From Mahan to Corbett

An Inquiry into the Development of Chinese Naval Strategy in the Indian Ocean Region

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This article examines how China draws upon the strategic theories of Alfred Thayer Mahan and Julian Corbett to shape its emerging naval doctrine and force posture in the Indian Ocean region (IOR). It traces Mahan's emphasis on sea power and naval supremacy, as well as Corbett's concepts of maritime communications and balancing maritime forces with terrestrial capabilities. The article analyzes China's accelerated naval modernization, including its aircraft carrier program, and its increasing military presence across key maritime chokepoints and archipelagic chains stretching into the IOR through port access facilities and security partnerships. It argues that Beijing synthesizes a hybrid maritime strategy that combines Mahanian principles of decisive naval dominance with Corbettian advocacy for controlling sea lines of communication to protect economic interests. While facing limitations in achieving complete control, China appears poised to acquire significant deterrent capabilities countering US regional primacy. This analysis sheds light on China's multifaceted theoretical framework motivating its drive for greater power projection into the Indian Ocean.

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For decades, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) projected Deng Xiaoping’s famous slogan “China’s peaceful rise” as the ultimate mantra in its international diplomacy, which beguiled many international relations (IR) pundits. However, recent robust expansionist policies displayed by Beijing have rebutted claims emerging from Western IR scholars and ended the Chinese myth of “peaceful rise” for good. It is evident that China’s present ambitions are well shielded by the naval strategy of the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), whose long-term strategic mechanism has a broad outlook toward naval expansion. China recognizes the importance of naval supremacy as an indispensable factor in countering the dwindling American presence in the Indian Ocean. Against this backdrop, one must endeavor to understand China’s naval strategy in the Indian Ocean.

The Indian Ocean holds significance beyond being a mere body of water, as its civilizational legacy reflects both Indian, Chinese, and many more footprints in history. Given its perennial value as a decisive factor, the Indian Ocean is on the verge of transforming into a game-changer. The Rimland theory, propounded by
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John Spykman as a supportive theory to Halford John Mackinder’s “Heartland concept,” underscores the significance of the Indian Ocean for the twenty-first century.¹

This article’s task is threefold. First, it establishes Alfred Tyler Mahan’s analogy of sea power as a modern Chinese strategic perception in bolstering its economic prosperity. By highlighting the enormous military capacity earned by the PLAN as an organized force, this article discusses the aircraft carrier program aimed at challenging US naval hegemony in the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean. The recent launch of China’s first domestically designed aircraft carrier, Fujian, in September 2023 marks a significant milestone in China’s pursuit of projecting its strength beyond its shores. Capable of carrying a complete fleet of aircraft, Fujian’s technological capacity rivals that of the USS Gerald Ford, the most advanced carrier in the US Navy’s service.² While China currently trails the United States in terms of the number of aircraft carriers, with only four compared to the US Navy’s larger fleet, Beijing is actively working to acquire at least another five to six aircraft carriers by the 2030s. This endeavor aims to elevate PLAN’s status into a world-class navy capable of challenging the omnipotent naval supremacy of the United States.

Secondly, this article extends its focus to the Indian Ocean while discussing the steady development of PLAN. Drawing from the theoretical impetus derived from both Mahan and British strategist Julian Corbett, this article examines China’s potential for developing its Indian Ocean fleet and other geopolitical strategies Beijing aspires to utilize.

The third focus of this work lies in examining the deeper roots of Chinese naval strategy in the Indian Ocean, which align with China’s economic ambitions as the emerging center of the world’s production and its related challenge of oil imports from the Middle East and Africa. The overarching result of this article will demonstrate the gravity of geopolitical entanglement in the Indian Ocean as a pond for all the great powers. Additionally, the analysis in this study assesses Chinese strategic thinking influenced by both Mahan and Corbett.

Influence of Mahan and Corbett on Chinese Naval Strategy

Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914) and Julian Corbett (1854–1922) emerge as two distinct strategists in naval warfare. Despite the contrasting nature of their

¹ John Spykman, Geography of the Peace (Hamden, CT: Archeon Books, 1944).
strategies, the contributions made by both are undeniably exceptional. Mahan, a naval historian, viewed anarchy as a defining feature of IR due to the lack of stringent mechanisms to safeguard world order amid chaos. He advocated for robust armament as a deterrent against potential conflicts. Additionally, Mahan emphasized the importance of a hierarchy in which great powers, particularly commercial states, played a pivotal role due to the wealth generated from international trade. His depiction of Great Britain, or “Pax Britannica,” in the nineteenth century underscored British political supremacy based on its unchallengeable position as a trading state and naval hegemony at sea. Mahan’s strategic thinking centered on the nexus between a country’s foreign policy and naval power, highlighting the necessity of acquiring formidable warships and fleets for any aspiring great power seeking expansion.

In contrast, Julian Corbett, a British naval historian, diverged from Mahan’s seminal work with his exhaustive efforts. His major contribution to naval strategic thinking lies in his work “Principles of Maritime Strategy,” which provides astute analysis on the objective nature of naval warfare rather than solely focusing on naval hegemony. Corbett argued that the objective of naval warfare should be to secure command of the sea or prevent the enemy from doing so. Unlike Mahan, who emphasized achieving complete triumph over the enemy through major sea battles, Corbett advocated for the development of distinctive strategies tailored to great powers, including the creation of effective maritime strategies.

Corbett’s perspective equated command of the sea with control of maritime communications, whether for commercial or military purposes. Drawing from Carl von Clausewitz, Corbett integrated maritime strategy as a mechanism to support or obstruct diplomatic efforts. He acknowledged the limitations of sea power, particularly in the face of continental powers, and advocated for a proper balance between sea power and land power to confront formidable foes. Corbett’s analysis, rooted in Great Britain’s experience in the nineteenth century, blended the concepts of sea power and maritime communication to secure its position amid the Napoleonic Wars.

In short, while Mahan extolled the importance of achieving dominance at sea through formidable fleets, Corbett’s maritime strategy revered the notion of at-

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taining maritime communication without necessarily engaging in sea battles. Corbett emphasized the constant pressure exerted by a navy’s presence, which he termed “Fleet in Being,” as a means of strategic influence.8

The motivations driving China to draw upon both Mahan and Corbett are deeply rooted in Beijing’s ambitions to emerge as a superpower. When Mahan articulated the concept of sea power in the nineteenth century, the United States was in its early stages of engaging in global affairs. Mahan’s renowned thesis on “Sea Power” served as an inspiration to the nascent US, emphasizing the imperative of securing maritime dominance before asserting significant influence on the world stage. This notion resonated strongly with US leaders like Theodore Roosevelt, who sought to elevate the nation’s status to that of a global power. Similarly, Chinese strategic thinking has embraced Mahan’s principles, recognizing the pivotal role of maritime power in achieving broader geopolitical objectives.

Leading scholars James Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara offer a comprehensive analysis in their work “The Influence of Mahan upon Chinese Maritime Strategy,” detailing China’s efforts to adopt Mahanian principles.9 It is important to note that China’s interest in sea power surged alongside its remarkable economic progress in the late twentieth century. While Mahan coined the phrase, he did not provide a precise definition of sea power. He viewed it as a multifaceted system encompassing various forms of maritime utilization with both civil and military applications. Mahan underscored the economic significance of the sea, particularly in trade, arguing that sea power could significantly enhance a nation’s wealth and power. Historian Andrew Lambert posits that Mahan’s use of sea power (two words) explored the strategic utilization of the sea, distinct from traditional notions of a state being a seapower (one word).10

In his acclaimed work titled “Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power,” Robert Kaplan asserts that China has swiftly turned to Mahan in its strategic deliberations.11 Historically, Chinese emulation of Japanese imperial warfare trends predates the World War II, as military advisors in the Qing dynasty sought insights from the Japanese navy’s naval developments, despite their perceived insufficiencies. Following Deng Xiaoping’s reforms, Chinese strategic thinking was captivated by Mahan’s emphasis on achieving complete command of the sea, which

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8 Corbett, Some Principles of Maritime Strategy, 234.
Chinese policy makers aptly linked with commercial prosperity. For instance, in 2004, a defense paper issued by General Jiang Shiliang underscored China’s justification for controlling “strategic passages.”

It is worth noting that this subtle shift in strategic thinking occurred a decade before the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and at a time when Beijing’s rhetoric regarding the South China Sea exhibited only slight signs of hostility. Chinese thinkers frequently applied Mahanian principles to bolster China’s dominance, exemplified by Beijing’s assertive stance toward Taiwan, situated at the midpoint of the first island chain. Indeed, China’s perception of claiming Taiwan appears to have been influenced by Mahan, as Beijing views possession of Taiwan as granting direct access to the Pacific.

The current utilization of Mahan by the PLAN transcends mere rhetoric, as it entails significant implications for the reorganization of the Navy. The Mahanian spirit resonates strongly with many modern Chinese naval strategists, some of whom characterize China as an oceanic nation, naturally endowed with a long coastline. Admiral Liu Huaqing’s initiation of the Chinese “offshore defense strategy” focused on asserting sea control for a finite duration, extending several hundred miles off the mainland coast.

Chinese naval history boasts a rich heritage that predates European maritime ventures. The naval expeditions conducted by the Ming dynasty in the fifteenth century were marked by awe and genuine interest in expanding Chinese culture. These endeavors were underpinned by the belief in upholding Chinese superiority over other nations, with the Chinese readily resorting to the use of force when their presence was challenged. For instance, the historic conflict between the Ming dynasty and the Kotte Kingdom in the fifteenth century, culminating in the

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16 The Kotte Kingdom was a prominent political entity in what is today Sri Lanka during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Established in the fourteenth century near present-day Colombo, it reached its height under Parakramabahu VI. The kingdom was known for its centralized administration, strategic trade location, and cultural patronage.
capture of the Kotte ruler as a prisoner, exemplified the Chinese concept of *tianxia* under the auspices of Ming rulers.\(^\text{17}\)

However, China’s once-dominant position as a naval power faded into obscurity following Emperor Hongxi’s decision to dismantle the fleet, effectively marking the end of China’s naval legacy. The emperor’s choice to cease naval voyages may have stemmed from his Confucian worldview, which harbored hostility toward navigation and mercantile pursuits. Nonetheless, China’s withdrawal from the Indian Ocean created an opening for European powers to embark on their formidable colonial ventures in the sixteenth century.\(^\text{18}\)

China’s renewed interest in developing a naval strategy centered on the Indian Ocean mirrors the rapid industrial progress witnessed in the late twentieth century, which underscored the critical need to expand sea routes as strategic conduits. The transformation of the PLAN from a coastal defense service under Mao Zedong to a fully-fledged navy in the late twentieth century was intimately linked to the challenges confronting the People’s Republic of China since its inception. Initially, the Chinese naval doctrine merely mimicked the Soviet approach in the 1950s, focusing primarily on small-scale battles.\(^\text{19}\)

Following the Sino-Soviet rift in the early 1960s, Chinese naval strategy entered a new phase when Admiral Xiao Jingguang presented a report to Mao advocating for the development of a robust naval mechanism for the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). Mao promptly endorsed the report, and on 24 January 1977, the PLAN submarine SS 252 embarked on a voyage spanning more than 3,300 nautical miles, successfully completing a training exercise in the Western Pacific.\(^\text{20}\) This pivotal event reshaped the Chinese Navy’s traditional coast guard image and laid the groundwork for distant-waters exercises thereafter.

The trajectory leading to the emergence of the PLAN’s blue-water strategy was significantly influenced by Admiral Liu Huaqing’s transformative initiatives upon assuming command of the PLAN in 1982. In a concept paper submitted to the Central Committee of the CCP, Liu argued that the development of capitalism was intricately linked to three factors: prosperity in navigation, the opening of new sea routes, and the discovery of new continents. According to Liu, the centers of


world civilizations shifted from the Orient to Western Europe, and subsequently to the United States.\(^{21}\)

The evaluation of Mahan’s strategy in shaping the development of the Chinese navy should be contextualized within the significant shifts that occurred in China following Deng Xiaoping’s rise to power and subsequent changes in Chinese strategic thinking. From a broader perspective, Mahan delineated several factors as pivotal in the rise of maritime powers. These factors encompassed geographic position, physical configuration, territorial expanse, population size, and national character. China’s alignment with these factors positioned it as a suitable candidate to emerge as a naval power, and the echoes of Mahan’s principles continue to reverberate in the reshaping of China’s naval strategy, with a particular emphasis on the Indian Ocean.

In 2004, at the Sea Lane Security Symposium, Chinese Admiral Wang Zaibang referenced Mahan’s naval strategy as an inspirational guide for enhancing future Chinese naval power.\(^{22}\)

**China’s Tryst with the Indian Ocean**

To address future challenges and effectively navigate the maritime domain, China is undertaking significant efforts to bolster its naval capabilities on a grand scale. A prominent aspect of China’s maritime ambition is its fervent pursuit of expanding its aircraft carrier capacity, as evidenced by the unveiling of *Fujian*, China’s first domestically designed aircraft carrier. The Indian Ocean holds paramount importance for China due to its critical role in facilitating oil imports. Chinese strategist Zeng Xinkai emphasizes China’s vulnerability in its heavy reliance on other states to control its energy imports.\(^{23}\)

Moreover, China’s expansive BRI underscores the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean for Beijing’s policy makers. The roots of China’s naval strategy consolidation in the Indian Ocean can be traced back to the era of Hu Jintao, who coined the famous term “Malacca Dilemma,” highlighting China’s concern over the vulnerability of its oil imports should a rival power blockade the narrow Strait of Malacca.\(^{24}\)


In response, China has increasingly focused on enhancing its presence in the Indian Ocean, shifting from a state of lethargy to active engagement. While there were no PLAN port visits in the Indian Ocean in 1999, this inertia evolved into a new phase by 2010, with the PLAN conducting annual visits to the region. The recent docking of PLAN’s Hai Yang 24 Hao warship at the Colombo Port in Sri Lanka exemplifies China’s consistent presence in the Indian Ocean, where smaller nations like Sri Lanka find themselves entangled as pawns. Furthermore, China’s escalating naval presence in the Indian Ocean is underscored by its unique diplomatic outreach, as it stands as the only nation to establish embassies in all six nations bordering the Indian Ocean.\(^{25}\)

Drawing from the effective strategy of Mahan, China has stealthily developed its naval strategy in the Indian Ocean. Holmes asserts,

> The PLA Navy must venture into South Asia to protect the shipping lanes and other Chinese geopolitical interests there. As the Chinese fleet establishes a presence in the Indian Ocean, however, it will find itself far from Chinese shores, in waters that lie mostly beyond the range of ASBMs [antiship ballistic missiles], diesel submarines, and fast patrol craft. Fortress-fleet logic avails Beijing little there. It only extends as far as anti-ship technology can take it.\(^{26}\)

Evidently, China continues to refine its naval strategy to safeguard economic interests by consolidating its naval strength from the Western Pacific to the Northern Indian Ocean, spanning from the Middle East and African coasts to the Malacca Strait. It appears that China has solidified its approach to the Indian Ocean by emulating the US strategy of the two-ocean fleet, which propelled the United States into global superpower status. As Holmes noted, the US two-ocean fleet was rooted in the legacy of Mahan, who advised Washington to base its naval strategy on a one-power standard. Mahan drew inspiration from the grandeur of the British Navy, analyzing its strength as the decisive factor behind British success against French and Spanish rivals.

Chinese strategist Hu Bo advocates for a two-ocean naval strategy, comprising both the Pacific and Indian Ocean fleets.\(^{27}\) According to Hu, the proposed Indian Ocean Fleet should actively facilitate the safe passage of Chinese trade ships. Ad-

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ditionally, China’s establishment of its first overseas military base in Djibouti is a crucial factor in assessing China’s long-term ambitions in the Indian Ocean. The 300-meter-long berthing area capable of accommodating heavy vessels in Djibouti serves as a tangible indication of China’s advancement in naval strategy in the Indian Ocean. Since its inception in 2017, the Djibouti facility has undergone significant construction, with some experts suggesting that the PLAN is constructing an underground electronic and cybersecurity facility there. Although China portrays the Djibouti base as a logistical or support facility, the underlying reality reflects Beijing’s ambitious strategic intentions.

From a strategic standpoint, China has been meticulously devising various tactics to strengthen its ongoing naval presence in the Indian Ocean. The “String of Pearls” is a prominent strategy emblematic of Beijing’s strategic objectives. This concept revolves around the notion that China strategically establishes ports in neighboring states to counterbalance India’s influence. Additionally, China’s naval developments under the guise of the BRI underscore the fervor of Chinese strategic interest surrounding the Indian subcontinent. The Gwadar Port in Pakistan, the aforementioned facility in Djibouti, and Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka represent strategic locations that China proudly touts as ideal supply-and-support ports. Furthermore, the pretext of the BRI serves as another bastion that China can effectively utilize to counter strategic containment efforts by both the United States and India.

Sea Control and the Economic Ambitions

The military ambitions prevailing in the Indian Ocean align closely with Beijing’s economic objectives, which prioritize achieving maximum economic prosperity and national rejuvenation by 2049. These aspirations were outlined at the CCP conference in 2012, with a sense of optimism surrounding Xi Jinping’s envisioned “new era of prosperity.” China has made significant strides in its long-term strategic vision through the BRI, launched in 2013 as President Xi’s initiative to revive China’s historical Silk Road legacy.

However, the absence of a secure naval route to ensure the overall safety of Chinese ships traversing the region, attributed to China’s Malacca dilemma, presents a significant challenge. Beijing’s primary solution to this issue emphasizes the need to ensure safe passages for Chinese ships navigating through the Strait of Malacca. Alternatively, a more stringent option involves China’s interest in

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exploring alternative sea routes to bypass the Strait of Malacca altogether. China's heightened focus on the Indian Ocean stems not only from its own naval route concerns but also from its recognition of the region's significance in energy transportation.

It may not be an overstatement to assert that if the Strait of Malacca represents China's Achilles heel, then the Indian Ocean strategy emerges as its last resort. To achieve this objective, China pursues the manipulative tactic of extending its steady influence among the fragile states in the Indian Ocean region, such as Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. These states grapple with endemic corruption, nepotism, and susceptibility to external threats in their postcolonial context. Notably, these countries are partner states of the BRI, and they have received substantial Chinese aid.

China's two-oceans policy, focusing on both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, assumes critical importance in Chinese maritime ambitions. While the Pacific presents a formidable challenge to Beijing due to the presence of the United States and its allies, the power vacuum and fragile security architecture in the Indian Ocean region offer an excellent opportunity for China to expand its presence. China further facilitates its interests by cultivating ties with internally destabilized states in South Asia.

The acquisition of the Hambantota port for a lease of 99 years and the Chinese-funded port city project in Colombo exemplify China's leveraging of its presence in India's backyard. Presently, Sri Lanka owes China approximately USD 7 billion in commercial and bilateral debts, leading the island nation into a challenging financial condition, prompting Sri Lanka to declare default status in April 2022. However, China has recently agreed to restructure Sri Lanka's debt, enabling the island nation to secure the second tranche of USD 334 million from the International Monetary Fund.

Alongside Chinese influence in Sri Lanka, the potential repercussions can reshape geopolitical realities in the Indian Ocean. The increase in Chinese naval visits to ports like Colombo and Hambantota reflects Beijing's economic grip over Colombo, potentially shifting Sri Lanka away from India's orbit in addressing pertinent geopolitical issues. The power asymmetry between Colombo and Beijing became apparent in 2022 when a Chinese spy ship was permitted to dock in the Hambantota port despite India's objections. China declined Sri Lanka's foreign ministry request to defer the port visit, claiming it unjustified for certain countries to pres-

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Sure Colombo. Subsequently, Sri Lanka announced that the ship would be allowed to dock, illustrating how Chinese tactics push small states to align with Beijing’s strategic interests.

Overall, Beijing’s approach toward weaker states in South Asia and Africa mirrors China’s long-term strategic aspirations in the Indian Ocean, serving as a means for China to resolve its economic goals overseas.

**Mahan vs Corbett:**

**Hybrid Chinese Strategic Reading of the Indian Ocean**

In addition to embracing Mahan as a key strategist in reshaping its naval strategy, China appears to be intrigued by the works of British naval historian Sir Julian Corbett. While Mahan and Corbett share certain commonalities, such as recognizing the need to control vital sea lanes for both strategic and commercial interests, Corbett diverges from Mahan’s singular focus on achieving complete naval dominance over the enemy at sea. Specifically, Corbett rejects Mahan’s emphasis on pursuing decisive battles to eliminate the enemy.

Contrary to the grand strategic outcome envisioned by Mahan through naval annihilation, Corbett argues for the importance of establishing temporary control of the sea through methods such as blockade, commerce raiding, or homeland defense. Andrew Lathem states, “For Corbett, as for Clausewitz the most fundamental principle was the primacy of politics in war. Maritime strategy, he believed, should always be derived from nation’s specific political goals, purposes and constrains.”

In Latham’s analysis, China finds several compelling reasons to incorporate both Mahan and Corbett into shaping its naval strategy. Among the myriad factors driving China’s maritime focus, a primary catalyst is its notable shift from defending the mainland to asserting claims over disputed territories, a strategy known as “offshore balancing.” This strategy comprises three main principles.

Firstly, it entails the protection of China’s land and littoral frontiers, which encompasses securing the entirety of the nine-dash line in the South China Sea, claiming certain islands in the East China Sea, and ultimately regaining control of Taiwan. Secondly, the principle of offshore balancing emphasizes extending China’s influence to its immediate neighborhood, spanning from Vietnam to Thailand. Thirdly, and most crucially, China is determined to expand its chains of

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island strategy across five chains, aiming to establish a balance of power that prevents US hegemony from prevailing.

The fourth and fifth island chains, encompassing states like Sri Lanka, Gwadar in Pakistan, and Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, lean in favor of China’s ascent as a key player in the Indian Ocean. These strategic moves underscore China’s ambition to shape the maritime domain and assert its influence in regions vital to its national interests.

Corbett’s insight emerges as instrumental in shaping China’s naval strategy, influenced by Mahanian principles. Corbett’s philosophy fundamentally advocates for a balance between sea power and land power, contrasting with Mahan’s singular focus on naval supremacy. From Corbett’s perspective, naval and land forces should coordinate operations jointly, a concept he termed “maritime strategy,” distinct from Mahan’s naval-centric approach.32

China boldly challenges US naval dominance in the Indian Ocean, bolstering its continuous presence around the fourth and fifth island chains. Military establishments in Djibouti, the acquisition of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka, alongside Gwadar in Pakistan, and the installation of a military surveillance facility on Myanmar’s Coco Island in the Bay of Bengal illustrate the geopolitical shift favoring China in the Indian Ocean.

The embodiment of Corbett’s maritime strategy, emphasizing control of the sea, is aptly illustrated by China’s strategic utilization of sea communication lines through initiatives like the BRI. Projects such as the colossal Colombo port city endeavor and the establishment of military surveillance facilities on Coco Island exemplify Corbett’s wisdom in balancing both land and naval forces. Corbett articulates,

The object of naval warfare is to control maritime communications. In order to exercise that control effectively we must have a numerous class of vessels specially adapted for pursuit. But their power of exercising control is in proportion to our degree of command, that is, to our power of preventing their operations being interfered with by the enemy. Their own power of resistance is in inverse proportion to their power of exercising control; that is to say, the more numerous and better adapted they are for preying on commerce and transports, the weaker will be their individual fighting power.33

33 Corbett, Some Principles of Maritime Strategy, 103.
A critical factor facilitating China’s heightened involvement in the Indian Ocean is its astute strategy of consolidating both naval and land presence within its fourth and fifth island chains. In light of this, numerous instances demonstrate the successful integration of Corbett’s strategic principles into China’s strategic thinking.

**China’s Threat Perception**

The concept of the Thucydides’ trap was popularized by Harvard political scientist Alison Graham, who argued that war becomes inevitable when a great power’s hegemony is challenged by an emerging power. Graham used this concept to illustrate the growing tensions between China and the United States in 2012. This idea was further elaborated upon in his book *Destined for War* in 2017, where he described the Thucydides’ trap as the natural outcome when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, leading to structural stress that often results in violent conflict.\(^{34}\)

The current trajectory of Chinese strategic thinking is largely influenced by Beijing’s increasing perception of threats, particularly its skeptical attitude towards the West. This perspective must be understood in the context of the historical humiliations endured by China at the hands of the West. Regarding China’s hesitance to fully embrace liberal international law, Teemu Ruskola suggests that it may stem from the Chinese psyche still resonating with the memory of unequal treaties imposed on China by Western powers in the nineteenth century.\(^{35}\)

The explicit denial by the West of China’s claims in the South China Sea following Chinese military exercises there in 2021 further heightened tensions. China has asserted its historical rights to the South China Sea, tracing back to the Han dynasty in the second century BCE. However, Western scholars argue that such claims lack legitimacy under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The ongoing naval activities conducted by the United States in the South China Sea are seen by China as provocative actions that reinforce its perception of threat, ultimately reinforcing China’s naval strategy.

**Conclusion**

It is evident that the United States and its allies cannot ignore the rapid development of Chinese naval strategies in the Indian Ocean, prompting Washington to devise counterstrategies to deter Beijing. Collaborative efforts such as the

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Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and Australia–United States–United Kingdom (AUKUS) trilateral signal to China that complete naval supremacy in the Indian Ocean will not be unchallenged. However, China’s determination to enhance its naval capabilities in the region poses a significant challenge to US and allied interests. Despite this, China’s lack of significant airpower presence in the Indian Ocean, as noted by Australian analyst David Brewster, presents a strategic limitation akin to challenges faced by the Soviets.

Nevertheless, China’s steadfast pursuit of a strong presence in the Indian Ocean persists, underscored by its focus on expanding its aircraft carrier fleet. Recent refurbishments and ongoing developments in aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered submarines highlight China’s growing naval strength. While China may not achieve complete control of the Indian Ocean, its strategic approach, influenced by both Mahan and Corbett, allows it to navigate around such limitations. In sum, while China may not secure absolute sea control, its credible deterrent capacity against the United States and its allies in the Indian Ocean is likely. This analysis aligns with the strategic principles of Mahan and Corbett, demonstrating the enduring relevance of their insights in shaping contemporary Chinese naval strategy.

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