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Quantifying Maritime Power: A Systematic Index of China's Maritime Projection in Six Strategic Regions

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ABSTRACT

Maritime power constitutes a central component of national power, enabling states to project influence beyond their borders. Contemporary maritime power projection does not focus on naval capabilities alone, encompassing diplomacy, commercial infrastructure, control of supply chains and resources, and even grey-zone activities. This study introduces the Maritime Power Projection Index (MPPI) to assess China's maritime power projection across six strategically significant regions between 2012–2024. The findings reveal a clear regional hierarchy: China's maritime presence is strongest in the South China Sea, followed by the Indian Ocean and East Asia, the Mediterranean and South Atlantic, and limited engagement in the Arctic. Overall, the analysis underscores China's evolving role as a global maritime actor, highlighting the multidimensional nature of maritime power in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS

China maritime power projection; South China Sea; East China Sea; Indian Ocean; Mediterranean; Arctic; South Atlantic

Introduction

For centuries, maritime power has remained a critical component of a state's ability to project power, control sea lines of communication (SLOCs) and facilitate the deployment of military force beyond national borders.[1] Traditionally associated with naval strength, maritime power today encompasses a broader set of military and economic capabilities that enable states to secure maritime domains, protect critical infrastructure, ensure freedom of navigation, and safeguard overseas interests.[2] Hence, from a strategic perspective, strong naval and broader maritime capacities have historically shifted regional balances of power, deterred rivals, and supported security commitments.

In the contemporary globalised world, characterised by deep market integration and economic interdependence, the control over maritime routes ensures access to resources and markets and contributes directly to a country's national prosperity, marking a significant economic dimension to maritime power.[3] Similar to maritime empires in the past, globalisation further reinforced maritime

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[1]Pradeep Rathnayake, *Maritime Security and Strategy: Perspectives on Policy, Naval Power, and Strategic Security* (Springer Nature, 2025); Linton F. Brooks, 'Naval Power and National Security: The Case for the Maritime Strategy' (1986) 11(2) International Security 58–88. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/446283.

[2]Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, 'Beyond Seablindness: A New Agenda for Maritime Security Studies' (2017) 93(6) International Affairs 1293–1311. https://doi.org/10.53963/pjmr.2019.004.1.

[3]Hasim Turker, 'Charting a Course in Troubled Waters: Towards a New Cold War in Global Commons' (2024) 11(1) Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs 51–75. https://doi.org/10.1177/23477970241230372.

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primacy and the projection of power along fundamental sea passageways, intensifying struggles for access to resources and control of maritime networks.[4]

Alongside this economic dimension, maritime power also has a geopolitical dimension, encompassing geographical locations, control over strategic maritime areas (chokepoints) essential to global supply chains, commercial shipping routes, coastal infrastructure, and shipbuilding.[5] Ultimately, these elements shape states' ability to secure maritime interests and exercise influence across regions.

Following this broader understanding of maritime power, the United States has long been regarded as the strongest maritime power of the twenty-first century, maintaining an unmatched global reach, securing vital sea lanes, and projecting power across multiple regions simultaneously in support of its national interests. However, the dominance of the United States has increasingly been challenged by the rapid rise of China as a maritime actor, marking a significant shift in the international balance of power. China's maritime capabilities have been a prominent concern in U.S. and other states' national strategy documents, especially in reference to the Indo-Pacific region.[6]

China's transformation into a maritime power did not occur abruptly. Beginning in the 1990s and accelerating in the 2000s, Chinese leaders increasingly recognised the strategic importance of the maritime domain.[7] Both Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao considered that, in the long run, the PLAN should gradually focus on improving its far-seas capabilities.[8] China's concept of maritime power (haiyang qiangguo 海洋强国) has been emphasised since the 2012 Party Congress, framing it as essential for national defence, economic development, and global influence.[9] It was, however, under Xi Jinping that China emerged as a blue-water naval power. With the Belt and Road Initiative, the PLA Navy modernisation, expanded strategic partnerships, market access, and energy security China envisioned a new and compact *grand* strategy to respond to the ambition of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.[10]

As a result, for the first time since World War II, the primary friction points in great-power competition are maritime, where a potentially revisionist China increasingly challenges the United States' enduring maritime superiority, despite Beijing having pursued primarily asymmetric capabilities to offset Washington's global 'blue water' advantages.[11] China's approach to maritime power integrates the navy, maritime law-enforcement agencies, and civilian actors, manifesting in increased assertiveness and the use of grey-zone tactics such as artificial island militarisation, fishing militia and coast guard operations against foreign vessels.[12] In parallel, China has asserted its

[4]Kevin Blachford, 'Ocean Flows and Chains: Sea Power and Maritime Empires within IR Theory' (2024) 37(1) Cambridge Review of International Affairs 44–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2022.2137466.

[5]Xue Wang, Debin Du and Yan Peng, 'Assessing the Importance of the Marine Chokepoint: Evidence from Tracking the Global Marine Traffic' (2023) 16(1) *Sustainability* 384 https://doi.org/10.3390/su16010384; Basil Germond, 'The Geopolitical Dimension of Maritime Security' (2015) 54 Marine Policy 137–142. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2014.12.013.

[6]Maria Papageorgiou and Zeno Leoni, 'The Five Eyes Allies and China: Assessing Threat Perceptions and Power Dynamics' (2025) 30(4) Journal of Chinese Political Science 647–677. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-025-09913-w.

[7]Edward Sing Yue Chan, 'China's Discourse of Maritime Power: A Thematic Analysis' (2025) 34(153) Journal of Contemporary China 432–450 https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2024.2319064; Nan Li, 'The Evolution of China's Naval Strategy and Capabilities: From 'Near Coast' and 'Near Seas' to 'Far Seas' (2009) 5(2) Asian Security 144–169 https://doi.org/10.1080/14799850902886567; Hu Bo, *Chinese Maritime Power in the Twenty-First Century: Strategic Planning, Policy and Predictions* (Routledge, 2019).

[8]Zhengyu Wu, 'Towards Naval Normalcy: 'Open Seas Protection' and Sino-US Maritime Relations' (2019) 32(4) The Pacific Review 666–693 https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2018.1553890.

[9]Mathieu Duchâtel and Alexandre Sheldon Duplaix, *Blue China: Navigating the Maritime Silk Road to Europe* (European Council on Foreign Relations 2022).

[10]Alba Iulia Catrinel Popescu, "The 'China's Dream'—The Grand Strategy of Transforming China into a Global Maritime Power" (2024) 10(1) *Cogent Social Sciences* 2,414,873 https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2414873;Nuno Morgado and Éva D. Druhalóczki, "Traditional Worldviews, Strategic Culture, and Revolutionary Mentality: The Case of People's Republic of China". *China Report* (2024) 60(4): 361–377. https://doi.org/10.1177/00094455241288062. ISSN 0009-4455.

[11]Jonathan D. Caverley and Peter Dombrowski, 'Too Important to Be Left to the Admirals: The Need to Study Maritime Great-Power Competition', in *Security Studies in a New Era of Maritime Competition* (Routledge 2023) 1–22.

[12]Edward Sing Yue Chan, 'Beyond Mahanianism: The Evolution of China's Policy Discussion on Sea Power Development' (2022) 18(1) Asian Security 38–55 https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2021.1949583.

maritime presence not only in its near abroad but also in distant waters, such as the Indian Ocean, South Atlantic and the Arctic.[13]

Yet scholarly assessments of China's maritime or sea power diverge. Some scholars view China as already possessing many of the attributes of a strong maritime power and becoming an increasingly capable and clear competitor to the United States[14] while others regard such assessments as overstated.[15] Another point of debate is whether China can project power abroad, with some seeing its Navy as focused on proximate seas[16]; while others see its overseas influence increasing and expanding, especially due to its transnational commercial port network.[17]

These debates highlight a central limitation in existing research: the absence of a systematic, comparative assessment of how China projects maritime power across different regions using a consistent analytical framework. To address this gap, this study develops an analytical index of maritime power projection (the MPPI) and applies it across selected regions, offering a consistent comparative assessment of the scope, intensity, and strategic variation of China's global maritime activities. The MPPI conceptualises maritime power projection as a state's capacity to establish, sustain, and exercise maritime influence in and beyond its territorial waters through the combined use of military, geoeconomic, diplomatic, and hybrid instruments. Rather than equating power projection solely with naval force, the index understands it as the ability to shape maritime environments, secure access to strategic sea lines of communication, support overseas operations, protect economic interests, and influence the behaviour of other actors across distant maritime regions. This conceptualisation therefore extends beyond classical Mahanian approaches centred primarily on naval strength and geography by recognising that contemporary maritime power projection increasingly relies on the interaction of military, economic, diplomatic, and hybrid capabilities.

The findings of the MPPI suggest a clear regional hierarchy in China's maritime power projection. It is strongest in the South China Sea, where all indicators of maritime power projection are present to a high degree. It is then followed by the Indian Ocean, important for energy security and naval presence, while in the East China Sea, although its score remains medium, constrained by U.S. alliances.[18] Beyond Asia, China's engagement is more selective: the Mediterranean shows moderate activity through port investments and occasional deployments, the South Atlantic focuses on economic infrastructure and fishing, and the Arctic remains a peripheral and limited theatre.

Literature Review

The literature on maritime power has deep historical roots that predate modern naval theory. One of the earliest systematic formulations of maritime power can be traced to Fernando Oliveira (1507–

[13]Kamrul Hossain, 'China's BRI Expansion and Great Power Ambition: The Silk Road on the Ice Connecting the Arctic' (2019) 3 *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies* F3OSGP; Christopher Len, 'China's twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative, Energy Security and SLOC Access' (2015) 11(1) *Maritime Affairs: Journal of the National Maritime Foundation of India* 1–18.

[14]Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to US Maritime Strategy* (Naval Institute Press 2018); Lungani Hlongwa, 'China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative: A Quest for Sea Power' (2020) 48(2) Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies 21–37.

[15]Zhengyu Wu, 'Grand Strategy and China's Sea Power: A Review Essay' (2022) 45(6–7) *Journal of Strategic Studies* 1071–1082 https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2021.1903883; Marshall J. Beier, 'Bear Facts and Dragon Boats: Rethinking the Modernization of Chinese Naval Power' (2005) 26(2) Contemporary Security Policy 287–316 https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260500190393.

[16]Andrew S. Erickson, 'Essence of Distinction: The Ends, Ways, and Means of China's Military Maritime Quest' (2024) 6 Frontiers in Political Science 1448241 doi: https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1448241; Nguyen Huu Quyet, 'Chinese Strategy in the South China Sea: A Growing Quest for Vital Economic and Strategic Interests' (2023) 186(3) World Affairs 687–716 https://doi.org/10.1177/00438200231181141; John Robert Wood, 'China's Maritime Strategy and National Security in the South China Sea' (2021) 36(3) *Intelligence and National Security* 444–450 https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2019.1620548; Isaac B. Kardon, 'China's Global Maritime Access: Alternatives to Overseas Military Bases in the Twenty-First Century' (2022) 31(5) Security Studies 885–916 https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2022.2137429.

[17]Isaac B. Kardon and Wendy Leutert, 'Pier Competitor: China's Power Position in Global Ports' (2022) 46(4) International Security 9–47 https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00433.

[18]Takashi Hosoda, 'Considering a New Geopolitical Analysis on Japan-China Equivocal Relations: Why Is Ocean-Space Utilized as an Arena for "Competition" by Agents?' in N. Morgado (ed.), *Geopolitics in the Twenty-First Century—Territories, Identities, and Foreign Policies* (Nova Science Publishers, 2021).

1581), a Portuguese Dominican friar who formulated geostrategic principles for the control of the sea lanes and the role of bases, highlighting the practice of naval [just] warfare, using the know-how of the Renaissance period.[19] This reasoning was later articulated into maritime *grand* strategy thinking with many aspects replicated by A. T. Mahan centuries later.[20] Early modern thinkers such as Sir Walter Raleigh further advanced these ideas by arguing that mastery of the seas ensures control over commerce and global influence while Mahan emphasized control of maritime chokepoints as key to global dominance.[21] Over the years, scholarly understandings of sea or maritime power have evolved from classical notions of naval dominance to encompass economic, strategic, symbolic, and cooperative dimensions, reflecting the complex ways in which states project influence.

While early formulations focused primarily on naval dominance, scholarly understandings of maritime power have progressively expanded. Modelski and Thompson,[22] adopting a broadly Mahanian perspective, defined sea power as a state's capacity to achieve and maintain command of the seas, which enabled states such as Portugal, Netherlands, Britain and the United States to exert global influence. In their account, navies function not only as instruments of power but also as indicators of a state's position within the international system. However, subsequent scholarship has further expanded what the term maritime power entails.

Grove[23] emphasises the political and strategic dimensions of maritime power, arguing that maritime capabilities derive meaning from the objectives they serve and are best understood as instruments of national policy. On the other hand, Till[24] highlighted the economic dimension of sea power, arguing that globalisation depends fundamentally on maritime shipping and particularly container transport which underpins global trade and, by extension, the international economic order. Expanding on this perspective Leoni et al.[25] situate sea power within a broader conception of maritime order encompasses trade, legal regimes, strategic influence, and resource control. This approach moves beyond material capabilities to highlight governance and institutional control over maritime spaces, reinforcing the argument that maritime power remains central not only to security and economic considerations but also to the regulation of global commons.

Beyond military and economic dimensions, scholars have also drawn attention to the symbolic and geopolitical aspects of maritime power, Mobley[26] emphasized the symbolic dimension of sea power, were naval operations, like the *Beira Patrol*, may yield limited military results but project significant political influence by advancing Britain's objectives. From a geopolitical standpoint, Flint[27] asserts that states employ naval power to control both proximate and distant waters, highlighting that the reach of their naval capabilities increases their power. Colby,[28] similarly, conceived maritime power as a nation's overall relationship with the sea, including naval strength, technological superiority, and moral leadership upon the oceans, listing the USA as an example. Lastly, Sakhuja[29] has conceptualised maritime power as a multidimensional construct encompassing military, economic, political, and diplomatic elements.

[19]Fernando Oliveira, *Arte da Guerra do Mar—Estratégia e Guerra Naval no Tempo dos Descobrimentos* (Edições 70 2008).
[20]Nuno Morgado, 'Portugal as an Old Sea Power: Exploring EU Membership as Geopolitical Design' (2021) 8 *Journal of Territorial & Maritime Studies* 59.
[21]Popescu (n 10).
[22]George Modelski and William R. Thompson, 'Seapower and Global Politics', in *Seapower in Global Politics, 1494–1993* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK 1988) 3–26.
[23]Eric Grove, *The Future of Sea Power* (Taylor & Francis 1990).
[24]Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2004).
[25]Zeno Leoni, João Vitor Tossini, William de Sousa Moreira and Sarah Tzinieris, 'A Neglected Region? The Strategic Value of the South Atlantic' (2025) 48(1) *The Washington Quarterly* 79–95 https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2025.2480518.
[26]Arthur Scott Mobley Jr., *Progressives in Navy Blue: Maritime Strategy, American Empire, and the Transformation of US Naval Identity, 1873–1898* (University of Wisconsin–Madison 2015).
[27]Flint, Colin. *Near and far waters: The geopolitics of seapower*. Stanford University Press 2024.
[28]Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (Yale University Press 2021).
[29]Vijay Sakhuja, *Asian Maritime Power in the Twenty-First Century: Strategic Transactions China, India and Southeast Asia* (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute 2011).

Yet, despite the extent of the literature, the terms *maritime power* and *naval power* are often used interchangeably. A crucial conceptual clarification within this expanding literature is the distinction between *sea power* and *maritime power*. Kotani[30] draws a distinction between sea power and maritime power in operational terms, with the former referring to traditional military naval strength, whereas maritime power encompasses broader strategic functions, including the protection of sea lines of communication, energy security, international maritime cooperation, and operational flexibility. Maritime power, therefore, is not solely a matter of ships or state policy, but one of alignment with economic systems and the societies that sustain them.

These broader conceptual debates have informed scholarship on China's rise as a maritime power, along with the country's historical accounts. Ren[31] argues that its dual continental and maritime character presents distinctive strategic challenges, with a maritime focus on security, peaceful development, cooperative engagement and protecting global interests. Shi[32] maintains that Chinese sea power extends beyond military assets, being shaped by domestic politics and international perceptions, and cautions against the uncritical application of 'Western maritime concepts'. On the contrary, Chan[33] sees that despite Chinese officials' maritime exceptionalism, their tactics and practices resemble those of earlier empires.

Drawing on Chinese scholarly and bureaucratic discussions, Chan[34] identifies three schools of thought that have reshaped China's approach to sea power: the 'harmonious school', which stresses non-military tools and broader maritime governance; the 'administrative school', which prioritizes domestic maritime law enforcement, resource management, and legal–bureaucratic control; and the 'balancing school', which focuses on diplomacy, especially managing relations with the United States and ASEAN through a 'two-track' strategy. These perspectives suggest that China's maritime strategy is multidimensional, combining naval modernisation with governance, law enforcement, and diplomatic pressure. This framework offers a more comprehensive explanation of China's maritime behaviour than classical Mahanian approaches, which struggle to account for grey-zone tactics and the integration of civilian and military actors.

When it comes to China's maritime priorities, geographical proximity is evidently important, with the Yellow Sea, the South China Sea, and the East China Sea being at the top of the list.[35] Beyond its immediate neighbourhood, the Indian Ocean, specifically the 'String of Pearls' and the Gwadar Port, has been elevated as a priority region for China due to energy resources.[36] China's latest increasing interest in the Arctic Ocean[37] and in the Pacific Ocean is usually wrapped by Chinese scholars' literature as 'a cooperative development model' that seeks cooperation with countries in the region.[38] Taken together, these studies illustrate a progressively expanding maritime agenda that reflects both regional imperatives and China's broader strategic ambitions. However, while scholars have examined individual dimensions and regions in detail, there remains limited systematic and comparative analysis of how China projects maritime power across different regions using a consistent analytical framework.

[30]Tetsuo Kotani, 'Reluctant Seapower: Geopolitics in Asia and Japan's Maritime Strategy', in *Twenty-First Century Seapower*, 1st ed. (Routledge 2012).
[31]Ren Xiaofeng, 'China's Maritime Security Policy Making and Maritime Confidence-Building Measures', in *Twenty-First Century Seapower*, 1st ed. (Routledge 2012).
[32]Shi Xiaoqin, *An Analysis of China's Concept of Sea Power* (Institute for Security and Development Policy 2011).
[33]Sing Yue Chan (n 7).
[34]Sing Yue Chan (n 12).
[35]Popescu (n 10); Wood (n 16) Kejin Zhao and Hao Zhang, 'Projecting Political Power: China's Changing Maritime Strategy' (2019) 12(2) The Chinese Journal of International Politics 229–261 https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/poz004.
[36]Khalid Manzoor Butt and Sadaf Jan Siddiqui, 'Growing Chinese Presence in the Indian Ocean' (2021) 41(2) Strategic Studies 64–81; Riya Sultana and Ronen A. Cohen, 'China's Red Sea Gambit: A Paradigm Shift of NSAGs and the Maritime Strategic Dilemma in the Middle East' (2025) 12(1) Cogent Arts & Humanities 2495475.
[37]Yitong Chen, 'China's Arctic Policy and Engagement: Review and Prospects' (2023) 18(1) Asia Policy 29–38 10.1353/asp.2023.0005.
[38]Yen-Chiang Chang, 'Toward Better Maritime Cooperation—A Proposal from the Chinese Perspective' (2022) 53(2–3) Ocean Development & International Law 85–104 https://doi.org/10.1080/00908320.2022.2068704.

China as a Maritime Power Over the Years

China's maritime concepts have evolved significantly throughout the centuries. Early maritime activity in ancient China was basically fishing and coastal trade. Later, it expanded into sophisticated shipbuilding and long-distance navigation, as seen in the Tang–Song maritime networks and Zheng He's voyages; however, this progress later declined, as piracy, external threats, and a land-focused worldview pushed China toward isolation.[39] In the 1800s, defeats by Western powers and Japan forced China to reconsider its Sino-centric assumptions, recognize the strategic and economic importance of sea power, and pursue naval modernization despite domestic instability and political constraints.[40]

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, maritime strategy under Mao remained limited, rooted in a land-centric defence posture.[41] After 1976, Deng prioritised domestic modernization, and for maritime development, he adopted a 'shelve disputes' approach to encourage joint development with neighbouring states.[42] Deng also introduced the concept of 'offshore defence', arguing that China's major political and economic centres along the coast made maritime security essential, thus expanding the navy's operational range, deepening coastal defence, and strengthening China's ability to protect its territory, islands, and maritime resources.[43]

Later, Jiang Zemin became the first CCP (Chinese Communist Party) leader to set a national objective for developing Chinese sea power, declaring China's ratification of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).[44] He also stressed the strategic importance of the oceans, stating that 'we must recognize oceans from the height of strategy and strengthen national maritime concepts' (Jiang Zemin, 2003: 182). However, despite these initiatives, his overall maritime outlook remained largely continentalist.[45]

A more pronounced maritime orientation emerged under Hu Jintao, China accelerated the expansion and modernisation of its navy, aligning to become a *'strong maritime state'* (haiyang qiangguo), a concept first introduced in the 2003 National Maritime Economic Development Proposal.[46] Hu promoted ideas such as the 'harmonious sea' and called for stronger international maritime cooperation, signalling that China needs to enhance its oceanic capabilities.[47]

Nevertheless, the key turning point came at the 18th Party Congress in November 2012,[48] when the CCP declared that China 'should enhance our capacity for exploiting marine resources, develop the marine economy, protect the marine ecological environment, resolutely safeguard China's maritime rights and interests, and build China into a maritime power'.[49] This statement set the strategic tone for the new era, anchoring the shift toward a more proactive and expansive maritime posture that would later define China's approach under Xi Jinping.

Since Xi Jinping came to office, China's grand strategy has undergone a clear and sweeping shift toward the sea, with maritime power becoming an integral component.[50] To support its rise

[39]Lixin Sun, 'Chinese Maritime Concepts' (2010) 8(3) Asia Europe Journal 327–338 https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-010-0282-7.
[40]Sun (n 39).
[41]Saul Bernard Cohen, *Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC 2014).
[42]Zhao and Zhang (n 35), 'Projecting Political Power: China's Changing Maritime Strategy' (2019) 12(2) The Chinese Journal of International Politics 229–261.
[43]Sun (n 39).
[44]Howard Wang, 'Toward a Sea-Power Strategy' (2024) 77(3–4) Naval War College Review 41–59.
[45]Howard Wang, 'Toward a Sea-Power Strategy—Chinese Communist Party Debates and Consensus Building under Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping' (2024) 77(3) Naval War College Review art 5. https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol77/iss3/5.
[46]State Council, Quanguo haiyang jingji fazhan guihua gangyao [Outline of the National Maritime Economic Development proposal (NMEDP)] (Beijing 2003).
[47]KZhao and Zhang (n 35).
[48]'Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at the 18th Party Congress'. Xinhua. 17 November 2012. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/special/18cpcnc/2012-11/17/c_131981259.htm.
[49]PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 18th Party Congress_Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China.
[50]Zhao and Hao Zhang, 2019; Thomas J. Bickford, *Haiyang Qiangguo: China as a Maritime Power* (2016).

as a leading global power, China has rapidly expanded its maritime capabilities with the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) and by building and financing related infrastructure across Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Europe. These projects enhance China's maritime reach and strengthen its position along critical trade routes for importing oil, iron ore, copper, and other strategic resources positioned as projects of maritime connectivity.[51] As a resource-dependent maritime nation, China closely monitors the security of these waters for its energy security and economic growth. The BRI and MSR have a complementary aspect within China's land-sea cooperation approach, emphasising the development of land-based and maritime economies, aiming to reach a balance among resource use, environmental protection, and economic growth in both.[52]

These strategic shifts have been accompanied by a phased transformation of the PLAN. The first (2000–2010) focusing on operations within the first island chain, fleet modernization, and personnel training, the second (2010–2020) sought to project power beyond the first island chain by strengthening combat capabilities and acquiring aircraft carriers and the final one to transform the PLA Navy into a blue-water force centred on carrier-led power projection.[53] These phases illustrate a gradual but deliberate expansion from regional defence toward global maritime presence, aligned with China's broader strategic ambitions. More than that China's Military Strategy[54] in 2015 clearly states that *'the traditional mentality that land outweighs sea must be abandoned, and great importance has to be attached to managing the seas and oceans and protecting maritime rights and interests { . . . .} for building itself into a maritime power'*.

Nevertheless, the development of Chinese maritime strategic thinking has also expanded to encompass governance, legal, and normative dimensions that go beyond traditional military and economic considerations. The Chinese government, by presenting its Maritime Community with a Shared Future (MCSF)[55] as a guiding principle, aims to articulate a cooperative vision of maritime governance that reinforces its international legitimacy and promotes its role not as an assertive actor but as a responsible power,[56] which Xu and Tan[57] argue serves as an instrument for China to strengthen its leadership role in the international system, while also embedding maritime power within the CCP's broader global vision and advancing a new normative order. Besides, as Chan (2025)[58] demonstrates, Chinese academic debates on maritime strategy largely converge around themes of governance, naval power, maritime rights, economic development, and legal frameworks, reflecting broad alignment with official political discourse that places greater emphasis on military capabilities and strategic implementation. Yet, maritime power projection continues to be assessed primarily through material capabilities, including fleet size and composition, control over sea lanes and the capacity to sustain operations over distance.[59]

[51]Morgan Clemens, 'The Maritime Silk Road and the PLA' (2015) 15(6) *China Brief* 7–10. https://jamestown.org/the-maritime-silk-road-and-the-pla-part-one/

[52]The State Council. The People's Republic of China (2017). *Full text of the Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative*. [Online] URL: https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2017/06/20/content_281475691873460.htm [Accessed: 01.04.2026]

[53]Dharmendra Kumar, Angela Z. Gapa and Bibek Chand, 'China's Maritime Geoeconomic Strategy in the Western Indian Ocean Region' (2025) Journal of Asian and African Studies 00219096251345460.

[54]The State Council. The People's Republic of China (2015). *China's Military Strategy (full text)*. https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2015/05/27/content_281475115610833.htm [Accessed: 01.04.2026].

[55]State Council of PRC. (2017). Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2017/06/20/content_281475691873460.htm and MFA PRC (2024). Coexisting in Harmony and Working Together to Bring Global Ocean Governance to a Higher Level. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbzhd/202411/t20241126_11533290.html.

[56]Maria Papageorgiou and Daniella da Silva Nogueira de Melo. 'China as a responsible power amid the COVID-19 crisis: Perceptions of partners and adversaries on twitter'. *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* (2022) 15 (2):159–188 https://doi.org/10.1007/s40647-022-00344-y.

[57]Qi Xu and Ziyue Tan, 'Building a Maritime Community with a Shared Future: Scholarly Reflections on China's New Ocean Vision' (2023) 149 Marine Policy 105,508 10.1016/j.marpol.2023.105508.

[58]Chan (n 7).

[59]Erik Gartzke and Jon R. Lindsay. 'The influence of sea power on politics: domain-and platform-specific attributes of material capabilities' (2020). Security Studies 29 (4): 601–636 https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2020.1811450.

As Grove[60] argues, power projection is underpinned by the availability and effective deployment of physical assets at sea. In this regard, China's trajectory reflects a consistent effort to translate strategic ambition into material strength. Beijing has expanded both the scale and efficiency of its maritime forces and while its maritime strategy is increasingly articulated through governance and normative frameworks, its effectiveness ultimately rests on the accumulation and optimisation of its material capabilities.

Analytical Framework and Methodology

The contemporary study of maritime power has evolved far beyond its classical association with fleets and battles. Maritime power is now understood as a complex amalgam of naval, economic, geopolitical, and security dimensions. Since this study aims to provide a systematic analysis of China's maritime power projection across different regions, our framework builds on multiple theoretical and empirical perspectives.

The MPPI should be understood as an index of maritime power projection rather than as an exhaustive measure of maritime power in all its political, institutional, and normative dimensions. First, it draws on classical sea power theory, emphasizing naval capabilities such as military bases and exercises. Second, it incorporates modern interpretations of maritime geoeconomics, highlighting the strategic role of economic infrastructure and connectivity, where ports, shipping fleets, and sea lanes are not merely commercial assets but instruments of geopolitical influence.[61] Third, it accounts for the particularities of China's maritime approach as a multidimensional concept that integrates naval capabilities with merchant marine strength, scientific research, law enforcement, cultural diplomacy, economic influence and grey zone operations such as the use of fishing militias, to extend its maritime presence and strategic reach.[62] Building on these perspectives, this study develops an analytical tool, the Maritime Power Projection Index (MPPI), that combines the main elements identified as essential for assessing a state's maritime power projection.

By employing the term *maritime power* rather than *sea power*, we acknowledge that China's ambitions and reach extend beyond naval capabilities, encompassing economic, diplomatic, and infrastructural dimensions as well. The MPPI (Table 1) is composed of eight indicators grouped into four categories. Maritime geoeconomic indicators include commercial ports, port investments, control over maritime trade chokepoints and energy and critical resources dependencies. Military indicators cover military bases or dual-use ports and naval exercises, while the diplomatic indicators are naval port calls. Lastly, a hybrid category incorporates Chinese characteristics, including the presence and extent of operations of paramilitary and fishing militias.

All indicators are assigned equal weight, reflecting a balanced and methodologically parsimonious approach that enhances transparency and comparability across regions. Equal weighting is the most common weighting scheme in composite-indicator construction and provides a defensible baseline where there is no clear theoretical structure, expert consensus, or sufficient empirical basis for assigning differential weights.[63] Although we recognise that some components of maritime power projection, mainly military capabilities, may carry greater strategic significance in specific contexts, the present study treats all indicators as co-constitutive. For the operationalisation of these indicators, we use observable and measurable proxies to account for the operational activity for each year and then aggregate them as a total for the period under analysis from 2012 to 2024. The scores are then classified into three levels from 1–3 accounting for Low, Medium and High based on their observed magnitude or performance relative to the overall distribution.

[60]Erik Grove. The Future of Sea Power (1st ed.). 1990. Routledge.
[61]R. Bosneagu, 'Maritime Economy versus Maritime Geoeconomics' (2018) 21(1) *Scientific Bulletin 'Mircea cel Bătrân' Naval Academy*.
[62]Bickford (n 50).
[63]Salvatore Greco et al., 'On the Methodological Framework of Composite Indices: A Review of the Issues of Weighting, Aggregation, and Robustness' (2019) 141(1) Social Indicators Research 61–94 https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-017-1832-9.

Table 1. Maritime power projection index indicators and operationalisation

Dimension	Indicator	Definition	Low (1)	Medium (2)	High (3)
Military	Overseas Bases	Presence of military bases and dual-use ports	No base; ≤2 dual-use ports	No base; 3–5 dual-use ports	≥1 permanent base or ≥6 dual-use ports
Military	Naval Reach (Exercises)	Frequency of naval deployments and exercises	0–1/year (infrequent or one-off missions)	2–3/year (regular patrols, deployments, or exercises)	4+/year (sustained or frequent presence)
Geoeconomic	Commercial Port Presence	Number of Chinese-linked ports in region	1–2 ports	3–6 ports	7+ ports
Geoeconomic	Port Investment	Scale of port investments	Limited financial exposure; $0–1.9B	Substantial investment; $2.0–2.9B	Extensive investment; >$3B
Geoeconomic	Strategic Chokepoints	Degree of control or influence over maritime chokepoints	Transit only;	Indirect/shared access via agreements, partnerships, or equity stakes	Direct influence or control; ability to shape access and transit
Geoeconomic	Energy Dependency	Share of Chinese energy imports from countries in the region	<10%	10–30%	>30%
Diplomatic	Naval Diplomacy (Port calls)	Frequency of naval engagement (e.g. port visits)	Occasional visits (1–2 year); largely symbolic	Regular engagement (3–5/year); limited operational interaction	Frequent/institutionalised presence (6+/year); combined diplomatic and operational signalling
Hybrid	Grey-Zone Activity (Maritime Militia)	Scale and coercive use of maritime militia / fishing fleets	Occasional fishing activity; small fleets; no enforcement role	Regular presence; coordinated fleet operations; some militia/coast guard use	Large-scale, persistent presence; integrated militia/coast guard; quasi-enforcement in disputed waters

Source: Authors' conceptualisation.

In more detail, for the first indicator, military capabilities, we account for the number of overseas military bases and dual-use ports; this was measured using official and secondary defence sources.[64] Given China's limited number of overseas bases, its strategy prioritises dual-use ports capable of supporting refuelling, resupply, maintenance, and force deployment, enabling maritime power projection while serving as a more flexible and cost-effective substitute for formal military bases.[65] This coding aligns with naval strategy literature emphasising the importance of distributed access points for sustaining forward presence and power projection,[66] as well as arguments that flexible access agreements and logistics networks enable operational reach without formal basing.[67] While existing studies do not quantify overseas military presence and rarely establish fixed numerical thresholds they distinguish between different types of basing arrangements, variation in scale, permanence, and function.[68] Building on this literature, this study operationalises maritime military

[64]Belfer Centre (2023). Navigating China's Opportunistic Approach to Overseas Naval Base Acquisition https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/pantheon_files/files/publication/NavigatingChinasApproachtoOverseasNavalBaseAcquisition.pdf, Kardon, Wendy Leutert (n 17).

[65]The data included constant information with no significant changes over time except where a known change in basing status occurred, namely the opening of China's Djibouti base in 2017, or a new port established or an existing expanded; Kardon (n 16); Joel Wuthnow, Phillip C. Saunders and Ian Burns McCaslin, *PLA Overseas Operations in 2035: Inching Toward a Global Combat Capability* (2021). In *Strategic Forum* (No. 309, pp. 1–19). National Defense University Press.

[66]James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, 'History Rhymes: The German Precedent for Chinese Seapower' (2010) 54(1) Orbis 14–34 10.1016/j.orbis.2009.10.003; Till, Geoffrey. *Seapower: A guide for the twenty-first century*. (Routledge 2009).

[67]Alexander Cooley and Daniel H. Nexon, '"The Empire Will Compensate You": The Structural Dynamics of the US Overseas Basing Network' (2013) 11(4) *Perspectives on Politics* 1034–1050 doi: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592713002818.

[68]Yeo, Andrew, and Stacie Pettyjohn. 'Bases of Empire? The Logic of Overseas U.S. Military Base Expansion, 1870–2016' (2021) 40 (1) Comparative Strategy 18–35 https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2021.1853433.

presence through a tiered threshold model based on the number of overseas bases and dual-use ports, allowing for a more systematic comparison of power projection capabilities.

The second military indicator, naval reach (exercises)[69] is operationalised through the annual frequency of bilateral and multilateral naval exercises conducted in the region, involving either regional or extra-regional countries and operationalised based on adapting Selden's scoring of very significant (three exercises per year), significant (two exercises per year), moderate (one exercise per year), minor (less than one per year), and no participation.[70]

The commercial port presence indicator is measured by the number of ports in which Chinese entities hold ownership stakes, leases, or operational control in a regional country[71] while port investment captures the scale of financial commitments and is calibrated using cumulative financial commitments, with thresholds derived from the empirical distribution of Chinese overall overseas port financing. Given that Beijing's total global investment amounts to approximately '$24 billion in Chinese state-directed loans and grants for 363 seaport-related projects supporting 168 ports in 90 countries',[72] regional totals cluster within a relatively narrow range with thresholds at $1 billion, $2 and $3 billion therefore capturing meaningful variation between limited, moderate, and concentrated investment patterns, approximating China's global port footprint.

The strategic chokepoints indicator is coded based on the degree of access, partnership, or control over key maritime routes.[73] The three-tier coding of maritime chokepoint control is consistent with port governance literature that conceptualises control as a spectrum ranging from full public ownership to hybrid public–private concessions and private operation rather than a binary state.[74] This indicator also exhibits many constant points over the year as change is more difficult to occur annually.

The energy dependency indicator is calculated as the share of China's oil and gas imports[75] transiting a given region, defined as:

$$Dependency_{r,t} = \left(\frac{\sum_{i \in r} Import\ s_{i,t}}{\sum_{j} Import\ s_{j,t}} \right) \times 100$$

- $Dependency_{r,t}$ = energy dependency of China on region r in year t.
- $Import\ s_{i,t}$ = value (or volume) of Chinese oil and gas imports from country i in year t.
- $i \in r$ = all supplier countries belonging to region r.
- $\sum_{j} Import\ s_{j,t}$ = total Chinese energy imports from all countries in year t.

[69]Data from China's Military Diplomacy by Phillip C. Saunders and Melodie Ha https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/china-strategic-perspectives/19/, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/, US Department of Defence Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China (various years), Ministry of National Defense People's Republic of China, Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications By Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen.

[70]Zachary Selden, 'Balancing Against or Balancing With? The Spectrum of Alignment and the Endurance of American Hegemony' (2013) 22(2) *Security Studies* 330–364 https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2013.786918.

[71]Data from: AidData | AidData's Chinese-Financed Ports Overseas and Related Terminals (CPORTS) Dataset, Version 2.0, 2000–2025 and Tracking China's Control of Overseas Ports | Council on Foreign Relations and China Global Investment Tracker | American Enterprise Institute—AEI.

[72]Thome, L., Fedorochko, R., and Zhang, S. 2026. *Chinese-Financed Ports Overseas and Related Terminals (CPORTS) Dataset*, Version 2.0, 2000–2025.

[73]Data were collected from UNCTAD Review of Maritime Transport, Tracking China's Control of Overseas Ports | Council on Foreign Relations, https://www.cfr.org/articles/china-overseas-ports

[74]Mary R. Brooks and Kevin Cullinane. 'Governance models defined'. 2006 *Research in Transportation Economics* 17: 405–435; Laxe González, Fernando, Ricardo J. Sánchez, and Lorena Garcia-Alonso. 'The adaptation process in port governance: the case of the Latin countries in South America and Europe'. Journal of Shipping and Trade 1.1 (2016) https://doi.org/10.1186/s41072-016-0018-y.

[75]Data were collected from the World Bank's World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), aggregating Chinese oil and gas imports (HS codes for crude oil and gas HS 2709 and 2711) by country of origin and grouping them into geographic regions. This approach captures dependence on supplier regions rather than transit routes, ensuring a consistent and replicable measurement across time.

The naval diplomacy indicator measures the frequency of port visits[76] and conceptualises them as a blend of cooperation and coercion, whereby inherently military assets operate as forms of both expressive force signalling intent, alignment and political messaging and purposeful force, demonstrating readiness and the latent capacity to escalate short of war.[77] Military naval port calls are consistently operationalised in the literature as indicators of naval diplomacy intensity, with studies distinguishing in categories between episodic, routine and persistent engagement based on frequency of visits.[78] Albeit, no standardised numerical thresholds exist, and this study uses averages to capture variation in signalling intensity based on the qualitative categories above.

Lastly, the grey-zone activity indicator captures the scale and coordination of maritime militia and fishing fleets, by developing a proxy[79] that accounts for number of vessels (number of Chinese-flagged or associated vessels present in a given maritime area), persistence of presence (days vessels remain in contested or strategic waters per year), and evidence of state coordination (formation patterns, synchronised movement, and co-location with coast guard or naval assets).

Nevertheless, this index is not without limitations. Firstly, the classification into three levels simplifies variation across regions. Second, the scores are presented as conceptually qualitative categories and operationalised as quantitative rankings. Third, rapid recent developments may not be fully captured, particularly where data availability lags behind operational change. In addition, the data show enduring spatial patterns of influence rather than short-term fluctuations given that in some indicators the data remain static and constant for several years. Also, the indicators rely on heterogeneous data sources and temporal baselines, which may limit the index's ability to reflect the most recent dynamics in all regions. Finally, we recognise a degree of subjectivity in the selection of specific proxies for the coding of indicators.[80] However, we emphasise that the resulting scores should not be interpreted as absolute measures or precise cut-off points, but rather as indicative brackets that capture relative intensity and patterns of maritime power projection, enabling comparative ranking across regions. Despite these limitations, the MPPI provides a systematic, replicable, and empirical framework derived from conceptual considerations of what maritime power is that can be refined through additional indicators or application to other maritime powers in future research.

The regions selected for analysis represent maritime hotspots of strategic importance, each carrying distinct implications for China's rise. This variation encompasses different military, commercial, and strategic interests, while also capturing China's relationships with key regional actors and the differing strategic importance it assigns to each maritime space. The six cases include: South Atlantic, Indian Ocean, Arctic Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, East China and South China Sea. Although there are other important regions, such as the Persian Gulf or Red Sea, Pacific and North Atlantic, the focus on the aforementioned regions captures a variety of maritime spaces ranging from proximate to China's borders to overseas areas and can also indicate its varying maritime engagement and maritime power projection. Finally, although the paper adopts pre-defined oceans and seas for the purposes of comparative analysis, we acknowledge the impact of interconnectivity between regions on maritime dynamics and particularly for indicators such as strategic chokepoints.

[76]China's Military Diplomacy by Phillip C. Saunders and Melodie Ha https://digitalcommons.ndu.edu/china-strategic-perspectives/19/, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/; US Department of Defence Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China (various years), Ministry of National Defense People's Republic of China.

[77]James Cable, *Gunboat Diplomacy, 1919–79: Political Applications of Limited Naval Force* (Springer 2016).

[78]Christian Le Mière. *Maritime diplomacy in the twenty-first century: Drivers and challenges*. (Routledge 2014).

[79]Data were collected from Global Fishing Watch Transparency for a Sustainable Ocean | Global Fishing Watch https://globalfishingwatch.org/, Dropping the Act: China's Militia in 2024 | Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative https://amti.csis.org/dropping-the-act-chinas-militia-in-2024/, https://chinaselectcommittee.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/final-china-s-global-fishing-offensive-compressed-1.pdf.

[80]The MPPI does not capture every contemporary manifestation of maritime power, including commercial shipping, scientific research activities, and broader normative and institutional dimensions. These indicators were excluded to preserve methodological consistency and cross-regional comparability; however, we consider that the Index can be expanded in the future to include more indicators.

China's Power Projection in Each Region

East China Sea

China's maritime power projection in the East China Sea is shaped by the interaction of resource security, control over key maritime choke points, naval presence, Exclusive Economic Zones disputes, and persistent grey zone activities. The pursuit of energy and fisheries resources within the East China Sea remains central to the CCP, particularly around the contested Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Although the seabed's hydrocarbon potential is still debated, the CCP considers the access to these energy resources as essential for long-term energy supply. Fisheries are also central for food security, and the protection and expansion of Chinese fishing fleets has served as a justification for Chinese coast guard deployments.

Choke points further elevate the region's strategic value. The East China Sea forms a 'lake' between the western Pacific Ocean and China's industrial rimland. The control over SLOCs leading through (1) the Korea Strait, (2) the passages in the first island chain (most importantly the Miyako Strait as a key international passage) and (3) the Taiwan Strait constitute centres of gravity for the Chinese *grand* strategy. Taiwan Strait and Bashi Channel connect the East China Sea with South China Sea. The latter likewise opens the Pacific Ocean to China. These geographical perimeters contain China's long reach access to the Pacific Ocean, the Arctic Ocean, and the Indian Ocean. The PLA Navy and China's Coast Guard have increased operations all over the East China Sea in the last years, demonstrating a willingness and a capacity to challenge rival maritime claims and to maintain persistent presence beyond the mentioned first island chain, increasing influence over chokepoints concerning transit possibilities.

Military exercises reinforce this argument of China's increasing maritime power projection. Amidst the recent diplomatic crisis with Japan and Taiwan, China performed a joint naval and air complex exercise with Russia in December 2025, extending over the East China Sea and western Pacific.[81] Over the past decade, China has conducted frequent joint naval-air drills, including encirclement-style exercises around Taiwan and high-intensity manoeuvres. These exercises serve both as (a) a demonstration of operational capabilities and (b) a demonstration of force directed at Japan and the United States as main rival actors in the region.[82] East Asia, China naval basing and logistical footprint in the region remain moderate: China has not established permanent military bases in nearby East Asian countries, nor does it currently operate ports in the region capable of supporting sustained dual-use (civil–military) operations.[83] This reflects East Asian states' reluctance to accommodate China's maritime power projection, driven by concerns over its assertiveness and unresolved disputes. Ongoing air and naval patrols around Taiwan, alongside joint exercises with Russia,[84] reinforce deterrence and shape regional threat perceptions. Despite lacking overseas bases in the region and maintaining only limited dual-use access in North Korea (1 port), China has expanded infrastructure in disputed areas, incrementally enhancing its strategic position without full forward basing.

Infrastructure is another pillar of China's maritime ambitions on this sea where it has invested heavily in modernizing its own coastal hubs, enhancing shipbuilding, logistics, and naval support functions however, investments and presence in other countries are low. Finally, Beijing leverages 'grey-zone' tactics such as use of coast guard, maritime militia, PLAN combat vessels transit waters and do manoeuvres near Japan in order to exert pressure while containing the risk of uncontrolled escalation. China's maritime and fishing militia formation take place near the Japan-administered

[81]Lee, Y. and Blanchard, B. (2025, December 4). Exclusive: China Massing Military Ships across Region in Show of Maritime Force, Sources Say. *Reuters*. https://www.reuters.com/world/china/china-massing-military-ships-across-region-show-maritime-force-sources-say-2025-12-04/.

[82]Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga et al., *Deciphering Chinese Deterrence Signalling in the New Era: An Analytic Framework and Seven Case Studies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation 2021). https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/html/trecms/AD1134808/.

[83]Simon, Maxwell, and Ravi Jayaram. *Navigating China's Opportunistic Approach to Overseas Naval Base Acquisition*. Policy Analysis Exercise. (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, November 2023). https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/pantheon_files/files/publication/NavigatingChinasApproachtoOverseasNavalBaseAcquisition.pdf.

[84]Nuno Morgado and Takashi Hosoda. 'A Pact of Iron? China's Deepening of the Sino-Russian Partnership' (2024) 6 *Frontiers in Political Science* 1–10 https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2024.1446054.

Senkaku Islands following a strategy of 'fish, protect, contest, and occupy' to reinforce its sovereignty and resource claims over contested islands.[85]

South China Sea

China's maritime power projection in the South China Sea is defined by its intense focus on resource security, its control over Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), and a vast network of militarized and commercial infrastructure. The South China Sea is a critical maritime link between the Indian Ocean and East Asia, connecting key chokepoints such as the Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits. Maintaining influence over this maritime space is therefore essential for reducing China's vulnerability to disruptions and enhancing its ability to shape access to secondary sea lanes. Moreover, control over the Paracel and Spratly archipelagos, alongside a dense military and coast guard presence, enables China to monitor and potentially influence navigation corridors vital to global commerce, particularly in times of conflict. And although regarding energy dependence, China is not heavily reliant on the South China Sea as a direct source of resources, but rather on its role as a key transit corridor for energy and critical supplies.

Strategically, China's sole ballistic missile submarine station Yulin Naval Base on the southern coast of Hainan Island[86] anchors the South China Sea as a critical bastion of China's nuclear deterrent, making frequent military activities, periodic standoffs and recurring crises a long-standing and persistent source of regional tension and instability. China constructed major airstrips on Subi, Fiery Cross and Mischief Reefs, alongside supporting facilities on Gaven, Johnson, Hughes and Cuarteron, creating forward military bases and observation posts that enhance monitoring capabilities and signal its resolve to assert territorial claims.[87] These hubs allow sustained power projection, surveillance and rapid deployment across the southern reaches of the first island chain, pursuing the so-called 'cabbage tactics'.[88] In this context, China's military exercises in the region reinforce its claims and operational readiness. The PLA Navy, Air Force and Coast Guard routinely conduct live-fire drills, amphibious landing training, and joint patrols around disputed locations. These exercises serve both as deterrence and as practical training for area-denial missions, demonstrating China's ability to impose costs on rivals such as Vietnam and the Philippines.

Chinese port investments across Southeast Asia expand both commercial reach and strategic access, reinforcing its maritime influence. Although the CCP does not formally own foreign ports, it exerts control through investments, leases, and construction in Ream Naval Base and Sihanoukville (Cambodia)[89]; Kuantan and Melaka Gateway (Malaysia)[90]; Kuala Tanjung and Bitung (Indonesia)[91]; terminals near Hai Phong (Vietnam)[92]; Subic Bay and Davao (Philippines)[93]; and Laem Chabang

[85]Alan Dupont and Christopher G. Baker, 'East Asia's Maritime Disputes: Fishing in Troubled Waters' (2014) 37(1) *The Washington Quarterly* 79–98 https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.893174

[86]Funaiole, M. P., Bermudez, J. S., Jr., & Hart, B. (2021, August 4). *A glimpse of Chinese ballistic missile submarines*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. https://www.csis.org/analysis/glimpse-chinese-ballistic-missile-submarines.

[87]Mark Raymond and David A. Welch, 'What's Really Going on in the South China Sea?' (2022) 41(2) *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 214–239 https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103422108629.

[88]Erdogan, H. (2015, March 25). China invokes 'cabbage tactics' in South China Sea. *AA.com*. https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/china-invokes-cabbage-tactics-in-south-china-sea/63892.

[89]Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (2025). A Tale of Two Reams: Questions Remain at Cambodia's Growing Naval Base. https://amti.csis.org/a-tale-of-two-reams-questions-remain-at-cambodias-growing-naval-base/.

[90]Free Malaysia Today (2025, September 15). Kuantan Port Vital for Trade with China, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, Says PM. https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2025/09/15/kuantan-port-vital-for-trade-with-china-thailand-laos-and-vietnam-says-pm.

[91]Wee, V. (2019, November 18). Indonesia's Kuala Tanjung adds Chinese Partner to Boost Port Development. Lloyd's List. https://www.lloydslist.com/LL1130011/Indonesia%E2%80%99s-Kuala-Tanjung-adds-Chinese-partner-to-boost-port-development.

[92]Hai Phong Portal (2025, April 16). Strengthening Hai Phong—China Cooperation. https://en.haiphong.gov.vn/highlights/strengthening-hai-phong-china-cooperation-746509.

[93]Geopolitical Monitor (2021, September 23). China's Belt and Road Runs Aground in the Philippines | Geopolitical Monitor. https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/chinas-belt-and-road-runs-aground-in-the-philippines/.

(Thailand).[94] These projects enhance connectivity and logistical capacity near key chokepoints such as the Malacca Strait. Along this network several ports support dual-use ports capabilities that can sustain naval presence, resupply operations and the integration of civilian and military logistics, strengthening China's regional leverage. Additionally, China has constructed and militarised artificial features across the Spratly and Paracel Islands, equipping them with airstrips, hardened hangars, missile systems, radar installations, and permanently stationed personnel.[95] These installations function as de facto forward operating bases, substantially extending China's surveillance, strike, and denial capabilities deep into the maritime domain and altering the regional balance of power while also blurring the line between civilian and military control.

Maritime militia also play a critical role in the region with large fleets of Chinese fishing vessels, often backed by and protected by coast guard escorts, operate throughout disputed waters. Notably, between 2013 and 2015, China also constructed nearly 3,000 acres of artificial islands on seven reefs, significantly altering the region's physical and ecological landscape.[96] These activities assert sovereignty claims, gather intelligence, and normalize Chinese presence, blurring the line between civilian and military power. This region has witnessed some of the most visible confrontations involving China's maritime militia, particularly in disputed waters involving the Philippines. These encounters often involving ramming incidents, water cannon use and blockade tactic illustrate how fishing fleets are employed as instruments of grey-zone coercion, allowing China to assert control while remaining below the threshold of conventional military conflict.

Indian Ocean

The Indian Ocean is central to China's emergent maritime power projection: geographically vast and semi-enclosed, it contains the world's principal SLOCs and three critical chokepoints (the Strait of Malacca, Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb) through which the bulk of China's energy imports and a large share of its trade transit.[97] China's increasing energy dependence on the Middle East and Africa means that the majority of its crude oil imports transit the Indian Ocean, representing approximately 53%.[98]

Commercial infrastructure is the most visible pillar of China's Indian Ocean maritime posture, with major port projects, such as Gwadar, Hambantota, Colombo, Chittagong and Kyaukpyu positioned along key SLOCs[99]; however, port investment is not that significant in the region. These Chinese-funded ports are often characterised as a 'string of pearls', reflecting a network of nodes that extend China's economic, diplomatic, and potential military expansion.

China's naval reach in the region is characterised by sustained deployments since 2008, including anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden, escort task forces, humanitarian operations, and naval patrols, providing continuous operational experience in the Indian Ocean. PLAN port calls and goodwill visits to Indian Ocean states (Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan, Bangladesh and others) are routine and often accompany people-to-people exchanges. China holds also a record of submarine and major surface-ship visits in the Indian Ocean such as in Colombo in 2014 and the first-ever visit by a Chinese nuclear-powered submarine to the region took place when a Type-093 SSN made a port

[94]Lee, H. L. (2015, May 19). Thailand, China Sign Agreement to Construct a New Strategic Kra Canal. Seatrade Maritime. https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/ports-logistics/thailand-china-sign-agreement-to-construct-a-new-strategic-kra-canal.

[95]Lily Kuo and Agnes Chang, 'How China Is Building Its Next Outpost at Sea' (*The New York Times*, 22 April 2026).

[96]U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission (2016, April 12). China's Island Building in the South China Sea: Damage to the Marine Environment, Implications, and International Law. https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-island-building-south-china-sea-damage-marine-environment-implications-and.

[97]Pieter W.G. Zhao and Sayed Mahdi Munadi, 'The Role of Gwadar in China's Maritime Strategy: A Geostrategic Dialogue Between Mahan and Mackinder' (2023) 42(4) *Comparative Strategy* 489–508 https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2023.2219192; Jeffrey Becker, *China Maritime Report No. 11: Securing China's Lifelines across the Indian Ocean* (2020).

[98]Yun Sun, 'Forecasting China's Strategy in the Middle East over the Next Four Years' (Brookings Institution 2024).

[99]Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Chaitanya Pasupala, 'Chinese Overseas Ports in Southeast and South Asia: Connecting the Dots', in *Chinese Overseas Ports in Southeast and South Asia* (Routledge 2024) 1–26; Michael McDevitt and Umida Hashimova, *Views of China's Presence in the Indian Ocean Region: A Workshop Report* (2020).

call in Karachi in 2016 and a sizable PLAN surface and submarine force operated in the Indian Ocean during the Sino-Indian Doklam crisis in the summer of 2017[100] Furthermore, the China–Pakistan 'Sea Guardian' naval exercises (since 2020) have included formation manoeuvres, anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare, logistics, and joint patrols, aiming to secure trade routes while normalising Chinese naval presence and expanding operational reach.[101] Naval diplomacy is comparatively strong, characterised by frequent port visits, goodwill missions, and logistical support agreements. Moreover, China's first overseas military base, established in Djibouti and operational since 2017, is complemented by a network of dual-use ports across several countries, enabling extended naval deployments and logistical support without formal basing rights or permanent troop presence.[102]

Key maritime chokepoints in the region, such as the Strait of Malacca, the Lombok and Sunda Straits, and approaches to the Bab el-Mandeb, remain critical to China's energy and trade flows. While China cannot unilaterally control these passages, its growing network of port facilities, maritime partnerships, and logistical agreements allows it to project presence and monitor maritime traffic effectively. Lastly, China's fishing presence in the Indian Ocean is regular but less overtly militarised. While Chinese distant-water fishing fleets operate across the region and are sometimes used for surveillance and logistical support,[103] their role remains primarily economic rather than coercive, reflecting a more cautious approach in an area with multiple regional powers and a more contested security environment.

Mediterranean

The Mediterranean Sea occupies a central place in China's Maritime Silk Road linking Asia to Europe.[104] Beijing's approach in the region mostly combines sustained commercial investments in port infrastructure and access to key maritime corridors and chokepoints. However, Beijing has not developed a comprehensive strategy toward the Mediterranean; a term seldom referenced in official discourse, preferring instead to view the area through its sub-regions, such as North Africa, Southern Europe, or the Balkans.[105]

China's commercial footprint in the region is extensive: the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) first attained long-term operating rights at Piraeus (Pier 2 in 2009 and permission to build Pier 3) and in 2016 purchased a majority stake (initially 51% for €280.5 million, with a contractual option for an additional 16%)[106] in the Piraeus port authority, making Piraeus a Mediterranean hub for distribution into the EU. Furthermore, China's presence in Israel's port is also significant with China Harbour/PMEC winning the tender to build the Ashdod southern terminal in 2014 and Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG) secured a 25-year concession to develop and operate the new Haifa Bay terminal.[107] The Suez Canal is another critical passage for China, with COSCO holding a stake in the Suez Canal Container Terminal at Port Said, through which most China–Europe maritime trade flows. By shortening routes between East Asia and Europe by roughly one third, the

[100]Joshua T. White, 'China's Indian Ocean Ambitions: Investment, Influence, and Military Advantage' (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution 2020).
[101]Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange (eds.), *Six Years at Sea . . . and Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China's Maritime Commons Presence* (Brookings Institution Press 2016).
[102]Sainandan S. Iyer, Ranadhir Mukhopadhyay and Sridhar D. Iyer, 'The Sino-Indian Geopolitics and Maritime Security of the Indian Ocean Region' (2021) 45(1) *Strategic Analysis* 1–17 https://doi.org/10.1080/01495933.2023.2219192.
[103]China's Maritime Militia: Fishing for Resources, Militarizing the Indian Ocean—Modern Diplomacy, https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2025/01/09/chinas-maritime-militia-fishing-for-resources-militarizing-the-indian-ocean/.
[104]Mordechai Chaziza, 'The Chinese Maritime Silk Road Initiative: The Role of the Mediterranean' (2018) 29(2) *Mediterranean Quarterly* 54–69 https://muse.jhu.edu/article/696570.
[105]Emilie Tran and Yahia H. Zoubir, 'China in the Mediterranean: An Arena of Strategic Competition?' (2023) 28(5) *Mediterranean Politics* 685–703 https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2022.2035125.
[106]China's Cosco acquires 51 pct stake in Greece's Piraeus Port | Reuters, https://www.reuters.com/article/markets/chinas-cosco-acquires-51-pct-stake-in-greeces-piraeus-port-idUSL8N1AR252.
[107]Chinese co PMEC wins Ashdod port tender—Globes https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-chinese-co-pmec-wins-ashdod-port-tender-1000948616, https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-chinese-co-pmec-wins-ashdod-port-tender-1000948616, https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-chinese-co-pmec-wins-ashdod-port-tender-1000948616.

canal underpins Chinese investments across the Suez corridor, enhancing influence over logistics and trans-shipment networks.[108] However, China's control over this chokepoint remains limited, relying on permissive access rather than formal authority.

The infrastructure in these ports involves long quays, extensive berthing capacity, and advanced back-terminal facilities that can also have far-sea naval support creating latent dual-use potential under permissive political conditions.[109] Through its large-scale investments in ports, shipping lanes, and inland transport corridors, the CCP is deepening its integration into regional and global value chains, with consequences that are not only economic but also geopolitical raising concerns in advanced and emerging economies alike about strategic dependencies, regulatory influence, and control over key nodes in the global maritime network,[110] as was evidenced in the case of Italy that decided to formally withdraw from the Belt and Road Initiative in 2023 indicating a growing political friction with EU and NATO partners and a broader European reassessment of China's port-centred connectivity strategy and its geopolitical influence.[111]

Since the CCP lacks overseas military bases, its port choices prioritize proximity to key maritime chokepoints and dual use ports. In the Mediterranean, where China's maritime traffic converges with several key chokepoints, 53 of its 96 strategically significant overseas ports or 55% lie within a day's sail of these crucial passages while its investments on them also support PLAN operations, as they offer piers with sufficient depth and length for large vessels (including Type 003–class carriers) and lie within 50 km of major commercial airfields capable of rapid personnel and supply airlift.[112]

The PLAN has conducted limited military exercises in the Mediterranean since the 2000s, including Joint Sea 2015[113] with Russia and a subsequent live-fire drills in 2017 en route to the Baltic for a larger Sino-Russian exercise. Its first joint exercises with regional countries such as Egypt took place in 2019.[114] There have been also several naval ports calls in the region in different countries, including Israel, Malta, Greece, Turkey, Algeria and France, indicating China's willingness to conduct non-regional naval operations in the Mediterranean, a sign of the PLAN's transition toward far waters. Nevertheless, such naval activities remain limited and economically than militarily focused being also constrained by NATO presence[115] and EU regulatory regimes that severely restrict military expansion and constrain it in pursuing security interests.[116] Moreover, the region's low importance in China's energy supply chain (ranks eight in China's crude oil import transportation network, indicating that it is not a primary focal point on China's diversification efforts for its energy security),[117] alongside negligible fishing militia activity, further underscores that it serves primarily as a commercial and logistical corridor linking Asia, Europe, and Africa, rather than a core theatre of Chinese maritime power projection.

[108]Anas Rakha and Khadiga El-Aasar, 'The Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on the Suez Canal Cargo Trade' (2024) 9(1) Journal of Shipping and Trade https://doi.org/10.1186/s41072-024-00167-y

[109]Grant F. Rhode, 'China's Emergence as a Power in the Mediterranean: Port Diplomacy and Active Engagement', in *Studies in Diplomacy and Statecraft* (Routledge, 2022) 175–196; Christina Lin, 'The Dragon's Rise in the Great Sea: China's Strategic Interests in the Levant and the Eastern Mediterranean', in *The Eastern Mediterranean in Transition* (Routledge 2016) 63–78.

[110]Kardon and Leutert (n 17); Federico Jensen and Alexander L.Q. Chen-Florea, 'Chinese Investments in Global Port Infrastructures: The Belt and Road Initiative as Variegated Logistical Fixes' (2025) Territory, Politics, Governance 1–16 https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2025.2569670.

[111]Giovanni B. Andornino, Simone Dossi and Anna Caffarena, 'Italy's Exit from the Belt and Road Initiative: Europeanization or US Leverage?' (2025) 17(4) *Contemporary Italian Politics* 499–513 https://doi.org/10.1080/23248823.2025.2543651.

[112]Kardon (n 16).

[113]China, Russia vessels arrive at exercise area of 'Naval Interaction 2015' - Xinhua | English.news.cn, https://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2015-05/19/c_127818826.htm.

[114]Egypt, China conduct joint naval drill in Mediterranean Sea—Xinhua | English.news.cn, https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/21/c_138326841.htm#:~:text=CAIRO%2C%20Aug.%2021%20%28Xinhua%29%20–%20Joint%20naval%20forces,Chinese%20missile%20destroyer%20%22Xi%27an%22%20participated%20in%20the%20exercises.

[115]Sidharth Kaushal, René Balletta, Philip Shetler-Jones and Elizabeth Lindley, *China's Strategic Options in the Euro-Atlantic* (Royal United Services Institute, 2024).

[116]Kaushal, S., Balletta, R., Shetler-Jones, P., & Lindley, E. (2024). *China's Strategic Options in the Euro-Atlantic*. RUSI.

[117]Jingye Liu et al., 'Assessing the Security of Crude Oil Supply Chain: The Case of China' (2025) 59 *Energy Strategy Reviews* 101733.

South Atlantic

The South Atlantic represents an increasingly important theatre for China's economic, scientific and naval activities, particularly as the CCP seeks to secure energy and resource supplies, diversify trade routes and support its global maritime influence. Economically, China's presence in the South Atlantic is anchored in both Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, regions that provide critical natural resources and energy supplies through the Gulf of Guinea that has emerged as a key alternative energy source to the volatile Middle East.[118] Beyond hydrocarbons, the region supplies minerals and other raw materials essential to China's industrial and military modernization as well as agricultural products such as soybeans, preventing the region due to China's demand from moving toward more commodity-intensive products.[119]

The Chinese presence in the South Atlantic has also grown through the expansion of investments in infrastructure.[120] Countries in the Gulf of Guinea, such as Nigeria and Benin, have been receiving Chinese funding for the construction of ports and other infrastructure that facilitate access to the ports.[121] Under the Maritime Silk Road, China has expanded its presence through ownership, construction, and operation of ports in regions such as Walvis Bay (Namibia), São Luís and TCP terminals (Brazil), and across Angola, Nigeria, and Guinea (Liu, 2024). While primarily commercial, these ports carry latent dual-use potential (Martinson, 2019) and may support security roles such as anti-piracy operations.[122]

Regarding energy, China imports significant quantities of oil from countries such as Angola and agricultural commodities from South American producers while the associated trade routes are not as strategically indispensable as those transiting the Indian Ocean or South China Sea. In terms of grey zone operations, the Chinese distant-water fleet state-owned by China National Fisheries Corporation, operates over 300 vessels, including squid jiggers, trawlers, and longliners, reflecting an eightfold increase in activity over the last decade.[123] Its presence and accusations for illegal practices have caused friction with regional countries, mainly Argentina, prompting China to introduce fishing moratoriums on the high seas in an attempt to defuse tensions (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020).[124]

China's military diplomacy in the South Atlantic has also expanded. PLAN South Sea Fleet vessels, including the Missile Destroyer *Lanzhou*, Missile Frigate *Liuzhou*, and logistics ship *Poyanghu*, visited Chile, Argentina, and Brazil in 2013 for naval port calls and conducted joint exercises with the Brazilian Navy in Rio de Janeiro.[125] Between 2003 and 2016, PLAN port calls and exercises in Africa included Angola (1 naval visit, 2 exercises), South Africa (5 port visits, 2 joint exercises), Namibia (1 port visit, 1 joint exercise), and Nigeria (2 exercises, 1 maritime visit).[126] In 2014, PLA Navy's units undertook their first-ever joint drills with Tanzanian forces,

[118]Daniella da Silva Nogueira de Melo, Maria Papageorgiou and Laura C. Ferreira-Pereira, 'Geopolitical Dynamics in the South Atlantic: The Maritime Strategies of Brazil, China, and the European Union', in *The Palgrave Handbook on Geopolitics of Brazil and the South Atlantic* (Springer Nature Singapore 2025) 1391–1416 https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-95-1169-3_63.

[119]Two decades of trade with China have boosted Latin America, but also 'reprimarized' its exports. Global Affairs. University of Navarra.

[120]Alana Camoça Gonçalves de Oliveira, 'The Dragon's Footprints in the South Pole: A Study on Chinese Strategies and Actions in Antarctica and Its Implications for Brazil' (2021) Brazilian Journal of Strategy & International Relations / Revista Brasileira de Estratégia e Relações Internacionais 105.

[121]Laura C. Ferreira-Pereira, Paulo Afonso B. Duarte and Carla Afonso, 'The China's Maritime Silk Road Towards the South Atlantic: The Case of the Gulf of Guinea', in *The Palgrave Handbook on China-Europe-Africa Relations* (Springer Nature Singapore 2025) 423–444.

[122]Tycho de Feijter, 'Chinese Ports and Terminals on the Gulf of Guinea' (2022) 46(5) *Atlantisch Perspectief* 5–10.

[123]González Levaggi, A. People's Republic of China: The 'Blue' Dream of a Maritime Challenger. In *Great Power Competition in the Southern Oceans: From the Indo-Pacific to the South Atlantic* (pp. 65–100). (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023).

[124]China Starts First Fishing Moratorium on High Seas, 2020-07-03. https://english.moa.gov.cn/news_522/202007/t20200707_300493.html.

[125]Levaggi (n 123).

[126]Allen, K.W., Saunders, P.C. and Chen, J. (2017) Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications. *China Strategic Perspectives*, No. 11. Washington, DC: National Defense University Press.

and in the first half of 2018, the PLA Navy's anti-piracy escorted task forces and 6 conducted joint military exercises with Cameroon, Gabon, Ghana and Nigeria.[127] In 2019, China participated with two BRICS partners, Russia and South Africa, in the naval drill (MOSI),[128] off the city of Cape Town and repeated this exercise (MOSI 2) in 2023.[129] In 2024, China participated in the Brazilian-led drill Operation Formosa along with US forces despite no joint training between them.[130]

China maintains no permanent military bases in the region, although it has access to a small number of dual-use ports along the African Atlantic coast that support commercial shipping and provide occasional logistical access; however, there is no meaningful military functionality or forward-deployed naval capabilities. Naval port calls by the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) remain infrequent and largely symbolic, often conducted in the context of Peace Ark hospital ship missions, scientific expeditions, and goodwill visits rather than sustained operational deployments.[131] Consequently, naval diplomacy in the South Atlantic is limited to occasional engagements and does not reflect a continuous maritime presence. However, based on recent developments and a US re-focus on the Western Hemisphere, as shown in its 2025 NSS,[132] China's operations can be further constrained.

Arctic Ocean

China's maritime ambitions in the Arctic Ocean are shaped its interests on emerging resources, access to the North Sea Route, and a growing network of scientific, commercial, and dual-use infrastructure that supports its long-term global ambitions. Although not an Arctic state, China defines itself as a 'near-Arctic power',[133] claiming that climatic, economic, and international politics' shifts give it legitimate interests in the region. In fact, the PLA described the Arctic 'as a potential "lifeline" for the growing Chinese economy' (p.19).[134] As the sea ice retreats, shipping routes across the Arctic are increasingly feasible, offering desirable alternatives to current routes between China, northern Europe, and North America. Choke points and new shipping routes significantly influence China's approach. The North Sea Route along Russia's coast offers a shorter pathway between Europe and Asia, reducing transportation time compared with traditional routes. China aims to leverage this corridor to enhance supply-chain resilience and reduce dependence on routes vulnerable to strategic pressure, such as the Strait of Malacca as mentioned above. The CCP also envisions a 'Polar Silk Road' as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, linking Arctic logistics to global trade.[135]

Apart from this, resources as geopolitical factor is another key driver. The Arctic contains vast reserves of hydrocarbons and critical minerals. Melting sea ice increases China's interest in securing long-term access to Arctic energy, which the CCP views as a pillar of future resource diversification. Chinese state-owned enterprises have already invested in Russian LNG projects — namely the Yamal LNG and Arctic LNG 2[136] integrating Arctic energy into

[127]Grieger, G. 2019. 'China's Growing Role as a Security Actor in Africa'. European Parliamentary Research Service. October 2019. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/642232/EPRS_BRI(2019)642232_EN.pdf.
[128]Li, T. and Wang, G. (2019, November 29). China-Russia-South Africa conduct live-fire fleet exercise. *Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China*. http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/4855925.html.
[129]Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China (2023, January 23). *South African Navy to Host Russian, Chinese Counterparts for Maritime Exercise*. http://eng.mod.gov.cn/xb/News_213114/TopStories/4931225.html.
[130]Reuters (2024, September 10). Chinese troops to join Brazil's military drills with US forces. https://www.reuters.com/world/china-joins-brazilian-military-exercises-alongside-us-troops-2024-09-10/.
[131]Melo et al. 2025.
[132]2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf.
[133]https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm.
[134]Pincus, R. Three-Way Power Dynamics in the Arctic (2020) *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 14(1) 40–63.
[135]Lamazhapov, E., Stensdal, I. and Heggelund, G. (2023, November 14). China's Polar Silk Road: Long Game or Failed Strategy? The Arctic Institute. https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/china-polar-silk-road-long-game-failed-strategy/.
[136]Humpert, M. (2025, November 20). Russia Ships Nearly 3 Million Tonnes of LNG to Asia via Emerging Arctic Shortcut. *GCaptain*. https://gcaptain.com/russia-ships-nearly-3-million-tonnes-of-lng-to-asia-via-emerging-arctic-shortcut/.

China's broader national energy strategy. Fisheries, still largely unexploited, also represent a prospective domain of interest should regulations evolve, thus the CCP already expressed interest in creating an international fisheries framework and participating in existing legal and governance frameworks and multilateral initiatives.[137]

As China lacks Arctic bases and dual use ports must operate within strict international constraints, it has not participated in any military exercises in the region until now. Instead, the CCP focuses on scientific missions, icebreaker expeditions, hydrographic surveys, and climate research. Still Chinese investment activity in the Arctic remains selective and exploratory primarily pursued through cooperation with Russia in port facilities (Murmansk, Arkhangelsk, Sabetta), while Chinese-built icebreakers such as Xue Long 2 support a sustained presence.[138] Scientific stations in Iceland (e.g. Finnafjord) and Norway (Kirkenes) contribute data and diplomatic influence. Grey zone and Chinese maritime militia presence is minimal, while China's economic dependence on Arctic resources, including hydrocarbons and critical minerals, remains low.[139] Overall, this pattern reflects structural constraints associated with its 'near-Arctic state' status, which restricts military access and legitimacy, pushing China toward a strategy centred on research, economic cooperation, and partnership with Russia to gradually build a compliant long-term presence.

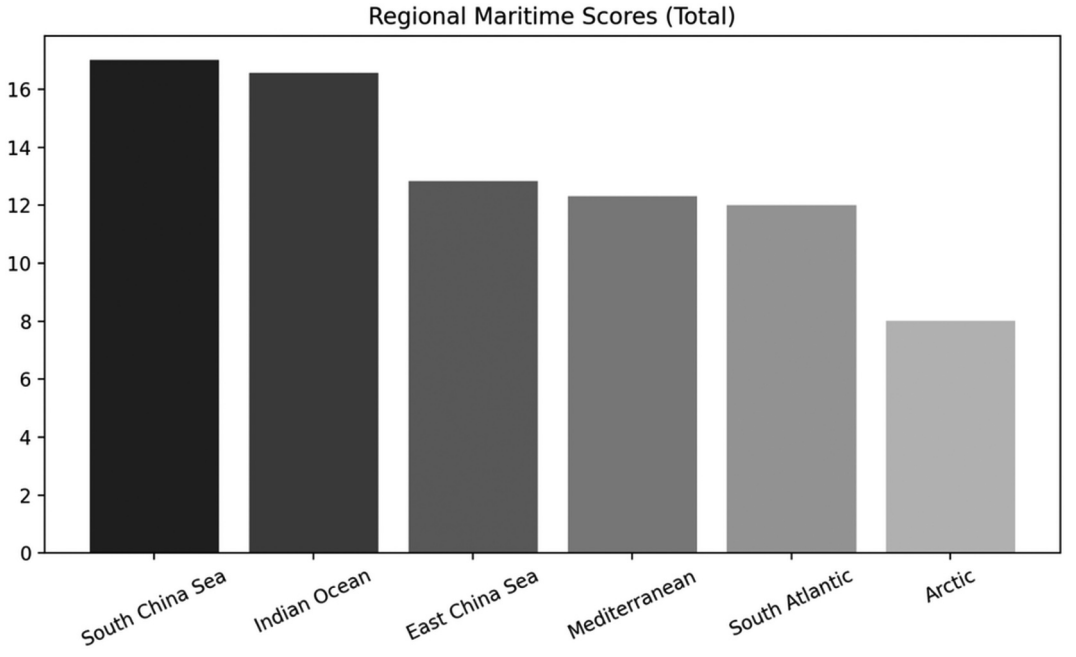
Comparative Analysis

The Maritime Power Projection index (MPPI) demonstrates that China's regional presence varies, reflecting differentiated strategic priorities. The South China Sea ranks highest, followed by the Indian Ocean, East China Sea, the Mediterranean, and South Atlantic while its power projection in the Arctic remains low (Graph 1). Although broadly consistent with existing interpretations, the index highlights important differences in intensity and regional sequencing often overlooked in current analyses. Our findings illustrate China's 2015 naval strategy, which emphasises 'near seas active defence' alongside 'far seas protection', reflecting a prioritisation of adjacent maritime spaces combined with selective but expanding engagement in more distant regions. The MPPI further refines the distinction between China's near- and far-seas strategies and allows to observe between its differentiated strategic priorities across maritime spaces. In the near seas, particularly the South and East China Seas, maritime power projection is characterised primarily by sovereignty concerns, naval activity and grey-zone instruments. In the far seas, China relies comparatively more on commercial infrastructure, logistical access, naval diplomacy and SLOC protection. The Indian Ocean, however, doesn't adhere to this distinction: despite being a far-seas theatre, it ranks second in the MPPI because of its importance for energy security and overseas logistical access. The index therefore shows that China's maritime power projection is not simply determined by geographical proximity but reflects the strategic, economic and security importance Beijing assigns to particular maritime regions.

[137]Edward Sing Yue Chan and Annie Young Song, 'China's Efforts to Increase Discourse Power in the Arctic and Antarctica Through Fisheries Management' (2025) *International Politics* 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-025-00738-1.

[138]The State Council. The People's Republic of China (2025, September 26). *China's Icebreaker Xuelong 2 Returns to Shanghai after Arctic Expedition*. https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202509/26/content_WS68d6916ac6d00ca5f9a06790.html.

[139]Anders Edstrøm, Guðbjörg Ríkey Th. Hauksdóttir, and P. Whitney Lackenbauer. 2025. *Cutting Through Narratives on Chinese Arctic Investments*. Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, June 23, 2025. https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/china-arctic-investments.

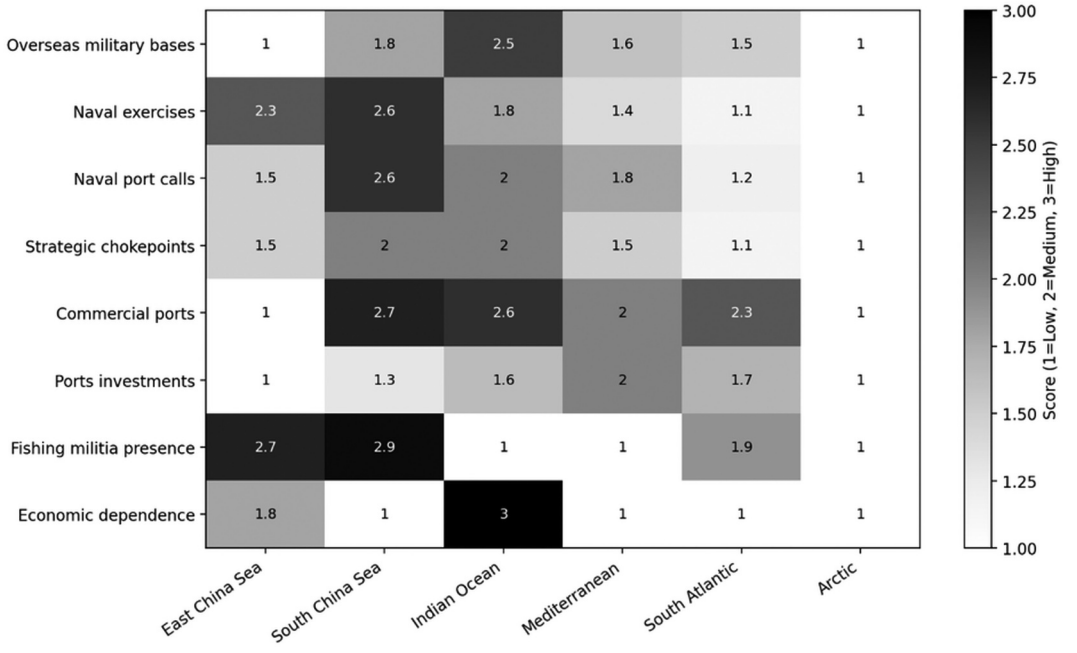


Graph 1. Aggregate MPPI score for 2012–2024.

Although the data confirms that China has developed meaningful power projection capabilities, focused mostly on access rather than control however the scale and depth of its presence remain below historical benchmarks set by previous maritime powers, particularly the United States and the British Empire that were primarily characterised by dense global basing networks, sustained expeditionary operations, and uncontested command of SLOCs.[140] This suggests that China's maritime rise is hybrid in nature, combining economic statecraft, limited military presence, strategic positioning and grey zone tactics, rather than replicating the fully globalised dominance seen in earlier hegemonic models. It, however, faces challenges from geopolitical competition with major global players, the inability to coagulate military alliances or coalitions with regional countries and its energy dependency.[141]

By looking more closely at the average of each indicator for the 2012–2024 for each region (Graph 2) we can see that some emerge as primarily strategic–military theatres, while others are better characterised as more geo-economically significant. The South China Sea scores highly in naval exercises (2.6) and naval port calls (2.6), indicating sustained operational tempo and forward presence having also a strong performance in commercial ports (2.7) and an exceptional level of fishing militia presence (2.9), reflecting the integration of economic infrastructure with grey-zone maritime capabilities. While its economic dependence score (1.0) remains low indicating that the region is less critical as a source of resources.

[140]Kardon (n 16) Kardon and Leutert (n 17).
[141]Popescu (n 10); Mohammad Eslami and Maria Papageorgiou, 'China's Increasing Role in the Middle East: Implications for Regional and International Dynamics' (2023) 2(6) *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*.



Graph 2. MPPI scores per indicator for the period 2012–2024.

The Indian Ocean, although similarly high in aggregate terms, exhibits a structurally distinct configuration of influence with high economic dependence score (3.0), the strongest across all indicators, underscoring the region's critical role in sustaining China's energy security demand, paired with a strong presence of overseas military bases (2.5) and high scores in commercial ports (2.6), indicating a strategy rooted in infrastructure, logistics, and long-term access rather than overt grey-zone activity. Notably, the low fishing militia presence (1.0) differentiates the Indian Ocean from the South China Sea.

The East China Sea scores relatively high in fishing militia presence (2.7) and naval exercises (2.3) indicate a concentration on operational readiness and grey-zone tactics, particularly in the context of territorial disputes and strategic competition in East Asia. However, this is not matched by equivalent economic or infrastructural depth, as reflected in low scores for commercial ports (1.0) and port investments (1.0). This imbalance suggests a region where China's presence is driven primarily by security imperatives and proximity.

The Mediterranean reflects a predominantly investment-led and commercially oriented presence with the highest indicators ports investments (2.0) and commercial ports (2.0) however it scores low in economic dependence (1.0) and fishing militia presence (1.0). These results suggest that China's approach in the Mediterranean is shaped by institutional constraints (e.g. NATO and EU frameworks) and prioritisation of commercial footholds as its power is highly integrated with trade relations and EU still remains the biggest market for China over military expansion. Thus, although the Mediterranean is central to the MSR as a commercial gateway to European markets it does not constitute a primary theatre of China's broader maritime strategy or hold a sustained military power projection.

The South Atlantic scores relatively high in commercial ports (2.3), port investments (1.7) and fishing militia presence (1.9), indicating growing but lower scores in naval activity and economic dependence (1.0) suggest that the region does not yet constitute a core strategic theatre and more as an alternative region for China's diversification efforts.

Finally, the Arctic is low-scoring region, with a score of 1 across all indicators. This lack of variation indicates that China's presence remains minimal and exploratory constraints within established regional frameworks and its collaboration with Russia.

Lastly, if we unpack the yearly scores (graph A1-8) we can identify that certain events over the years have revealed both long-term structural geopolitical priorities and short-term external shocks in several indicators. Starting with 2012 and following the U.S. 'Pivot to Asia' (2011) that initiated an intensifying great-power competition led to a high-intensity activity in the South China Sea and East China Sea, where China used both naval diplomacy through naval port calls and improved relations with other countries but also grey-zone tactics to consolidate control[142]. Especially although between 2008 and 2013 grey zone operations in East China Sea have stabilised since 2010 China's focus then shifted in South China Sea against weaker and disorganized neighbours.[143,144] This study's findings corroborate existing rankings of China's grey-zone operations, indicating that, based on the actions undertaken and actors involved, their intensity is highest in the South China Sea, followed by the East China Sea and the Taiwan Strait.[145]

Moreover, accounting for China's economic performance in the aftermath of the Global Economic crisis as well in 2008 and 2009 China's strategy followed a phased model of capability accumulation which created openings for Chinese mega investments in Mediterranean ports, explaining the early-2010s surge in infrastructure and investment indicators[146,147]. A further important landmark is the launch of the BRI in 2013 that explains the steady growth observed in economic and infrastructural indicators since then. Another important landmark is the 2016 South China Sea arbitration also coincides with heightened activity in naval exercises, militia presence and port development since then, reinforcing China's consolidation of control in its near seas. The opening of the Djibouti base in 2017 also helps explain the gradual increase in naval exercises, port calls, and logistical presence in the Indian Ocean. The Covid-19 pandemic initiated also saw a decrease in naval reach during 2020 and 2021, but certain regions haven't recovered previous intensity after this period with Mediterranean being the most impacted. Similarly, in the region despite the initial increase in indicators such as commercial port presence, investments during the mid-2010s which reflected the westward extension of the BRI into European markets has seen a relative decline. These peaks and declines suggest that while China's maritime strategy is structurally anchored, it remains responsive to both geopolitical pressures and global disruptions. More recently, the Russia–Ukraine war (2022) has reinforced the strategic relevance of alternative trade corridors and energy routes, which is reflected in the sustained or increasing importance of the Indian Ocean and selective recovery in Atlantic-facing regions. These developments highlight that China's maritime behaviour is not only internally driven but also responsive to systemic changes, aligning with scholarly arguments that Chinese sea power is shaped by both geoeconomic expansion and strategic competition.[148]

Conclusion

This study offers a systematic analysis of China's maritime power projection, demonstrating that contemporary maritime power projection extends beyond traditional naval capabilities to include economic, diplomatic, and hybrid tools. It argues that China's maritime rise follows the guidelines of the Chinese Military Strategy reflecting a long-sought broader transition from a traditionally land-focused power to one increasingly oriented toward the maritime domain, with an emphasis on securing SLOCs and expanding influence beyond its immediate periphery. By developing the Maritime Power Projection

[142]Toshi Yoshihara and James Holmes, *Red Star over the Pacific: China's Rise and the Challenge to US Maritime Strategy* (Naval Institute Press, 2018).
[143]Brent Sadler and Elizabeth Lapporte, 'China's Evolving Risk Tolerance and Gray-Zone Operations: From the East China Sea to the South Pacific' (Heritage Foundation Report 9 September 2024).
[144]Erickson, A.S. and Martinson, R.D. (eds.) (2019) China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations. *Annapolis*, MD: Naval Institute Press.
[145]Tetsuo Kotani, 'China's Military and Paramilitary Activities in the East China Sea' (2020) 15(3) Asia Policy 7–18 10.1353/asp.2020.0040.
[146]Isaac B. Kardon, *China's Law of the Sea: The New Rules of Maritime Order* (Yale University Press 2023).
[147]Meunier, S. A. (2014). Faustian bargain or just a good bargain? Chinese foreign direct investment and politics in Europe. *Asia Eur J* 12, 143–158 https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-014-0382-x
[148]Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (National Bureau of Asian Research 2017); Hu Bo and Geoffrey Till, *Chinese Maritime Power in the Twenty-First Century: Strategic Planning, Policy and Predictions* (Routledge 2019).

Index, this research quantifies China's maritime power projection across six strategically significant regions: South China Sea, East China Sea, Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, South Atlantic, and Arctic. This approach addresses a gap in the literature by providing a comparative and regionally focused assessment of China's maritime presence, moving beyond anecdotal or single-dimensional evaluations.

The contribution of this study lies in systematically quantifying and comparing its regional manifestation. By translating broad strategic principles into measurable indicators, the MPPI demonstrates how China's power projection is unevenly implemented across regions, revealing differences in intensity, timing, and functional composition. This allows for a more comprehensive assessment of where and how China is consolidating influence, moving beyond general strategic narratives toward empirically grounded comparison.

The results reveal a clear hierarchy of influence: China's maritime power projection is strongest in the South China Sea, followed by the Indian Ocean and the East China Sea, with moderate presence in the Mediterranean and South Atlantic, and only limited engagement in the Arctic. These patterns reflect geographical proximity, strategic priorities, economic interests and operational constraints. They are also influenced by the presence and interests of other great powers, as well as regional actors and global economic and security networks. China's military capabilities are not particularly extensive in most regions. However, diplomatically and economically and through asymmetric grey zone operations has managed to exert increasing control.

These findings underscore a central contribution of the study that China's power projection is not uniform nor global in the traditional sense, but strategically differentiated and region-specific. Also, despite its attempts for a blue navy, its naval power projection abroad is still underdeveloped. Instead, China's maritime power projection is more closely aligned with sustaining its economic growth and securing critical trade routes than with pursuing overt regional hegemony. Given that China's economy is deeply dependent on trade and access to foreign markets, a slowdown, unsuccessful infrastructure projects, or deteriorating relations with regional states can significantly constrain its maritime power projection. Overall, this study can also offer insights on China's evolving maritime strategy and the implications of its maritime power projection for global maritime security.

Future research could further refine the index with the inclusion of additional indicators such as technological and cyber capabilities, coast guard activities, and political institutional influence while it can be applied to other regions. We consider that, except for China's maritime (fishing) militia presence, the analytical framework can also assess the maritime power of other great powers historically and presently.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study were compiled from publicly available sources, identified in the article. The sources and procedures used to construct the Maritime Power Projection Index (MPPI) are described in the methodology section. The compiled data underlying the analysis are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.