenth FYP’s heavy emphasis on maritime environmental protection is logical in light of the greater strategic priority Chinese leaders have afforded to environmental issues in recent years—notwithstanding China’s dismal record of environmental management during most of the reform period. The Eighteenth Party Congress in 2012 amended the Party’s constitution to add “ecological progress” as an important long-term task, a signal of the rising prioritization afforded to environmental issues in Beijing’s national strategy.\textsuperscript{60} New environmental-protection policies have followed, although effective implementation often has lagged in the face of local resistance, distorted institutional incentives, and the sheer scale and complexity of the problem. Many environmental challenges are global in nature, adding further complications; China is highly vulnerable to ocean acidification, fisheries depletion, rising sea levels, and extreme weather patterns, with Chinese megacities, including Shanghai and Hong Kong, under particular threat from rising sea levels.\textsuperscript{61}

\textbf{Science and Technology.} Chapter 41 places heavy emphasis on scientific and technological innovation, a natural outgrowth of Beijing’s intense focus on boosting indigenous innovation across the board in recent years. The third of Xi’s four transformations (toward innovation-led marine science and technology [S&T]) is reflected here. Chapter 41 stresses the importance of developing cutting-edge
and green maritime technologies and making new discoveries in marine science. In addition to economic and practical motivations for pursuing these advancements, Beijing is keen for China to become an S&T great power as an important marker of great-power status. The ocean offers great potential in this regard; by one measure, 95 percent of the world's oceans remain unexplored, and Beijing is determined that China achieve world-class breakthroughs on this frontier. Of course, many of the maritime technologies China is developing may have dual-use applications that could enable military operations as well as civilian missions, although this is not addressed explicitly in this section.

For its period, the Thirteenth FYP highlights four major ocean-related S&T projects, which extend from those close to home to far-flung ventures exploring exotic frontiers.

- Blue Bays Renovation: restoring China's polluted gulf and bay areas by strengthening artificial coastlines, restoring natural coastlines, and building artificial wetlands
- Flood Dragon (Jiaolong) deepwater manned submersible: building platforms for deep-sea experimentation and exploration
- Snow Dragon (Xuelong) polar exploration: building a new Arctic observation station, an Antarctic scientific exploration station, and a new advanced icebreaker; raising Antarctic aviation capabilities; and building a polar land-sea-air monitoring platform
- Global Ocean 3-D observation network: planning for a national ocean-observation station, to start building a system for global 3-D observation; and strengthening observation and research of the ocean ecology, ocean currents, and ocean climate

South China Sea. A number of the resource and environmental projects that China set forth for the Thirteenth FYP period pertain to the SCS. China touts these projects to portray itself as playing a positive, stabilizing role.

According to the SOA, the projects include restoring “ecological islands and reefs,” construction of SCS ecological-protection zones, and “public benefit” demonstration projects on islands. The foreign ministry offered China's lighthouse on Subi Reef in the Spratlys, which went into operation in April 2016, as an example of China's provision of “public goods and services for navigation in the SCS.”

Safeguard Maritime Rights and Interests

In an address in November 2014 at the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference—a rarely convened forum; its meeting signals that Beijing is reevaluating its foreign policy approach—Xi highlighted the need to “resolutely safeguard territorial
sovereignty and maritime rights and interests, safeguard national unity, and properly handle disputes over islands.” The speech gave increased political significance to the term “maritime rights and interests.” Reference to this term had been absent in official readouts of two previous benchmark foreign policy addresses—Xi’s speech on peripheral diplomacy in 2013 and President Hu’s address at the most recently preceding work conference in 2006. The term’s appearance in 2014 suggested growing convergence between the maritime and foreign policy strategies. The Thirteenth FYP in 2016 added further political traction to the term and provided greater detail on how China would go about protecting its maritime rights and interests.

A number of general themes emerge from an assessment of this way. First, China is taking a very proactive approach to safeguarding its rights and interests, playing both offense and defense. Second, it has pinpointed both domestic and international obstacles to overcome. Third, it freely intermingles hard- and soft-power tools in pursuit of its maritime objectives.

China’s primary hard-power tool for the maritime realm—the PLA—is not mentioned explicitly in chapter 41, but the 2015 defense white paper states five times that the PLA must safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests, and there is significant thematic overlap between the white paper and the FYP’s discussion of safeguarding China’s maritime rights and interests.

Under the heading of “offense as defense,” China is actively strengthening its tools to protect maritime rights and interests. Each of the headers in quotation marks below is taken directly from the third section of chapter 41.

“Strengthen Maritime Law-Enforcement Capabilities.” Chinese sources make clear that Beijing’s concept of “maritime law-enforcement capabilities” refers to a multipronged approach in which civilian and paramilitary entities take center stage and the PLA Navy and Air Force are ready, over the horizon, if needed. In July 2016, Beijing published guidance that called for improving the capability of its “party–government–military–law enforcement–civilian joint force” (党政军警民合力) to defend China’s maritime borders. The SOA provided more detail: “We should claim our nation’s legitimate rights and interests in our territorial waters through normal fishing production and through the routine patrol of fishery administration ships, marine surveillance ships, and other law enforcement vessels.”

Building MGP is a comprehensive, whole-nation pursuit touching on all ocean-related issues that Beijing considers necessary for China to achieve national rejuvenation. Security issues . . . are only facets of the strategy, which also addresses economic, environmental, political, diplomatic, cultural, legal, scientific, and other issues.
enforcement ships, and should also safeguard our nation’s maritime rights and interests with the backup of our Navy and Air Force” (emphasis added). The diversity of China’s maritime law-enforcement tools—particularly its maritime militia, vessels of which can be indistinguishable to outside observers from ordinary fishing boats—often puts foreign navies in the quandary of not knowing whether the Chinese craft they encounter are state directed.

“Deepen Historical and Legal Research Related to the Sea.” Beijing extensively promotes its maritime claims to both domestic and international audiences, recognizing the need for stronger legal and public-opinion footholds for its arguments. Some areas the SOA recommended for deeper research in May 2016 were “disputes over islands and reefs,” U.S. military activities near China’s periphery, and “false claims” (purportedly by the United States) regarding freedom of navigation (FON) and sea-lane security.

“Coordinate the Use of All Sorts of Methods to Protect and Expand National Maritime Rights and Interests.” “All sorts of methods” points to the wide variety of approaches—diplomatic, legal, economic, military, and others—that China uses to promote its maritime rights and interests. The SOA commentary from May 2016 provides several examples: building more islands and reefs, providing international goods, and strengthening maritime counterterrorism and counter-proliferation cooperation.

Beijing appears to recognize that it faces a delicate balancing act as it uses a variety of methods, both coercive and cooperative, to protect its rights and interests, and it probably recognizes the need to avoid advancing too far too fast on one front at the expense of others. This suggests that as China advances multiple parts of its maritime agenda, it may pause some efforts and then begin again, tacking between caution and risk taking, depending on its assessment of the environment and its progress on different lines of effort. Observers should not assume that these pauses indicate a decrease in Beijing’s resolve or a change in its strategic objectives.

“Respond Appropriately to Foreign Infringements.” In the same May 2016 commentary, the SOA called for China to “increase counterresponses to other countries’ maritime infringements” and “seize the initiative in maritime disputes.” This suggests that in the future China might become increasingly assertive in pushing back against perceived “foreign infringements.”

China issues warnings about its redlines, such as in March 2016 when Xi told President Obama that Beijing would “not accept any acts that infringe on China’s national sovereignty and security interests under the pretext of freedom of navigation,” according to Xinhua. Beijing’s signaling intensified as China prepared for the PCA decision on the nine-dash line in July 2016; authoritative media
asserted that U.S. aircraft carriers, strategic bombers, and destroyers within the region “cemented China’s determination and capability to safeguard its own interests and rights,” and that China was “well prepared for any risky actions the U.S. might take.”

“Protect Freedom of Navigation and Safe Maritime Passage in Waters under Chinese Jurisdiction.” China is building a case for gradually displacing the United States in the role of protector of FON and safe maritime passage in waters China defines as its own and, perhaps, those farther afield. Here, China states its aim to take on more FON responsibilities, with the SOA adding that Beijing must “actively offer the public goods and services of FON protection and sea-lane security.”

The implication appears to be that Beijing would be more trustworthy than Washington in this role; Beijing contends that U.S. military involvement, rather than Chinese actions, has destabilized the region and created risks where none existed. Importantly, U.S. and Chinese commentators often differ in their understanding of FON, with Chinese commentators implying that the concept pertains only to the navigational rights of nonmilitary vessels and aircraft and criticizing the FON operations (FONOPs) conducted by the U.S. Navy as illegal.

International Cooperation
The next three items highlight the role Beijing sees international cooperation playing in its maritime strategy. For Beijing, maritime cooperation provides evidence that China is becoming a major world power with a vital contribution to make toward peaceful international development, and is increasingly capable of taking a leadership role in global governance.

“Actively Participate in Building and Protecting the International and Regional Maritime Order.” “Actively participate” here alludes to China’s shift away from its formerly cautious, passive diplomatic approach to a “confident approach of active guidance . . . to promote a global community of shared destiny.” Beijing seeks a larger role in the international system, including the constituent parts that influence international maritime norms and legal regimes, in line with its growing comprehensive national power.

“Perfect Systems for Dialogue and Cooperation with Neighbors.” China prefers to manage maritime disputes with its neighbors through bilateral dialogue, rather than in multilateral settings involving “non-regional countries”—primarily the United States. Beijing probably judges it will have more bargaining power in one-on-one negotiations with other claimant nations, whereas it would be more vulnerable to shaming, exclusion, or ganging up in multilateral forums. Sometimes, cooperation—such as that facilitated through BRI—can serve as an
incentive for nations to accede to Beijing’s terms, through bilateral rather than multilateral dialogue.

“Promote Practical Cooperation.” China sees the maritime realm as providing abundant avenues for “practical cooperation.” Its “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative,” discussed above, is a window into the wide range of international maritime cooperation Beijing has in mind: green development (environmental and climate change–related efforts), ocean-based prosperity (resource use, tourism, shipping, Arctic affairs, etc.), maritime security (already discussed), innovative growth (scientific surveys, technology cooperation, standards development, and transfers; educational and cultural exchanges), and collaborative governance.82

Domestic Synchronization
The next three items are interrelated and address domestic obstacles to China’s maritime strategy: flawed bureaucratic-coordination mechanisms; the need for unified, top-level guidance; and an incomplete legal regime. The imperative of Xi’s fourth transformation—toward a model for the protection of rights and interests that is based on unified planning—comes through strongly.

“Keep Improving Maritime Coordination Mechanisms.” The first domestic obstacle is poor intra- and interdepartmental coordination. According to the SOA, China’s multiple maritime-related agencies “each do things their own way.”83

During the last several years Beijing has focused on trimming bureaucratic overlap and sewing up gaps in its stovepiped, duplicative system for protecting China’s maritime rights. Although Beijing in 2013 merged four formerly separate maritime law-enforcement organs, forming the China Coast Guard and improving coordination, gaps and redundancies remain among the rights-protection forces.84

“Strengthen Top-Level Design of Maritime Strategy.” Beijing believes it needs a more centralized approach and coordinated planning for its maritime endeavors. This imperative probably explains Beijing’s call in July 2016—a few months after the March 2016 ratification of the Thirteenth FYP—for an overarching “national maritime strategy” to rationalize and unite its disparate efforts to build MGP.85

This logically follows from the previous imperative, since a unified strategy is a prerequisite for efficient and effective bureaucratic coordination.

“Formulate Basic Maritime Law.” Beijing sees shortcomings in its legal system that hinder the achievement of its maritime goals, and here Beijing appears poised to formulate new laws that will enhance its ability to claim disputed maritime features and areas, as it has done in the past. In August 2016, China’s supreme court issued a judicial interpretation that established a legal basis for China to impose
criminal penalties on Chinese and foreign nationals who illegally enter, fish in, or kill endangered wildlife in China’s “jurisdictional seas” (which China defined in 1992 to include contested waters in the SCS and around the Senkakus). Beijing’s efforts to “formulate basic maritime law” merit watching as indicators for how China will deal with external disputes and justify its activities in international waters in the future.

On the institutional front, Beijing is seeking to bolster its legal system’s ability to handle a greater number of international maritime legal disputes in its domestic courts, thereby building a judicial system commensurate with its expanding maritime reach. Zhou Qiang, China’s top judge, in 2015 called for “building China into an international maritime judicial center with more influence over international law,” citing the need to provide legal protection for BRI.

THE STRATEGY’S EXPANDING IMPLICATIONS

For Beijing, the concept of MGP, along with China’s strategy to achieve it, is evolving, as dictated by China’s expanding national interests. The implications of the maritime strategy, both for China and for the world, are expanding in turn. As a senior Chinese maritime official noted in 2012, “MGP’s meaning is not immutable; as the construction of MGP is put into practice, the meaning will be enriched and perfected.” Furthermore, according to PLA scholars, “China’s national interests have been gradually extending beyond the traditional confines of territories, territorial waters, and airspace . . . into the maritime, outer space, and electromagnetic areas . . . . The expansion of national interests in the maritime arena will be an extremely important part of the rise of China’s national interests.”

It is worth pausing to note here that Beijing’s maritime policy concepts—ocean boundaries, territory, rights, and so on—are different from Washington’s. China’s approach tends to be more flexible and user defined, to comport with its assessment of its strategic requirements, rather than to conform to existing international legal standards and norms. This can be frustrating to outside observers seeking to pinpoint Chinese intentions and definitions. Qiushi, a key Communist Party political theory journal, in 2017 offered a definition of China’s “national maritime strategic interests” (国家海洋战略利益): they concern China’s core interests of national sovereignty, security, and development, and they manifest specifically in terms of economic, political, security, and cultural interests. This definition captures the breadth and flexibility of Beijing’s understanding.

The Thirteenth FYP’s maritime section touches on the expanding nature of China’s maritime rights and interests, directing officials to “plan holistically for using all sorts of methods to protect and expand national maritime rights and interests,” as discussed in the previous section. The directive contains both
defensive ("protect") and offensive ("expand") components. Government documents, official commentary, and PLA scholarship shed light on the meaning of this brief but important phrase.

On the Defensive: Global Interests under Threat

As China's interests expand globally, Beijing recognizes that its threat horizons are expanding concurrently; its maritime strategy must face this reality head-on to "protect...national maritime rights and interests." The 2015 defense white paper painted a dark picture of the threats to China's overseas interests. "With the growth of China's national interests, its national security is more vulnerable to international and regional turmoil, terrorism, piracy, serious natural disasters and epidemics, and the security of overseas interests concerning energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication, as well as institutions, personnel, and assets abroad."91

This list of threats is global, and most of the items relate to the maritime domain, directly or indirectly. Given this threat assessment, it is unsurprising that the white paper calls for broadening the PLAN's mission geographically, from its predecessor's focus on "offshore waters defense" to a combination of "offshore waters defense" and "open seas protection."92 This is an explicit reference to a shift that was already well under way. The PLAN for years had been seeking to synchronize its modernization efforts with the needs of China's export economy, such as the protection of sea lines of communication, as well as operational requirements far from China's periphery, such as antipiracy activities off the coast of Somalia.93 As was alluded to earlier, the PLAN is just one of multiple means Beijing uses to defend China's maritime interests; others include the CCG and the maritime militia, diplomats, propaganda, and scholars and legal experts.

While the list of threats Beijing perceives is global, it is easy to deduce that the U.S. military occupies a primary position in Beijing's assessment of threats to its maritime rights and interests. It appears that Beijing's protection of its rights and interests requires a gradual attrition of the U.S. security role in the region. Beijing uses its extensive propaganda apparatus to cast the U.S. military as a troublemaker in the Asia-Pacific region, one with a "Cold War mindset." PRC government and official media statements call U.S. aircraft carrier operations an attempt to "grasp hegemony," U.S. sensitive reconnaissance operations a "severe threat to China's national security," and U.S. FONOPs a "total disregard for China's call not to disturb peace in the SCS."94

As China's capabilities increase, Beijing appears increasingly willing to challenge Washington in defense of the country's maritime rights and interests. This appeared to be the case in December 2016 when the PLAN seized a USN unmanned underwater vehicle in the SCS.95 Notably, the incident occurred outside...
the nine-dash line that China uses to mark its claims in the SCS, but Chinese official statements stated that it occurred in “relevant waters of the SCS”—an ambiguous phrase in both English and Chinese. Beijing went a step further and used the opportunity to reiterate its opposition to “persistent close-up surveillance and military surveys by the United States within Chinese waters” (emphasis added). A Chinese government adviser on maritime issues warned, “China wants to send out a signal that if you spy on us underwater and threaten our national security, we have measures to deal with it. On the South China Sea issue, we took in humiliations with a humble view in past years. I think this has finished.”

**On the Offensive: Expanding Rights and Interests**

Beyond simply defending China’s maritime rights and interests as they expand, China’s maritime strategy seeks to expand those rights and interests actively. This expansion is, first of all, geographic. Beijing is engaged in a comprehensive effort to secure greater rights and interests in seas outside Chinese territorial waters. The head of the SOA stated this clearly in January 2016, noting that a key task for the year was to “holistically plan for protecting rights in near and distant seas and expanding the space for maritime strategic interests.” This was similar to, but more explicit than, language in the Thirteenth FYP (“plan holistically for using all sorts of methods to protect and expand national maritime rights and interests”). In a similar vein, the SOA’s official newspaper, in a commentary on the Thirteenth FYP in May 2016, called for “actively widening maritime strategic interests outside of seas under China’s jurisdiction” (emphasis added).

While the Thirteenth FYP and surrounding commentary state Beijing’s intent to expand China’s maritime interests in the high or “distant” seas explicitly, the concept existed before 2016. In 2012, a senior official declared at China’s annual legislative session that China’s maritime strategy faced two geographically based challenges: first, defending and exploiting China’s “nearly 3 million square kilometers of blue territory”; and second, “accelerating exploration and exploitation in 250 million square kilometers of the high seas, as well as expanding our nation’s ocean rights and interests and increasingly using resources from the high seas.” The SOA, in a February 2014 work meeting focused on protection of maritime rights and interests, called for “expanding new frontiers of maritime strategic rights and interests.”

What do Chinese leaders have in mind, specifically, when they call for expanding maritime interests beyond China’s territorial waters? Authoritative documents and scholarly commentary indicate that these interests have a strong economic component. The opening section of China’s maritime-development FYP in 2013 framed China’s maritime strategic interests primarily in terms of China’s economic links to the rest of the world: “As a developing country that is a
major maritime nation, China has extensive marine strategic interests. With the development of economic globalization and the formation and deepening of an open economy, the ocean's role as a link for international trade, cooperation, and exchange becomes more and more obvious by the day, and the strategic position the ocean plays in guaranteeing resources and expanding development space becomes more and more prominent.\(^{103}\)

PLA scholars writing in China’s foremost military journal in 2012 highlight economic and political aspects of China’s expanding global rights and interests; they frame national security interests as derivative of economic and political interests, which determine the requirements of naval modernization. These scholars enumerate specific examples of China’s global interests: Politically, they include China’s “new rights” in the global commons (international waters, seabeds, straits, waters under the control of coastal nations, and polar areas), the ability to control foreign vessels’ friendly and unfriendly passage by using domestic legislation and law enforcement, and the right to explore and develop natural resources in international seas.\(^{104}\) On the economic front, they list interests that include marine industries (fishing, oil and gas extraction, shipping, and shipbuilding) and protection of China’s economic ventures overseas.\(^{105}\) Presumably, the latter now would include projects associated with BRI.

Several geographic areas beyond China’s near seas stand out as being of notable importance in China’s maritime strategy. The sea routes that make up the Maritime Silk Road (that between China and the South Pacific, and another connecting China to Europe via the Indian Ocean) are key. In addition, even before the rollout of BRI, military scholars highlighted the importance of the western and southern Pacific and the northern Indian Ocean as vital for ensuring China’s strategic access to trade, energy, and markets, and noted that in the future key areas might expand to include the eastern Pacific (to include the sea routes between China and Latin America, as discussed previously), the northwestern Indian Ocean, and parts of the Atlantic Ocean.\(^{106}\) On the last, some Chinese strategists argue (according to a U.S. scholar’s analysis of SOA documents) that China needs an Atlantic strategy because of that ocean’s strategic importance and because it is necessary for an MGP to have a global maritime strategy.\(^{107}\)

Given the strategic importance of BRI for Beijing and the PLA’s mandate to defend China’s overseas interests, it will not be surprising if Beijing seeks military
bases along the Maritime Silk Road, in addition to the base it officially opened in Djibouti in July 2017. The Djibouti base lies in proximity to Chinese economic interests in Africa and at the strategically important intersection of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, on the edge of the northwestern Indian Ocean. China’s 2015 defense white paper hinted at a rationale for this move, stating that the PLA’s strategic tasks include safeguarding China’s overseas interests. Chinese maritime researchers in March 2016 called for the construction of “maritime strategic support points” to protect China’s interests overseas, noting the port of Gwadar in Pakistan and ports on the Indonesian island of Sumatra and in the Indonesian region of Kalimantan as potential locations.108

Chinese strategists and planners also focus extensive attention on the Arctic and Antarctic Oceans, both as frontiers for exploration and scientific breakthrough and, in the case of the Arctic, as a strategic transit route. Beijing is focusing significant resources on building a better Chinese icebreaker and more-advanced Antarctic aviation capabilities.109 Strategists see the Arctic Ocean’s Northeast Passage as growing in importance as a trade route to Europe, as melting polar ice makes it a shorter alternative to the Malacca–Suez route during summer months.110 In June 2016, Xinhua noted that the China COSCO Shipping Corporation—the world’s largest maritime carrier—planned to increase the number of commercial cargo voyages through the Northeast Passage; COSCO first used that route in 2013, according to Xinhua.111

In addition to expanding China’s maritime rights and interests in a geographic sense, Beijing also appears to be seeking to expand ideological acceptance of its rights and interests. Beijing is engaged in a broad campaign to raise “whole-nation maritime consciousness” (全民海洋意识), seeking to develop popular support for its positions. Government guidance during the Thirteenth FYP on building “MGP soft power” (海洋软实力) called for media outreach, education, and academic research aimed at domestic and international audiences, with the goal of creating, by 2020, a “comprehensive, multilevel, multidomain system for whole-of-nation consciousness propaganda, education, and culture building.”112

China’s efforts to promote its views were particularly apparent in the lead-up to and aftermath of the PCA decision in July 2016 on the nine-dash line, in advance of which Chinese propaganda organs unleashed a global media blitz in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the Philippines’ case.113 The tribunal’s decision, strongly favorable to Manila, likely contributed to Beijing’s assessment that it needed to bolster efforts to create “a Chinese system of legal discourse in international and maritime law” to deal with “increasingly fierce competition and conflict in the area of global maritime rights and interests” led by “anti-China forces.”114

However, the Philippines’ election of pro-China Rodrigo Duterte in May 2016 led to a dramatic improvement in China-Philippines diplomatic relations. With
an accompanying easing of pressure from the United States—epitomized by Secretary of State John Kerry’s statement in Laos in late July that it was time to “turn the page” on SCS tensions—the tide turned decisively in China’s favor.\textsuperscript{115} With external pressure relieved, the tone of China’s public rhetoric on the SCS became more positive, and PRC foreign minister Wang Yi praised “the magnificent turn of China-Philippines relations” as one of China’s important diplomatic achievements in 2016.\textsuperscript{116} Furthermore, Chinese officials began comparing the role the United States and other nonregional countries played in the SCS negatively with China’s, crediting China and other regional countries with cooling down the situation, while “countries outside the region” simply wanted to stir up trouble.\textsuperscript{117}

Beijing’s quest to become an MGP is well under way and is unlikely to be deterred significantly. The vital connection that Beijing draws between its maritime strategy and the higher-order goal of national rejuvenation indicates that China almost certainly will continue to place high priority on achieving its maritime objectives.

That said, there are at least three key factors that could throw the maritime strategy off track or cause delays. The first factor is international resistance. The posture that the United States and other countries adopt in response to China’s maritime strategy is a major variable in the strategy’s speed and success. External acquiescence would allow Beijing to accelerate its strategy, whereas resistance would force it to delay parts thereof. The second factor is economic decline. A worse-than-expected Chinese slowdown, protracted over years, would weaken China’s economic magnetism overseas and compel Chinese leaders to scale back or delay elements of the strategy. China would have fewer economic carrots, such as port and basing agreements, to offer in exchange for MGP gains, as partners would take a dimmer view of China’s ability to maintain its commitments. The third factor is environmental degradation. China has defined “an exquisite maritime environment” as a requirement of MGP, but climate change, pollution, depleted fish stocks, and other environmental problems raise serious questions about the viability of this objective.

China’s maritime strategy is not entirely set in stone, however. Indeed, China’s stated intention to issue a unified national maritime strategy at some point in the future indicates that some aspects of China’s approach are still pending. Beijing’s Nineteenth Party Congress (set for October 2017, as of this writing) is the next major juncture for watching for signs of possible revisions or updates to the maritime strategy. The open-ended nature of the strategy offers a window—albeit one that is narrowing quickly—for the United States and others to anticipate China’s future trajectory, nudge it toward conformance with established international
rules and norms, and call Beijing out when its maritime behavior falls short of its own self-assessment as a responsible actor in the maritime realm.\textsuperscript{118}

Issues that are still in flux at the time of this writing include China’s effort to unify its pantheon of maritime rights-protection forces into a “party–government–military–law enforcement–civilian joint force”; how Beijing approaches this issue will affect the operating environment for foreign navies, coast guards, and commercial vessels interacting with Chinese ships. Another important issue to watch is China’s evolving conception of its global maritime rights and interests. Changes in how Beijing defines and prioritizes these in authoritative documents can serve as early indicators of China’s intentions to expand and defend its commercial, military, diplomatic, political, and ideological footprints overseas.

\textbf{NOTES}

1. \textit{Beijing} is used here to refer to authoritative spokespersons speaking on behalf of the Party or government, or official Party or government documents.

2. The China Maritime Studies Institute at the Naval War College is a rich repository of analysis of these topics. Also, for an excellent, in-depth study of China’s maritime rise, with an emphasis on military issues, see Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, \textit{Red Star over the Pacific: China’s Rise and the Challenge to U.S. Maritime Strategy} (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013). For an assessment of many of the key components of Chinese maritime power (the PLAN, CCG, maritime militia, merchant marine, shipbuilding industry, and fishing industry), see Michael McDevitt [Rear Adm., USN (Ret.)], \textit{Becoming a Great "Maritime Power": A Chinese Dream} (Washington, DC: CNA, June 2016), available at www.cna.org/.

3. 海洋强国 is “build [a] maritime great power,” or “build [China] into a maritime great power.” This article uses these various terms interchangeably. “Maritime great power” (海洋强国) also could be translated “strong maritime nation” or simply “maritime power.”


For a Chinese perspective on “sea command” as it applies to both historical maritime great powers and to China’s current situation, see Liang Fang, \textit{海上战略通道论 [On Maritime Strategic Access]} (Beijing: Current Events, 2011). Chinese officials have denied aspiring to “sea control” in the Western, military sense; Foreign Minister Wang Yi in a news conference on March 8, 2017, stated, “While some people in the world believe in Alfred Mahan’s theory of controlling the seas, the Chinese people prefer the approach taken by Zheng He and value maritime cooperation.”


8. These national strategic goals were put forward at the Eighteenth Party Congress by Hu Jintao and are known as the “two centenary goals.” “National rejuvenation” is also known colloquially as “the Chinese dream” and, in its full form, is “building China into a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious” by 2049. See “Achieving Rejuvenation Is the Dream of the Chinese People,” speech by Xi Jinping on November 29, 2012, as published in English in Xi Jinping, The Governance of China (Beijing: Foreign Language, 2014).

9. Xi Jinping in中共中央政治局第八次集体学习时强调进一步关心海洋认识海洋经略海洋推动海洋强国建设不断取得新成就 [”Xi Jinping at the 8th Politburo Study Session Emphasizes Continuing Being Concerned with the Ocean, Knowing the Ocean, and Planning and Controlling the Ocean, to Unceasingly Make New Achievements in Promoting the Building of Maritime Great Power”], Xinhua, July 31, 2013, news.xinhuanet.com/.

10. Liu provided a long list of specific objectives to achieve by 2020, including doubling 2010 maritime output, improving innovation, optimizing the layout of maritime-development spaces, controlling environmental degradation, improving disaster prevention and mitigation, improving coordination, participating in and influencing international maritime affairs, raising awareness of the ocean, improving laws and regulations, safeguarding rights and interests and maritime security, and developing maritime provinces and cities.

11. Liu Cigui, "Striving to Realize the Historical Leap." In Chinese, “become [the/a] main maritime great power in the world” is 成为世界上主要的海洋强国. Chinese does not have the articles “a” or “the,” so the appropriate translation is debatable. Elsewhere, Beijing spares no effort to state that it is not seeking global dominance, will never become a “maritime hegemon,” and always will adhere to the principle of building a “harmonious ocean”—statements probably intended, in part, to depict MGP in a benign light.


15. Chinese strategists bemoan that, starting in the fifteenth century, China’s Ming dynasty rulers began curtailing the remarkable period of Chinese maritime voyages to Southeast Asia, India, and Africa led by Adm. Zheng He. For centuries thereafter, rulers focused inward, terminating China’s maritime development just as European nations were expanding theirs. This helped set the stage for imperial China’s demise during the Qing dynasty, when China suffered a series of maritime defeats at the hands of Western nations and Japan. In the early decades after the PRC’s founding in 1949, Chinese military strategists continued to focus on continental threats, and the PLAN was seen as supporting the army. See Andrew S. Erickson and Lyle J. Goldstein, “Chinese Perspectives on Maritime Transformation,” in China Goes to Sea, ed. Andrew S. Erickson, Lyle J. Goldstein, and Carnes Lord (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2009); Yan Youqiang and Chen Rongxing, "Naval Officers on International, Chinese Maritime Strategy”; Yan Youqiang and Chen Rongxing, “PRC Ocean Specialists Explain ‘National Ocean Development Project Plan’ in 12th Five-Year Program” [in Chinese], Beijing Renmin Haijun, April 1, 2013; and Zhang Shiping, 中国海权 [China’s Sea Power] (Beijing: People’s Daily Publishing, 2009).


26. Zhang Shiping, China's Sea Power, p. 128. Regarding the Chinese concept of 近海 ("near seas"), Yoshihara and Holmes note that this term is often translated "offshore" in official publications, but "near seas" is a more literal and perhaps more accurate rendering. They note that, according to Liu Huaqing—the preeminent PLAN commander in the 1980s—"near seas" includes the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, South China Sea, the Spratly archipelago, and the waters within and beyond the Taiwan–Okinawa island chain, as well as the northern sea area of the Pacific. Yoshihara and Holmes note, however, that "near seas" is a "malleable concept that can be extended commensurate with the PLAN's growing capabilities." Yoshihara and Holmes, Red Star over the Pacific, pp. 24–25.


31. For more on China's lessons learned from the rise of great powers, see Erickson, Goldstein, and Lord, China Goes to Sea.


39. Ibid. See also “China to Build Ocean Surveillance Ships to Protect Maritime Rights,” Xinhua, February 21, 2008, news.xinhuanet.com/.


44. Chinese authoritative documents do not use the “ends, ways, and means” construct. Rather, they often start with an assessment of the current environment (discussing recent progress and key challenges), follow with a statement of key principles (e.g., upholding socialism with Chinese characteristics), and then list objectives (e.g., “deepen reform of the administrative system”). The Thirteenth FYP is organized this way. What U.S. strategy refers to as “means” is often implied or referred to incidentally in high-level Chinese documents such as the Thirteenth FYP’s maritime section, which is written as a series of imperatives (e.g., “Strengthen maritime law-enforcement capabilities”). The assumption appears to be that China will use any and every means necessary to achieve its objectives (i.e., a whole-of-government or whole-of-nation approach). Lower-level implementation documents often discuss the means more specifically (e.g., the CGG, the State Oceanic Administration, or the PLAN).


48. Beijing has moved away from using “One Belt One Road,” or OBOR, in English-language official documents, preferring “Belt and Road” to translate the Chinese abbreviation (一带一路) for the initiative’s full name (丝绸之路经济带和21世纪海上丝绸之路).

49. China’s 2016 National Ocean Work Conference listed the implementation of OBOR projects as a key task, according to the SOA’s website as of January 2016, at www.gov.cn/. See also “Chronology of China’s Belt and Road Initiative,” Xinhua, March 28, 2015, news.xinhuanet.com/.

https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol71/iss2/5
51. "Chronology of China's Belt and Road Initiative."
55. "Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative."
57. Hu Jintao, "Report to 18th Communist Party Congress on 8 November 2012."
64. 以新理念引领南海区海洋工作 ["Use a New Concept to Lead Ocean Work in the South China Sea"], China Ocean Online, April 8, 2016, www.oceanol.com/.
68. National five-year plans typically focus on economic and social development rather than military affairs; however, there is strong evidence of alignment between the Thirteenth FYP and the defense white paper on maritime issues. Both emphasize the protection of China's maritime rights and interests. Furthermore, there is evidence that Thirteenth FYP drafters coordinated with military stakeholders and took national security issues into account. One of the FYP planning committee members, Zhang Shiping—a researcher at the PLA Academy of Military Science, with the rank of major general—appears to have played a major role in shaping the plan's maritime chapter. Subsections closely resemble major themes in Zhang's 2009 book, China's Sea Power, which advocates for greater strategic focus on building comprehensive sea power, to advance China's development interests, through both military and nonmilitary means.
69. "‘Opinion Concerning Economic Construction and National Defense Construction.’"
72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
76. "Starting a New Journey in Maritime Rights Protection."
77. Zhong Sheng, "United States Must Not Violate the Bottom Line."
81. Cdr. Jonathan Odom contributed to the analysis on this point.
82. "Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative."
84. For more information on the 2013 reorganization and the formation of the CCG, see Ryan D. Martinson, "From Words to Actions: The Creation of the China Coast Guard" (paper presented at the CNA "China as a Maritime Power" conference, Arlington, VA, July 28–29, 2013), available at www.cna.org/. Martinson argues that, while the integration of China's rights-protection forces remains a work in progress, the forces have made marked progress both in coordination (deployments directed by a single chain of command) and in coercive potential (more and bigger ships at sea).
90. 实现中华民族强国梦想的科学指南 ['Scientific Guide to Realizing the Chinese MGP Dream'], Qiushi, September 1, 2017, theory.gmw.cn/.
92. Ibid.


100. “Starting a New Journey in Maritime Rights Protection.”


104. Liu Yonghong and Tang Fuquan note that “China, according to new maritime laws and rules, enjoys new rights in such areas as contiguous zones, exclusive economic zones, and continental shelves, as well as international waters, international seas and seas, intercontinental straits, polar areas, and other waters under the control of coastal nations.” Liu Yonghong and Tang Fuquan, “China.”

105. Ibid.

106. Ibid.


109. Liu Yonghong and Tang Fuquan, “China.” Also see “Use a New Concept to Lead Ocean Work in the South China Sea.”


111. “More Chinese Ships to Travel on Arctic Route,” Xinhua, June 17, 2016, news.xinhuanet.com/.


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