



## Chinese Strategic Assessments of Southeast Asia

March 2018

Marvin Ott, Asia Fellow, Woodrow Wilson Center  
Yilun Hao, Researcher, Woodrow Wilson Center



Southeast Asia has been, and remains, a natural focus of China's geopolitical ambitions. Beijing's strategic approach toward the region has crystallized as Chinese capabilities have changed. Today's China is unmistakably asserting its status as Asia's dominant power and Southeast Asian states find themselves under growing pressure to accommodate and defer to a new and increasingly stark reality. The geopolitical future of Asia is in play, the pace of change is breathtaking, and the stakes both for the region and for the United States are enormous. To understand the game it is vital to better understand how China's strategic approach to Southeast Asia has evolved.

China's relationship with Southeast Asia has deep historical roots going back well over a millennium. The essential nature of that relationship, from a Chinese standpoint, was captured in the formulation of an imminent American sinologist, John K. Fairbank, who described a "Tribute System." China saw the monarchs, sultans, and other authorities in the Nanyang (the "South Seas") as naturally subordinate and deferential to China. As the only true civilization, the Middle Kingdom was surrounded by less than fully civilized peoples ("barbarians") on its periphery. The superiority of China and the Han people was taken as natural and incontestable. This relationship took tangible expression in periodic "tribute missions" sent from Southeast Asian rulers to the Dragon Throne. It was all heavily symbolic and ceremonial—but very important in Chinese eyes.

The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) provides the historical marker for the emergence of the Western state system. All the crown heads of Europe (and the later Republics) would enjoy juridical equality under an international legal regime that granted to each state exclusive (sovereign) authority within inviolable borders. The formulation was designed to bring an end to an extended, bloody era of religious warfare when, for example, a Spanish king might launch an armada to punish an English king for the religious practices within Britain. In practice, of

---

course, sovereignty was often violated and powerful states dominated weaker neighbors, but the ideal of sovereign equality remained—and ultimately spread to the non-Western, postcolonial countries that embraced it as a shield of the weak against the strong and predatory.

The Chinese view, firmly rooted in Confucian culture, was very different. The natural order among human beings and institutions is hierarchical. The head of the Confucian family is owed obedience and respect by all other members of the family. He in turn owes them benevolence and protection. Each member of the family knows his or her place—with authority downward and deference upward. In this way harmony is maintained, conflict avoided, and prosperity facilitated.

The Tribute System reflected these verities. But with the coming of the Western powers to Southeast Asia beginning in the 16th century and the actual establishment of colonies primarily in the 19th—the long relationship between China and Southeast Asia was severed. China, itself, was reduced to semi-colonial status (“the one hundred years of humiliation”). Southeast Asia, from a Chinese perspective, had come under alien control. That control was broken by the Japanese Imperial conquests of the early 1940s that precipitated the spread of World War II to the Pacific. The defeat of Japan and the postwar wave of decolonization took Southeast Asia into a new and heady era of independent states—part of the international sovereign state system. But there was another powerful revolutionary current at work as a triumphant Mao moved almost immediately to encourage communist insurgencies seeking power in all the new Southeast Asian states. Had they succeeded as envisioned, the result would have been something akin to a recreated Tribute System with new communist regimes paying deference to the red emperor in Beijing.

The cold war conflicts culminated in a communist triumph in Indochina but the consolidation of non-communist rule elsewhere in Southeast Asia. For China the results of all this were paradoxical and ultimately frustrating. By the last decade of the 20th century China found itself facing a region where:

1. a communist regime in Vietnam, heavily beholden to China for critical help during the Vietnam war, evinced growing suspicion (and occasional hostility) toward its huge northern neighbor;
2. the United States, even in the wake of defeat in Vietnam, remained the most powerful and influential presence in the region; and
3. Southeast Asian countries demonstrated an unmistakable devotion to sovereign independence—happy to engage China economically but showing no inclination to be deferential or subordinate in dealings with Beijing. The Tribute System seemed very much an artifact of ancient history.

But that conclusion ignored intensely-held views in China. When Mao died in 1976 he left China in a ruinous state—the product of one demented ideological campaign after another. The tumultuous power struggle that followed his death featuring the “gang of four” led by Madame Mao further weakened an already crippled country. When Deng Xiaoping finally emerged as paramount leader he set China on a course of national recovery and construction embodied in a favorite slogan that long predates the Peoples Republic—“rich country; strong army.” Deng’s agenda was one of classic nationalism: make China rich and powerful. Bismarck and Teddy Roosevelt would have understood Deng perfectly. The new approach produced dramatic results; annual GDP growth at nearly double digits with military budgets growing even faster—all this with a population of one billion. It was an achievement without precedent. Still, China remained relatively backward and weak through Deng’s years at the helm. A shrewd strategist, Deng understood the implications for foreign policy and repeatedly reminded his countrymen of a traditional Chinese adage: “Bide your time and conceal your capabilities until you are ready to act.” China was not yet strong enough but the fierce ambition to restore the Middle Kingdom to great power (or superpower) status was there. An obvious corollary to that ambition would be a restoration of Chinese primacy in Asia—something akin to a modern day Tribute System.

Despite its long coastline China was traditionally a land, not maritime, power. The threats to Chinese civilization over millennia came from central Asia. The Great Wall built over centuries was an epoch response to this threat. It was not until European explorers and then fleets appeared along the coasts that the sea became a source of threat—culminating in Japan’s invasion and occupation of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The first European mariners encountered a singularly insular and self-sufficient China. The great exception to the characterization of China as a land power was the astonishing series of voyages by Admiral Zeng He for the Ming emperor in the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. But as impressive as they were, they ended suddenly and became the exception that proves the rule.

After Zeng He’s flagship returned to port for the last time China turned inward—an orientation that remained unchanged for four centuries. Chinese fishermen plied the waters off China’s coast but officialdom paid scant attention. As World War II ended and vast territorial issues were negotiated, the Republic of China produced a map showing a maritime boundary line encompassing almost the entire South China Sea. Little notice was taken of this initiative even within the ROC government. The Cairo and Potsdam Declarations ignored any such implied claim. The line was highly imprecise and the names for islets, reefs, and other outcroppings were merely Chinese transliterations of English names derived from European exploration. When the new Peoples Republic printed its first maps showing the same line it generated minimal to no reaction. Nevertheless, a marker had been laid down and in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it became abundantly clear that the so-called “nine-dash line” was a serious statement of China’s strategic ambitions regarding Asia and Southeast Asia in particular.

With the 2012 inauguration of Xi Jinping as China’s powerful new leader, the era of “bide your time” was clearly over. By 2012 the Chinese economy was the second largest in the world and on a trajectory to become the largest within two decades. The Chinese military had been modernized with particular attention to the navy and supporting air power and reconnaissance capabilities—all instruments of

maritime power projection. From the outset Xi made it abundantly clear that his “China Dream” envisioned a new golden age for Chinese citizens and for China’s influence and power in Asia—and well beyond.

China’s growing assertiveness, including aggressive territorial expansion in the South China Sea, has become a first order concern both for the United States as well as the governments in Southeast Asia. A cornerstone question has been whether Chinese actions are animated and directed by an overarching strategic goal. If so, what are the objectives, perceptions, interests and understanding of regional dynamics that shape the strategy? The previous discussion provides only a sketch of such a strategic understanding—one based largely on Chinese official statements and actions. But for anything approaching a fine-grained understanding of Chinese strategy, these sources are not enough. What is needed are informed analyses by Chinese experts with access to (and perhaps influence over) government thinking. But in the case of China, such informed analysis is very hard to find. There are any number of articles that restate official policy and express Chinese grievances—work that is political and propagandistic—but there is very little that presents a dispassionate analytical understanding. There are, however, rare exceptions and they are made more valuable by their rarity.

What follows are selective translations of two such articles chosen for their analytical quality and because they are separated in time. One, published in 2003 provides a strategic perspective from a time when China’s post-Mao modernization was achieving undeniable successes but the sense of China’s military and strategic disadvantage vis-à-vis the United States and Japan was still quite real. The second was written thirteen years later (2016) and reflects the assertive confidence of a China bent on regional dominance. One article is written by an academic scholar writing in a prestigious officially sanctioned publication—the journal of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies—and the other by a senior analyst working for the Institute for International Strategic Studies of the Central Party School of the Communist Party in Beijing.

[Editorial note: the following articles appeared in Chinese. The original English translations have been edited for length]

### PRC Scholars on China's Geostrategic Options Regarding Southeast, Central Asia

*Journal of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies, April 15, 2003.*

*By Hou Songling, Associate Professor, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Jinan University and Chi Diantang, Jinan University.*

A basic principle...in geopolitics holds that, to balance a country's influence with respect to other countries, especially its power in war, the two factors of distance and geographic accessibility must be considered since these will erode and weaken the projection of influence and power. Consequently, because a country's distance from other countries and their geographic accessibility are different, their geographic roles are also different. Generally speaking...adjacent countries have the greatest geographic usefulness to one's own country. The number of countries adjacent to a country, their strength and weakness, and the tenor of relations with these countries all have an important impact on a country's security. ... Consequently, when formulating its own geographically related strategies any country will pay attention to the significant influence of peripheral areas to its own country. [Therefore] "stabilizing the periphery" has long been China's chief strategic goal in dealing with the outside world.

First, as [an] important region in China's peripheral geographic environment, Southeast Asia... [has] extremely important geostrategic significance for China. ...Developing neighborly, friendly, and cooperative relations with every country in [this] region...would be helpful to forming a peaceful and stable security environment on the periphery. This would forcefully ensure China's reform and opening up and the construction of socialist modernization.

Second, Southeast Asia...[is] the important breach point for China's smashing [the] strategic encirclement by the United States in the new century. ...China's full-speed development and the continuous strengthening of its international influence have evoked the sharp vigilance of the United States...[which] already views China as a potential strategic adversary. In... guarding against China and safeguarding its hegemonic interests in the Asia-Pacific and globally, the United States has gradually increased the weight of the "containment" aspect of its China policy, which has been manifested in concrete actions. It has continuously strengthened the penetration of peripheral regions in recent years and has positioned itself to maneuver for influence on China's periphery. ...[to] form a strategic ring of encirclement on China's periphery to control China's channels of contact with the outside world and squeeze China's room for development. At the same time, a series of U.S. military deployments on China's periphery may serve as forward bases in a possible future conflict between the United States and China.

This strategic deployment by the United States not only conflicts with China's strategic goal of "stabilizing the periphery," it will [also] have a serious impact on China's future development. For China to realize its great goal of modernization and further development in the new century, it must smash the strategic encirclement by the United States. Southeast Asia...[is] the important breach point for smashing this encirclement.

First, current U.S. deployments in [this] region are not yet complete or on a stable footing. Even though the United States has operated for a long time in Southeast Asia, it has been compelled since the end of the conclusion of the Cold War to withdraw troops stationed in the region. It only maintains symbolic military contacts with allies in the region and it is hard to compare its political and economic influence to the Cold War period...

Second, even though the countries in [this] region have expressed different degrees of welcome regarding the entry of U.S. power, their primary goal is to utilize U.S. capital and technology to develop economically...

Third, and even more importantly, China has made striking progress in its relations with every country in Southeast Asia...in recent years. Bilateral cooperation in politics, economics, security, and other areas, has deepened. This has provided a good political environment for China's smashing the encirclement by the United States. ...and also provide favorable conditions for further expansion of China's international space in the new century...

As a rising power, the scope of China's interests is also starting to expand outwardly. ...From this perspective there is a necessity for China to firmly establish its own strategic border areas...strategic border areas refer to the regions that national power and influence are actually able to extend or reach. This is different than natural territory or geographic border areas. ... strategic border areas can cause a country to expand the perimeter of its security and defense, exert necessary influence on situations that lie outside its national territory but endanger its own security and increase its ability to resist aggression.

Southeast Asia is located at the juncture of two oceans, and is an important passageway linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Exerting effort to improve and develop relations with every country of Southeast Asia will be beneficial to ensuring unimpeded international shipping lanes and will also assist in expanding China's space in the sea. As a great power bordering the sea, China's development naturally cannot do without marine development and utilization. The abundant resources stored in the sea and its important strategic value as a shipping channel have important significance for China's development in the new century. However, although China's geographic position causes China to face the sea, it does not border the ocean. Between the nearby seas and the greater ocean is an island chain composed of the Japanese archipelago, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, and numerous Southeast Asian archipelagos. This is the "first island chain." To...enter the larger ocean, China must pass through this island chain. The northern part of this island chain is currently controlled by the U.S.-Japan alliance. These areas can easily be blockaded during times of war since they are isolated frontally by Taiwan, which has still not been reunified with the motherland. Therefore, only Southeast Asia has passages through which China can securely and with relatively few constraints enter and exit the ocean. China can not only exit east to the Pacific Ocean, it can moreover enter the Indian Ocean to the west through this area, which will be very beneficial to China's development and utilization of space on seas and oceans in the new century. . . .

Every form of regional economic cooperation has emerged one after another following the conclusion of the Cold War and along with the development of economic globalization. As a leading power on the rise, if China wants to obtain a seat at the table in the midst of intense international competition, it must vigorously strengthen regional economic integration. ... Southeast Asia...has naturally become important for China's promotion of regional economic cooperation. ...Economic and trade cooperation between China and ASEAN countries has become increasingly close along with the full-speed development of China's economy. ...These kind of circumstances have determined that it is appropriate for China to adopt the geostrategy of "economics are the priority and politics will follow; economics will carry forward and spur politics" in Southeast Asia.

*FBIS translation: Document ID: CPP20030505000219*

## Chinese Maritime Strategy: the Basic Meaning and Background Analysis

*Theoretical Horizon, Journal of the China Marxism Research Foundation, Issue 6, 2016*

*By Han Aiyong, Assistant Professor, Institute of International Strategic Studies, Central Party School*

On July 30, 2013, on the construction of maritime power for the eighth collective study of the Central Political Bureau, General Secretary Xi Jinping made a detailed discussion of the seas and pointed out that “the construction of maritime power is an important part of constructing of the socialism with Chinese characteristics.”

### I. The Basic Meaning of China’s Maritime Strategy

This paper argues that China has not only formed its own maritime strategy, but its meaning is clear. This can be determined from the report of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the government work report for four consecutive years, and the meetings of the Central Political Bureau.

Although China’s maritime strategy is still in the process of preparation and development, its specific meaning is highly continuous and consistent. The strategy can be summarized as “one goal,” i.e. “to construct a strong maritime power [and] to expand the blue economic space. ... all the national strategic planning is to serve the ultimate goal of realizing the Chinese Dream, which is the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation, and the “Two One Hundred Years” goal.<sup>1</sup> In other words, building a maritime power is the goal of China’s maritime strategy, and this goal is only a means and a path to achieve the Chinese dream.

### II. The Background of China’s Maritime Strategy

As the China’s maritime strategy goes from fuzzy to clear, the public might need an answer as to why China is putting forward its own maritime strategy now. There are generally four arguments to this question:

First, the lack of maritime strategy has been China’s “Achilles’ heel” which has harmed China greatly. Therefore, putting forward a maritime strategy is the reflection and make up for the history of lacking of one. As early as August 28, 1949, when the Chairman Mao Zedong met with his commander Zhang Aiping, he pointed out that from the Opium War in 1840 to the Sino-Japanese War of 1894 to the Beijing Invasion of 1900, all China’s enemies are coming from the sea. China repeatedly suffered from defeats and exorbitant “compensation” demands due to governmental corruption and the lack of a capable navy. Based on his understanding, Chairman Mao believed that becoming a strong maritime power is the key to safeguarding national security as well as the country’s maritime rights, and the navy is the most important element to realize these goals.

Second, to deal with the increasingly fierce territorial disputes, China needs to take the initiative. China has eight maritime neighbors, and there are maritime territorial disputes with all of them. China’s jurisdiction claim over the sea area is 3 million square kilometers, but the disputed sea area makes up to 1.5 million square kilometers. The disputes over maritime rights and interests has been dragging too long, and has become a real obstacle to developing stable and healthy relations between China and neighboring countries. With this in mind, China is required to clearly declare its own maritime rights and interests, and introduce an effective maritime strategy.

Third, after 30 years of rapid economic development, China’s sustainable development is facing increasing pressure on resources. Therefore, maritime resource development is imperative. The reality is that China’s per capita land area is only 0.008 square kilometers,

well below the world's per capita level of 0.3 square kilometers. China uses 7 percent of the world's cultivated area to support 22 percent of the world's population. China's maritime resources, including a wide range of maritime life, oil and gas, solid minerals, renewable energy, coastal tourism and other rich resources, have development potentials. ...In order for China to achieve sustainable development, exploring and venturing into the ocean have become an inevitable trend.

Fourth, China has geographical maritime advantages. From the Yalu River estuary northward to the Beilun River southward, the Chinese mainland coastline is 18,000 km long. The island coastline is up to 14,000 km, with more than 160 gulfs larger than 10 square kilometers. The deep water coastline suitable for port construction is 400 km. These factors provide a natural geographical convenience for China to venture into the ocean.

After 30 years of reform and opening up, China has transformed itself from a traditional agricultural country to a maritime one, and its economic structure has changed from an autarkical economy to an export-oriented economy that heavily depends on the seas and maritime routes. In other words, the determinant of whether a country is a maritime one or not depends on its economic structure, rather than its geographical factors. Looking back into the history of the great powers, the prosperity of the great powers require the seas, and it is even more so for maritime countries. This is the fundamental reason for China to introduce its maritime strategy at this moment.

In the foreseeable future, China's maritime lifeline is mainly the line of "South China Sea - Malacca Strait, Aden Bay." People often use the "Malacca dilemma" to describe the issue of China's maritime lifeline. It refers to the challenges to national development and security introduced by the vulnerable nature of the channel in the time of peace. First of all, the vulnerability of the lifeline leads to the fragility of national strategies. It allows other big countries to bargain with us and raise the transaction costs. India, for example, believes that it is in a position to play an important role in transportation and security in the Indian Ocean. Therefore, the control of strategic positions by the Indian Navy allows India to bargain in the international competition. The second challenge is non-traditional security threats. According to the International Maritime Bureau data for 2012, there were 114 cases of piracy in the vicinity of the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca; 99 in the vicinity of the Red Sea, Somalia and the Gulf of Aden, 33 out of the Indian Ocean, 246 cases in total, accounting for 72 percent of the piracy cases worldwide (341). The third challenge comes from small countries involved in wars or suffering from natural disasters. These could also seriously affect the security of the channel.

Overseas areas with major interests are also a pressing issue. With the formation of China's all-round open-up and especially the construction of an open economy, more and more people are engaging the world and expanding Chinese capital and assets. According to estimation, by 2015, the population of the overseas Chinese is more than 50 million. The overseas Chinese assets are worth more than 4 trillion U.S. dollars. The economic sector they have formed and their development, prosperity and stability are directly related to the fate of China's large overseas assets. November 29, 2014, General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out at the Foreign Affairs Work Conference the need "to effectively safeguard national overseas interests, continuously improve the ability and level of protection, and strengthen the protection efforts." Premier Li Keqiang, for the first time, introduced the notion of "expediting the protection of overseas interests" in the government work report this year, reflecting the Party and the nation's utmost attention to the overseas interests.

### III. Conclusion

It has taken China nearly 20 years to formulate its maritime strategy. China published *China's Maritime Agenda* in the 21st Century in 1996. It was the first time China systematically

planned and introduced the concepts of “effective maintenance of national maritime rights and interests, the rational development of maritime resources, and effective protection the maritime ecological environment. To achieve the sustainable and coordinational development of maritime industries.” In 2003, the State Council issued *the Outline of the National Maritime Economic Development Plan*, which clarified the strategic plan of “gradually building our country into a maritime power.” The responsibility given by history makes China’s maritime strategy far more than the traditional concept of sea power. The strategy essentially serves the fulfillment of *the Chinese Dream and the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation* and serves as the connector of the fate of all mankind. Although China’s maritime economic activity and overseas interests have long been extended to the whole world and has formed an export-oriented economic structure that depends on the seas and sea corridors, the strategic planning and maritime behaviors of China are mainly to serve the goal of expanding the blue economic space.

- 1 The first One Hundred Years: By the time of 2021, the 100th anniversary of founding of the CCP, the goal of achieving a moderately well-off society in an all-round way will be realized.  
The second One Hundred Years: By the time of 2049, the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC, the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation will be achieved.

The two articles taken together and in comparison with one another provide a number of interesting insights.

1. Both underline the centrality of Southeast Asia and the maritime domain in Chinese strategic thinking—first as a weak link in a chain of containment being forged by the United States and then as an arena where Chinese rights and interests can be actualized.
2. The 2003 article identifies the ASEAN countries as providing opportunities for economic cooperation. The goal, aside from economic benefits, was to build cooperative ties and cultivate friendly relations before the United States could consolidate and entrench its influence in the region.
3. The 2003 article stresses that “economics are the priority and politics will follow; economics will carry forward and spur politics.” This can be interpreted as China’s intention to play down the political disputes between itself and ASEAN countries by creating economic interdependency.
4. The 2003 article proposes China create a “strategic border” in Southeast Asia by increasing its connectivity with the region stressing multilateralism. In short, China was playing strategic defense seeking to frustrate and preempt America’s strategic threat.
5. The later 2013 article, however, stresses pursuing China’s unilateral objectives. The same theme

appears in reports produced by the government and the CCP between 2013 and 2016 with repeated use of the phrase “firmly safeguarding national maritime rights and interests.” China can now be far more assertive because it possessed the capabilities to support such a policy.

6. The 2013 article stresses China’s need to expand “the blue economic area,” i.e. establish China’s control over the South China Sea. The author argues that due to the current economic structure of China in which the Chinese economy heavily depends on overseas markets, imported raw materials, and overseas investments, safeguarding China’s maritime rights has become a national security imperative.
7. The change in tone between the two articles with regard to the ASEAN countries is striking. The 2003 article proposes a multilateral approach where China, in order to continue its economic development, needs to cooperate with the ASEAN countries to form a relatively peaceful zone. The arguments and perspectives in the 2013 article become more forceful. The perspective shifts from multilateral cooperation to unilateral assertion where China aims to further its own economic and security interests with little regard for ASEAN preferences. The 2003 article emphasizes economic ties to frustrate American strategic designs whereas the 2013 article stresses the importance of controlling the maritime space in China’s economic and strategic interest.