

The Dragon and the Tides

Using Theory, History, and Conventional Naval Strategies to Guide America's Understanding of China's Maritime Hegemonic Aspirations in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

To capture the growing great-power competition and potential confrontation in the Indo-Pacific, this article seeks to uncover how current Sino-US naval and maritime policies are being guided. Specifically, this article examines the theoretical, historical, and conventional nature of naval and maritime strategies employed by the United States, China, and other great powers to understand how these two great regional actors have developed notions of maritime hegemony and to shed light on how their strategies will steer the Indo-Pacific's orderly architecture. It is also imperative to highlight that the analysis presented in this article is conducted through a high degree of abstraction. The goal is to provide intellectually and normatively provoking research, thereby offering policy and military officers a framework to guide operational thinking about the rapidly shifting naval and maritime dynamic in the Indo-Pacific.

When thinking of hegemony in the Indo-Pacific, it is hard to ignore the near-complete military and diplomatic dominance of the United States. With its post-World War II status-quo position, complete with its own Pacific Fleet, naval installations in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii; and Yokosuka, Japan, and the integrated US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) with its subordinate unified commands in Yokota Air Base, Japan; and Camp Humphreys and Camp H.M. Smith, South Korea, America's sustained regional dominance has been the strategic objective for past US presidential administrations. Specifically, the three past US presidential administrations of Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and now Joe Biden have intensified Washington's regional hegemonic position by garnering greater like-minded partners in the region to establish formal systems of collaboration—particularly the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and the Australia-United Kingdom-United States Trilateral Security Pact (AUKUS)—while also attempting to regain a favorable military projection in the region.

However, for the first time, an emerging peer-state with the resources, military capabilities, and political intentions to contest the region's status quo naval and maritime dynamic is challenging America's Indo-Pacific hegemony. The observation that America's Indo-Pacific hegemony is threatened for the first time since its World War II victory in the Pacific is difficult to comprehend. For one, many historians and defense analysts argue that during the Cold War the Soviet Union challenged US naval and maritime hegemony by developing strategic ballistic missile submarine (SSBN) forces and reworking its coastal navy into a blue-water navy.¹

However, this perspective negates the Moscow's prioritization regarding Soviet territorial and political possessions in Eastern Europe and sound deterrence policies to ensure its partial dominance of an ideologically divided world order. Moreover, Soviet geosecurity thinking during the Cold War was about using its SSBNs as a purely defensive force, not as a revisionist instrument to militarily overturn US hegemony in the Pacific. Unlike the Cold War, China's economic and military rise as an aspiring regional hegemon and global great power is actively displacing America's Indo-Pacific hegemony. Moreover, the shift in the regional hierarchical system to multipolarity and the relative decline of American military, economic, and diplomatic hyperpower status illustrates the preeminence of growing Sino-US hegemonic tensions.

Political Theories for Hegemony

We can observe the growing great-power struggle for naval and maritime dominance in the Indo-Pacific through multiple theoretical perspectives. For this article's intentions, however, the most prominent theories that can shine insightful information to guide a US naval and maritime response is hegemonic stability theory (HST) and power transition theory (PTT). In particular, these theories have specific implications for naval and maritime dynamics as researchers can incorporate them into traditional and distinct notions of a great power being a maritime power and the correlation to regional hegemonic posturing.

According to HST, peace, or a peaceful geopolitical setting, occurs when there is one dominant state actor in an international system.² Due to the international system's anarchic structure, implying a lack of a supreme power that can instantly and explicitly prevent or stop forms of interstate violence, state actors need to enhance their power to ensure their survival and continuity, often resulting in localized or broader struggles for military, economic, and diplomatic authority over neighboring states. To minimize wars or security dilemmas caused by states questioning or worrying about the intentions of neighboring nations, HST puts forth the need for a hegemon that can implement coercive and noncoercive strategies through employment of overwhelming power and capabilities to lead, control,

and influence an international system's military, economic, and diplomatic architecture while also ensuring that the international system is mutually beneficial to near-peer or peer states.³

When a hegemon is unable, unwilling, and incapable of coercing or persuading other states into compliance or submission, competition and confrontation emerge in the international system. Typically, peer-states will observe the decline of a hegemon as an opportunity to gain advantageous geosecurity and geoeconomic positions to elevate their status as a great power or will seek to overtake the declining hegemon and become the new hegemonic actor of a system—using its new geopolitical status, military, and economic strength to shift the system's architecture in its favor.

Frequently these hegemonic transitions lead to war—commonly referred to as the *Thucydides' Trap*—where hegemonic aspirants face off against the status-quo hegemon.⁴ The post-World War II period has shown that hegemonic transitions can also occur through passive ventures. These passive transitions from one hegemon to another can only occur if both aspirant and status-quo hegemons have interchangeable political systems and shared international values and norms—this was best captured during the hegemonic shift from the *Pax Britannica* to *Pax Americana*.

Another theoretical perspective that can guide Sino-US naval and maritime strategies for hegemony in the Indo-Pacific is A. F. K. Organski's PTT. Although associating elements of realism and power politics into its methodology, PTT offers a unique perspective into the dynamic settings of an international system, particularly one that envisions strategies of collaboration and competition through a hierarchical structure. At its core, PTT provides tools that guide and measure structural changes in a hierarchy's system, looking at the latter's power distribution between top-tier and lower-tier powers.⁵

Suppose a hierarchical structure's distribution of power is unbalanced. In that case, the system will take a *vertical* design in its interstate collaboration and competition dynamic, meaning that the hegemonic power has unchecked and near-complete control over military, economic, and political matters. Moreover, this scenario implies that there are more lower-tier states—classified as small, minor, and middle powers—than top-tier states, which inhabit the major, great, and hyper classifications of power. In a *horizontal* design, the power distribution remains hierarchical. However, there are more varying dynamics between the lower-tier and top-tier powers—often having multiple states inhabit the upper echelon of power classification.⁶ Moreover, in this design, there is greater emphasis placed on hegemonic satisfaction.

When either a vertical or horizontal system is inhabited by overwhelmingly like-minded allies and partners, a hegemon's rule is sought after and reinforced as

there are more advantageous geosecurity and geoeconomic factors for lower, middle, and top-tier powers to continue adhering to the rules and norms placed by the hegemonic state. If the system is inhabited by discontented and revisionist powers, potentially aspiring hegemons, then there is a higher likelihood for status-quo hegemonies to be challenged and deposed through great-power war or a coalition of powers.⁷

Within a naval and maritime strategy, attaining or preserving hegemony is a primary concern. Throughout history, hegemons were traditionally geographically located on peninsulas or were island states, resulting in them having superior naval and, in the modern context, aerial military forces.⁸ Due to the geographical boundaries, a peninsula or island hegemon could afford to have a limited standing land army due to the natural barriers afforded by a sea or ocean, thereby permitting hegemons to invest and supplement their military forces with naval and aerial capabilities. In turn, naval and aerial forces offer more definite defense and security deterrence due to their ability to efficiently and rapidly project forces against a perceived challenger. Additionally, hegemonic powers from these geographical settings have more means to accomplish and advance their objectives, either economically or militarily, as waterways and sea lanes provide routes that are harder to block, oppose, and capture while also projecting a hegemon's hard-power capabilities further afield from their state's territory, making potential armed conflict less devastating to the hegemon's civilian, agricultural, and industrial bases.

Hegemony also plays a central role in shaping and guiding Sino-US naval and maritime strategy as both great powers focus squarely on the Indo-Pacific region. Unlike the Cold War, where America and its rival, the Soviet Union, focused on global ideological and conventional global hegemony, the emerging Sino-US tensions are predominantly over the Indo-Pacific as the next great geopolitical theater of global affairs and its normative and institutional hierarchical nature. Although senior US defense, security, and political officials like to extend Sino-US tensions over a belligerent and overtly revisionist China that desires the complete overturn of the global rules-based international order and, by default, Washington's hegemony over it, the naval and maritime strategies of China are focused quite studiously on regional matters of Sino-centric sovereignty, security, and economic preeminence.⁹

A fortified reason for China's staunch perspective is due to where the Indo-Pacific region lies within the overall structure of the emerging multipolar order. Specifically, Asia has 60 percent of the world's population, seven of the world's most-populous countries,¹⁰ 65 percent of the world's oceans, and 25 percent of the world's landmass.¹¹ Moreover, the region's vital shipping lanes pass through small channels, particularly the Straits of Malacca, Sunda Strait, and Lombok

Strait, which connect the South China Sea (SCS) to the Indian Ocean. Strategically, whoever controls or regulates these waterways can impede or proliferate the flow of capital goods. Due to these factors, whoever can attain hegemony over these channels and waterways will be at the center of the global economic engine of future geoeconomics.

With such strong strategic value, there have been contested opinions of how impactful the Indo-Pacific region will be in influencing the global rules-based order in the coming decades. Just as European hegemony gave way to a Westphalian system of balance-of-power politics and a liberal-orientated rules-based order, hegemony in the Indo-Pacific may very well reinforce the status quo of a Western system of rules, values, and norms, or it may instigate a new Asiatic form of hegemony that will reintroduce a tributary system that was once at the heart of East Asian geopolitics—one where China was also the hegemonic center of power or “Middle Kingdom.”¹²

Naval Combat Theories

Theories of hegemony are not the only factor guiding Sino-US naval and maritime strategy. More than ever before naval theories and strategies for maritime superiority are coming into play. With the continual advancement in technological capabilities in the form of hypersonic missiles, multigenerational aircraft, large optionally manned surface vehicles (LUSV), medium unmanned surface vehicles, and extra-large unmanned undersea vehicles (XLUUV), decision makers must reexamine and adapt conventional naval strategies to a distinct regional dynamic of power.

Throughout history, maritime powers have used their ability and geographical locations to expand and project their dominance into regional and global theaters by having the most superior naval presence and vessels. In classical Greece, Athens used its robust navy to achieve victory by annihilating an enemy’s fleet, thereby attaining unchecked command of the seas.¹³ From antiquity to the early modern period, maritime powers have used their dominant navies, alongside their merchant fleets, to pursue and protect their interests.¹⁴

Although technology advanced and new naval vessels emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, maritime warfare remained relatively unchanged. Indeed, the same tactic of destroying an enemy’s fleet used by Athens 2,500 years prior gained further traction among naval officers theorizing the need to eliminate an enemy’s capital ships—the most important vessels in a naval fleet, which often were the largest and most-prized possessions.¹⁵ Captured best by American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, who provided his name to the “Mahanian concept of sea warfare,” for a maritime power to win a decisive battle

and a war, a state's navy must seek out and destroy an enemy's capital ships in one grand battle, thereby preserving the status quo of naval power or altering the balance to one's favor.¹⁶

While Mahan's theory maintains relevance in naval academies in the United States and worldwide, other influential naval strategies developed in the late nineteenth century from the British experience of maritime hegemony. For instance, Spencer Wilkinson, the first Chichele professor of military history at Oxford University, argued that maritime power should be used in collaboration with continental power. Wilkinson argued that Britain should have incorporated its naval supremacy with land power during peace and war to maintain its great-power status, along with expanding British defensive treaties that could act as a safeguard to build mutual interests among peer-states.¹⁷

The notion of *cooperative hegemony* also developed from such exchanges and brought forth the idea of an Anglo-American *maritime entente*. Supported by the Royal Navy's Rear Admiral Sir Charles Beresford, such a common course of action would have seen the United States and Great Britain—with the latter's Commonwealth nations—use their combined maritime power as a “heavy sword” in the international system, thereby becoming shared arbiters of common maritime laws, norms, and values that would advance the two nations' common geosecurity and geoeconomic interests. British royal engineer, Major General T. Bernard Collinson echoed the idea for a *maritime entente* by suggesting that Britain build definite defensive systems with Asiatic and European maritime powers to safeguard the British Empire and the balance-of-power institution that anchored the Westphalian system of European hegemony.¹⁸

However, maritime power and oceanic hegemony were periodical signs of being a regional or global great power. According to Halford John Mackinder, the famous nineteenth-century British geographer and academic, the “Columbian epoch” that permitted European powers to dominate the world through sea power—as defined by Mahan—eroded during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In an article that built off his remarks to a Royal Geographical Society conference, Mackinder argued that navies and shipping would decline with the technological advancement of transcontinental railway networks. With these new access points traversing land, Mackinder pointed to the enhanced strategic mobility of land powers to conquer essential areas that would amplify their access and retention of resources, making them more impervious to the effectiveness of maritime powers that initiated blockages.¹⁹

History also demonstrates the inconsistent nature of naval and maritime strategies for powers that seek hegemony. Followers of Mahan's theory often feel vindicated by the US victory in the Pacific theater in World War II, as US naval

power was successful against Imperial Japan. Due in part to America's use of carrier fleets equipped with aircraft, the United States was successful in attaining victory in key battles in the Pacific—the Battle of Midway and the Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942 and the Battle of the Philippine Sea in 1944.²⁰ However, in the Atlantic theater, neither carriers nor battleships were the *prima facie* of naval warfare. Quite the opposite, the Atlantic witnessed small battles of destroyers, escorts, and antisubmarine aircraft—guided by new advancements in radar through the Magnetron No.12 equipped to Allied aircraft or ships. Through these two unconventional features, the Allies went on to defeat the Nazi U-boat threat and close the Mid-Atlantic gap.²¹

China's Maritime Strategy

A conundrum between China's historical and contemporary experiences also steers Beijing's maritime strategy. When looking at past statements by former Chinese presidents and past general-secretaries of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), there are extensive references to China's "century of humiliation" caused by European powers defeat of China in the Opium Wars of the mid- to late 1800s; Imperial Japan acquiring Chinese territories in 1919 through the Treaty of Versailles; the Japanese invasion and conquest of Manchuria and the Second Sino-Japanese War from 1937–1945; and the annexation of Xinjiang by the Soviets in 1934.²² A commonality among these events was the perceived notion of China being bullied and humiliated by Western and foreign powers. The growing great-power competition with the United States and its like-minded partners is perceived in Beijing as yet another indication of China's continued struggle against foreign interference.

It is also helpful to point out that most of China's military defeats in the century of humiliation were the results of the country having a weak navy that faced multiple failures in maritime warfare, as historian Edward L. Dreyer argues, coupled with high-levels of governmental corruption and weak administrative outlooks.²³ China also suffered from a hegemonic hangover prior to the extraregional engagement by European powers in the SCS during the 1800s. At its hegemonic height, China was overconfident in its hegemonic standing to coerce and persuade top-tier powers it deemed inferior. In a growingly globalized world, Chinese hubris resulted failure to modernize and incorporate new technological advancements, thereby rendering China unable to compete against the advanced European powers. Furthermore, the Qing dynasty's sprawling kingdom compelled Chinese military and political leaders to observe itself as primarily a continental power with a critical but negligible maritime periphery. Such an outlook resulted in China concentrating its economic resources on upholding vast and expensive standing armies.

Hoping to learn from the lessons of history and avoid derailing President Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream," the CCP and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) have laid out an ambitious maritime strategy.²⁴ According to the CCP's 2019 Defense White Paper—*China's National Defense in the New Era*—the fundamental objective of China's regional engagement is to deter and resist neighboring and extraregional aggression by safeguarding national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity, and security, along with safeguarding the nation's maritime rights and interests against encroachment, infiltration, sabotage, or harassment.²⁵ To ensure that these objectives are met, China has publicly declared the islands in the SCS, Taiwan, and the Senkaku Islands—the latter of which Beijing calls the Diaoyu Islands—as inalienable parts of mainland China while also extending the PLAN's presence into the waters and airspace of the East China Sea (ECS), SCS, and the Western Pacific through combat and security patrols and white-hull diplomacy.²⁶

Despite its use in defense and security circles, China's *nine-dash line* is a reminder of the type of force projection Beijing seeks to attain for regional dominance in maritime and aerial domains. Beginning in 1935, the CCP put out a map—*The Map of Chinese Islands in the South China Sea*—that illustrated 11 dashes within the maritime space of the SCS.²⁷ Over the decades, the 11 dashes have subsided to nine dashes. However, the implications for what these lines imply are exceedingly evident. The nine-dash line encompasses 90 percent of the SCS and includes some of the most fertile fishing grounds, along with huge oil and natural gas reserves beneath its seabed.²⁸ Moreover, the SCS is poised to become the geoeconomic center of power, with its sea channels providing a gateway to the Indian Ocean. Lastly, and possibly most important for Sino-US maritime hegemonic competition, the SCS encompasses more than 200 islands, atolls, reefs, and seamounts.

Incorporating these maritime geographical features into China's maritime strategy is perhaps one of the most remarkable gambits in naval history. Since 2016, China has used the topographical makeup of the SCS to construct artificial islands, equipping them with antiship cruise missiles, surface-to-air missile systems, jamming equipment, radar systems, and personnel bases.²⁹ The significance of these developments is threefold. First, the artificial islands provide a sustainable forward-deployment area that can quickly and proficiently intercept any threat from a challenger or rival.³⁰ Second, these islands offer an opportune method to effectively annex the SCS as a Chinese lake, thereby hegemonizing the region under Chinese naval and mercantile superiority. Third, the islands serve as immovable aircraft carriers and ports that station fighter jets, bombers, short-range and medium-range missiles, and harbors and refueling stations for China's maritime militia and PLAN vessels.

Another hegemonic strategy presented in China's maritime strategy is the *island-chain theory*. Formed by the "father of the Chinese Navy," Admiral Liu Huaqing, in the 1980s, the three-island chain theory holds important sway in Chinese and US constructs of hegemony in the Indo-Pacific.³¹ Accordingly, this theory envisions the PLAN asserting control of the three island chains—particularly the three subregional peripheries that include the SCS and ECS, the Philippine Sea, and the Western Pacific—which encompass the Indo-Pacific's paramount territorial and commercial hubs.³² Although never announced publicly by Beijing, there are growing concerns over the prospect of China successfully gaining a foothold in these three island chains. Specifically, there are fears that China will pursue a westward expansion into the Indian Ocean and its subregional peripheries, thereby creating a fourth island chain that encompasses the Bay of Bengal and a fifth island chain that extends toward the Arabian Sea and the Horn of Africa.³³

China's *island-chain theory* also closely resembles Imperial Japanese thinking that sought to sketch out a defensive perimeter in the Western Pacific during the 1940s. According to Japanese maritime thinking, if the Japanese military controlled and installed aerial, naval, and ground troops on small, scattered islands in the Western Pacific, then it could, in theory, hedge against US Pacific bases in Guam or the Philippines threatening Japan's home islands in a future conflict.³⁴

China's Naval Strategy

To accomplish its hegemonic aspirations in the SCS, the Indo-Pacific, and beyond, the PLAN has undergone rapid modernization in its maritime power, along with assembling a naval force that eclipses the United States as the dominant regional maritime force in terms of numbers—incorporating green-water, brown-water, and blue-water naval capabilities. According to the US Department of Defense (DOD), the PLAN has a battle force of approximately 355 vessels, ranging from surface combatant vessels, submarines, aircraft carriers, amphibious ships, mine warfare ships, and sea auxiliaries. Furthermore, the report indicated that China's massive maritime fleet would expand to 420 ships by 2025 and 460 ships by 2030.³⁵

Arguably the crown jewel in the PLAN's arsenal are its three aircraft carriers, specifically the *Liaoning* (Type 001) class launched in 2012, the *Shandong* (Type 002) class launched in 2019, and the recent *Fujian* (Type 003) class in 2022. The *Liaoning* and *Shandong* classes are equipped with a "ski ramp" at the ship's bow, permitting fixed-wing aircraft like the J-15 Flying Shark to be launched. Meanwhile, the *Fujian*-class sports an Electromagnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS) that will improve the range and payload capabilities of Chinese fighter jets. The PLAN's Type 003 class will thus align itself with the US Navy's (USN) new

Gerald R. Ford-class of aircraft carriers. It should also be noted that all three carrier types, as of now, are conventionally powered, and as such, the DOD remarks that the PLAN has begun development of a Type 004 model that will incorporate the *Fujian*-class design but be nuclear-powered.³⁶

China has also paid significant attention to its surface combatant vessels that will serve alongside its aircraft carriers. In particular, the PLAN's modernization has focused its shipbuilding program on new guided-missile cruisers (CG), guided-missile destroyers (DDG), and corvettes, each with a niche operational contribution—namely air defense, antiship, or antisubmarine roles—for China's naval dominance.³⁷ The PLAN is also repurposing amphibious ships, designing them as assault vessels and equipping them with EMALS to support launching UCAVs, UAVs, and medium-lift utility helicopters.³⁸

Beijing has also sought to incorporate its artificial islands in the SCS into China's naval strategy by making them fixed bases to house antiship ballistic missiles (ASBM), notably the DF-21D and DF-26, which can reportedly target and hit ships moving at sea. Coupled with the demonstration of Chinese hypersonic glide vehicles in late 2021, China will undoubtedly equip its ASBMs with this new technology to make its missiles more difficult to intercept.³⁹ Moreover, the artificial islands are set to become vitally important hubs of power for the PLAN, becoming pivotal locations for refueling and porting stations for its naval and aerial forces, along with harboring China's maritime militia. Not only will these islands project Chinese maritime hegemony by enforcing China's geosecurity and geoeconomic interests onto neighboring powers and deter the United States and its like-minded partners interference in the SCS and the Indo-Pacific but the islands will also protect the mainland's industrial, economic, and military infrastructures—permitting China to maintain a high output level of ships to sea.

These maritime and aerial capabilities contribute to a Chinese regional anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) strategy. The A2/AD strategy provides China with the military opportunities to slow the deployment of a rival's maritime force or can disrupt the capabilities of rivals to conduct offensive maritime operations within a specific geographical theater.⁴⁰ Within this maritime strategy, A2/AD allows China to execute a multifaceted assault on the navies and inland bases of the United States and US allies by initiating subsurface, surface and inland missile attacks followed by a naval and aerial secondary assault. Such strategic maneuvers would overwhelm the USN and its allies, destroying a large portion of capital vessels belonging to the US Pacific Fleet—particularly America's aircraft carriers. Moreover, an A2/AD strategy will make an adversary more reactionary to Chinese tactical thinking, thereby redirecting military operations that will force the United States to react to the first aggression site. These operations will eventually

lead the United States and US allies to focus firmly on primary aggression sites, moving vital vessels, resources, and intelligence to counter a threat by the full force of a Western-liberal maritime coalition of powers. In turn, this could leave strategic areas in the Indo-Pacific vulnerable to attack, particularly Taiwan, the US Marine Corps base in Guam, or the Senkaku Islands.

Chinese Theoretical and Naval Design

Upon evaluating China's maritime and naval strategies, it is clear that Chinese political and military leaders desire a win-win strategy for China's competition with the United States in the Indo-Pacific. Given its history with foreign interference by extraregional powers and its modern desires to gain geosecurity and geo-economic dominance in the Indo-Pacific and thereby establish an Asiatic system of hegemony on the region's hierarchical structure, norms, and rules, Beijing is following an HST context as China's guiding hegemonic doctrine. In particular, China is using HST to achieve advantageous geosecurity and geo-economic positions, somewhat restrictedly, to elevate its status as a great power within a regional and global structure, evident by its A2/AD and island-chain strategies as an extension of a future *Pax Sinica*. Although Beijing will undoubtedly seek regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific, either by invading Taiwan, undertaking a Cold War strategy of expanding its ideological governance model to neighboring powers to establish regional and global partners, or executing a great-power war with the United States, China needs to maintain some semblance of hegemonic stability to avoid a complete security and economic breakdown in the Indo-Pacific's institutional, interstate, and normative environment.

China is also using its maritime and naval strategies within a Mahanian concept of sea warfare. The PLAN's modernization and expansion to become the largest naval force in the world, with specific attention to the total tonnage of its vessels, showcase the unchanged nature of how an Asiatic maritime power surveys maritime warfare. Moreover, the need for China to acquire numerous aircraft carriers, more powerful surface and subsurface vessels, and hypersonic missiles into its Indo-Pacific fleet pinpoints China's recognition of Mahan's emphasis on the need for a large naval force to defeat a peer sea power in a decisive and total maritime war.

Conclusion

The growing competition in the Indo-Pacific over Sino-US hegemonic control is a serious threat to regional and global stability and peace. However, confrontation is not unavoidable. As illustrated in this article, China's growing assertiveness

and interest in dominating the Indo-Pacific is due to its historical experiences with extraregional powers having controlled the geosecurity and geoeconomic architecture of the region's hierarchical structure. Moreover, following conventional notions of naval and maritime theory, China is pursuing a Mahanian approach to modernizing the PLAN in the potential lead-up to a great-power confrontation with the United States. As shown by traditional and historical experiences in the Pacific, the correlation between Mahan's concept of large navies winning a war equates with complete commercial and military control of a maritime domain. However, unlike the works of most senior military and policy experts and high-level scholars, this article demonstrates how China is not currently undertaking a great-power transition for regional hegemony. Instead, as argued herein, Beijing seeks to use the hegemonic stability of a declining great power to elevate its status as the region's hegemonic successor and prepare China's hegemonic rule for when a *Pax Sinica* emerges.

Although this article has focused exclusively on China, it is noteworthy to highlight that the United States is also undergoing a shift in its guiding maritime and naval principles. Historically, Washington has always had an "Asia First" outlook.⁴¹ One would be remiss not to think of the United States' strong principal passion equating freedom and liberty with the need for free seas and free trade. For the United States, being a maritime power means having moral imperatives advocating for and defending the notion of freedom and openness, features of a rules-based order that permit free trade and free navigation. For US naval, political, and military thinkers, being a maritime power is directly related to being a democratic great power responsible for preserving and advancing a free-and-open maritime trade and diplomatic system.

To remain the status quo hegemon of the region, the United States must reexamine its understanding of Chinese hegemonic aspirations with its principles for redesigning the Indo-Pacific's maritime dynamic. Although the United States thoroughly enjoys branding itself as a status-quo power, Washington's incorporation of Wilkinsonian and Beresfordian notions of *cooperative hegemony* and *maritime ententes*, using the Quad and AUKUS, demonstrates the atypical strategies the United States is willing to undergo to preserve its regional hegemonic position. The problem that emerges from these new guiding principles is Washington's unwillingness to maneuver beyond its coveted Mahanian heritage of being a maritime power. For this reason, the United States will continuously observe its competition through a PTT lens and, as a result, may undertake misplaced maritime strategies that can accelerate the approaching *Pax Sinica* in the Indo-Pacific. ❖

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