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The PRC'S Military Strategies on the Security Architecture of East and South China Sea under President Xi Jinping

Lokman Karadag*

Abstract: This paper analyses the four main military strategies of the People's Republic of China towards the security architecture of East and South China Sea under President Xi Jinping. These strategies cover a region that has been under the US alliance system's security umbrella since the Cold War. This paper demonstrates that the People's Republic of China, under the current leadership, seeks to reorder the regional security architecture to its favour by leveraging military modernisation, influence operations and diplomatic-economic power to remove the influence of the US and its allies over the East and South China Sea. The present study argues that the successful conclusion of the rising power's strategies over the East and South China Sea will translate the current geopolitical rivalry into a power transition to the detriment of the established power.

Keywords: China, Xi Jinping, East China Sea, South China Sea, power transition

Abstrak: Kajian ini menganalisis empat strategi ketenteraan utama Republik Rakyat China ke arah seni bina keselamatan Laut China Timur dan Selatan di bawah Presiden Xi Jinping. Strategi ini meliputi wilayah yang telah berada di bawah naungan keselamatan sistem perikatan Amerika Syarikat (AS) sejak Perang Dingin. Kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa Republik Rakyat China, di bawah kepimpinan semasa, berusaha untuk menyusun semula seni bina keselamatan serantau untuk memihak kepada mereka dengan memanfaatkan pemodenan ketenteraan, mempengaruhi operasi dan

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kuasa diplomatik-ekonomi untuk menghapuskan pengaruh AS dan sekutunya ke atas Laut China Timur dan Selatan. Tinjauan semasa ini menyimpulkan bahawa kejayaan strategi kuasa meningkat China ke atas Laut China Timur dan Selatan akan menterjemahkan persaingan geopolitik terkini kepada peralihan kuasa sehingga menjejaskan kuasa yang sedia ada.

Kata kunci: China, Xi Jinping, Laut China Timur, Laut China Selatan, peralihan kuasa.

Introduction

The military strategies of the People's Republic of China (PRC) towards the country's most critical flank, the East and South China Sea, have undergone tremendous changes since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013. The fundamental strategies towards the security architecture covering the East and South China Sea, which had long been dominated by the security umbrella of the US alliance system, began implementation after President Xi's authority was fully established over all critical positions at military ranks and government levels. Since the US's decision to pivot to Asia during the Obama administration in 2012, the region consisting of the East and South China Sea has become an area where the current global hegemon US and the rising power PRC come face to face, and where rivalries and frictions are deepening day by day (De C., 2013, pp. 331–349). The East and South China Sea region is vital to the PRC for several reasons. First and foremost, the region has become an area where China's greatest enemies are deploying their military assets at the highest level, posing a direct threat to its national security and territorial integrity. Moreover, almost all of the country's energy supply and vital sea lines of communication pass through this region; Taiwan and the strategic ports of the country, which have also become a matter of national security, are also located here. The region, which has become an area of enduring rivalry and friction, leaves the PRC with many security perils in the East and South China Sea, including pressure and military threats from the US alliance system, conflicts, and claims with neighbouring countries in the territorial sea and maritime zones. Without fully controlling and dominating the East and South China Sea, the PRC will not be able to secure its national

security and territorial integrity and break the first island chain to open the Western Pacific.

The geo-economic and geostrategic importance of the region, which is rich in natural resources, further complicates the nature of conflict and rivalry between the parties. The oil transportation of East Asia through the East and South China Sea, which is the centre of East Asia's energy corridor, is more than six times the amount passing through the Suez Canal and more than 17 times the amount passing through the Panama Canal. About two-thirds of South Korea's energy supply, about 60 percent of Japan's and Taiwan's energy supply and about 80 percent of China's crude oil imports pass through the East and South China Sea. It also has 7 billion barrels of proven oil reserves and an estimated 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (Kaplan, 2011). The deepening crisis between the two great powers in such an area brings global effects far beyond the regional consequences. Losing or winning the struggle by any of the parties in this region will result in losing or seizing global supremacy.

Essentially, the failure of the US to contain the rising PRC will lead to the loss of its global supremacy, and the loss of the PRC will mean that its quest for global leadership will be imprisoned behind the first island chain. The PRC implemented the following strategies under the leadership of Xi Jinping to turn the security architecture and the regional dominance in its favour in the East and South China Sea, where tensions have reached a global dimension, and many great powers are already involved.

The present article discusses and analyses the four main military strategies of the PRC towards the East and South China Sea under Xi Jinping. These strategies include the militarisation of the South China Sea and the nine-dash line, the establishment of an air defence identification zone over the East China Sea, the reunification of Taiwan and the breach of the first island chain. Here, I argue that the successful implementation of the rising power's strategies over the East and South China Sea will translate the current geopolitical competition into a power transition to the detriment of the established power.

Militarisation of the South China Sea and Nine-Dash Line

The militarisation of the South China Sea, especially with artificial islands, is one of the overall and comprehensive pillars of the PRC's military strategies towards the East and South China Sea. The breaking of the US influence in Asia and the Pacific, as well as the rise of the PRC as a global superpower by securing its national sovereignty against external interventions, depends entirely on the success of this strategy. For this purpose, the PRC is militarising the South China Sea as much as possible. Although the PRC's claims over the South China Sea and the foundations of the nine-dash line strategy date back to the early 1900s, China's maritime policy has been very consistent since the leadership of Deng Xiaoping; however, China is now more capable and determined than ever to safeguard its maritime rights. Overall, China has not changed its shelving disputes and national defence policies (Bo & Yanpei, 2019). Besides rapid economic growth and military capabilities, PRC's practical applications of military strategies towards the South China Sea have changed tremendously since Xi Jinping came to power in 2013.

PRC has followed much more centralised policies over the South China Sea from 2013 onwards. Apart from administrative buildings, hospitals, and sports complexes, some runways can land fighter jets equipped with defensive systems, radar antennae, and radio systems intended to monitor the area around them. Beijing has established such installations on Spratly Island and other massive artificial islands. Moreover, China has built hidden submarine tunnels on the country's south coast since 1990. The facilities with several entrances can house large vessels and nuclear submarines. To this date, People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) submarines, such as the 094 Jin-class submarines, visited the Yulin base on Hainan Island, where centres of naval and air communication with remote island in the South China Sea (Kanwa Intelligence Review, 2006). The PRC's military construction of dual-use facilities, including missile shelters on the Spratly Islands, Fiery Cross, Mischief, and Subi Reefs, started quickly after Xi Jinping came to power. The missiles and defence systems, including anti-ship missiles deployed on the Spratly Islands groups, will allow PLAN to operate over nearly the entire South China Sea and further sophisticate its power

project capability within the region. The radar and missile deployment on the island group would extend People's Liberation Army (PLA)'s A2/AD capabilities in the South China Sea and strongly deter the US and allied forces from interference in the Taiwan Strait. Additionally, radar systems would detect any missiles fired from the US military assets in the East and South China Sea or the Pacific, or any other US bases in the region. The military construction in the South China Sea was not limited to naturally emerged islands; for instance, the PLA expanded the Fiery Cross Reef over two square kilometres in order to construct an airstrip and harbour between 2014 and 2017 (AMTI, 2017). On the other hand, satellite images show that from at least early 2016, the PLA has deployed the HQ-9 (Hongqi-9) missile defence system and landed its J-11 fighter jets on Woody Island, which is the largest feature of the Paracel Islands group, on which the PRC claims full and undisputed sovereignty, unlike the Spratly Islands (The Diplomat, 2016). Taiwan's Ministry of National Defence (MND) spokesperson has also confirmed the PLA's deployment of advanced surface-to-air missile systems to Woody Island (Focus Taiwan, 2016).



Figure 1.1: Satellite Images of the Military Installation of the PRC in the South China Sea (AMTI, 2017).

Despite all efforts by PRC, the South China Sea is still an area that poses severe threat to its national security and territorial integrity and is a region that contains many obstacles to becoming a global superpower.

Ensuring the security of maritime communication and trade routes through the South China Sea, the vulnerability of national security over Taiwan, disputes with stakeholders of the South China Sea and the significance of breaching the first island chain are among the most urgent issues for PRC.

The safety of the trade routes used by the PRC – whose economy is fundamentally dependent on its economic rise – for its oil imports and goods export depends entirely on the security situation in the South China Sea. In times of war, if the maritime trade routes and sea lines of communication in the South China Sea are blocked, PRC's economy will face a complete standstill (Keyuan, 2021). On the other hand, Chinese aircraft carriers, nuclear-warhead attack submarines, and other littoral combat ships sailing to the north, central and west Pacific via the South China Sea are vulnerable to Taiwan's intelligence and surveillance. Due to its geopolitical location, Taiwan, located both within the South China Sea and only 100 miles from the mainland, stands as a highly strategic and threatening asset for the PRC. A Taiwan fully-integrated within the US regional alliance system is in a highly deadly base position to hit the mainland in case of war. Such national security issues, formerly strictly defined as defence issues between China and Taiwan, have gradually expanded to include the defence dimension and turned into a paradox for the parties (Clark & Chan, 1991). On the other hand, Taiwan stands as a strategic buffer belt in front of the PRC to breach the first island chain, push the US's influence towards the Pacific and become a global superpower.

The history of the dispute between the PRC, its neighbouring countries, and the colonial powers over the South China Sea goes back a hundred years. Admiral Sa Zhenbing, the Commander-in-Chief of Qing China's post-1900 navy, even led a naval expedition to the waters of the South China Sea in 1907 to enforce China's claim. In the beginning of 1909 and 1910, modernised Qing navy conducted several operations in the South China Sea and formally annexed many islands to Guangdong province and sent a ship every year to the South China Sea to maintain contact with overseas Chinese living in these islands (Holloway & Swanson, 1982). In the 1930s, many of these islands were occupied by the Japanese. Many strategic islands, including Paratas Island

and Taiping Island, remain under Taiwan's control despite China's protests. These conflicts continued before and after the Second World War, during the Cold War and at the beginning of the 21st century; it even evolved into armed conflicts from time to time. Although China and ASEAN-affiliated countries agreed in 2002 to try to resolve all outstanding disputes peacefully, no results could be reached because the PRC reiterated its claim to the entire Spratly Islands group, and Taiwan was not invited to sign the agreement (Bateman & Emmers, 2008).

By rapidly expanding the number of aircraft carriers and strengthening the submarine fleet, PLAN increasingly puts pressure on ASEAN-affiliated stakeholders such as Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia in the South China Sea (Hong, 2013, pp. 27–43). At the same time, military friction keeps getting worse with the United States, which is rapidly increasing its air and naval capacity around the South China Sea. The PLA's A2/AD capability, which has been further consolidated since Xi Jinping came to power, enables PLAN to engage in more ambitious activities in the South China Sea and challenge the United States (Permal, 2014).

The ongoing competition and frictions in the South China Sea are an area of strategic rivalry beyond the efforts of two superpowers and their allies, where there is a fierce battle to steer the new world order. From ideology to political history, hundred years of experience from both sides in the sea and land geopolitics has been included in all dimensions of this rivalry. As Kaplan, based on Spykman's idea, argues, the East and South China Sea for China is similar to the Caribbean Sea for the United States (Kaplan, 2019). As Mackinder and others note, the inner seas close to a rising power are contested by great powers, and they are a springboard for a rising power to become a world power (Kaplan, 2009). The United States recognised the presence and claims of European powers in the Caribbean but nevertheless sought to dominate the region. The closure of the American frontier in 1890 coincided with Mahan's publication of the *Influence of the Sea Power Upon History* (Mahan, 1890).

Moreover, domination of the Greater Caribbean Basin gave the United States effective control of the Western Hemisphere. This tilted the balance of power in the Eastern Hemisphere to the US. It will be

likewise with China. China's position vis-à-vis the South China Sea in the twenty-first century is akin to America's position vis-à-vis the Caribbean Sea in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Under Xi Jinping, PRC has extended its control not only over the South China Sea but also over the entire seas off China's coast, including the East China Sea. In his summit with President Obama at the White House in 2015, Xi promised that PRC would never militarise the artificial islands being reclaimed in the South China Sea. However, it was later discovered that the islands had been militarised. Okuyama argued that Xi Jinping felt that President Obama and Washington were still in a weak position after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis because President Obama enlisted the help of Beijing to rebuild America's financial markets. Since then, the PRC has moved on to establish inner sea dominance, and such practice has been the most significant change in terms of altering the status quo in favour of the PRC in the near seas, especially in the South China Sea, under the leadership of Xi Jinping (Okuyama, 2021).

All soft and hard power dynamics that would trigger a power transition have been combined and put into practice by PRC during Xi Jinping in the South and East China Sea (Stashwick, 2019, paras 1–7). PRC heavily concentrated on the militarisation of both seas and fought to push the US and its ally's military assets beyond the first island chain. For the time being, the US cannot deter PRC alone. In case of war, if it cannot successfully defend Taiwan or the Philippines, the US will lose its decades-long hegemony in East Asia and Pacific Region.

Establishment of Air Defence Identification Zone Over the East China Sea

The Chinese Government first announced the establishment of an air defence identification zone (ADIZ) on November 23, 2013 (Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union, 2013). The new ADIZ was announced eight months after Xi Jinping had come to power and underestimated the existing ADIZ in the region, established by the United States in 1950, to reduce the risk of a surprise attack from the Soviet Union. The ADIZ covers a significant part of the East China Sea contiguous to the east and north coastline of the PRC and overlaps in some areas with the ADIZs of South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. It also includes the airspace above several islands, rocks and reefs currently

disputed by Japan and South Korea, including the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and the Suyan Jiao/Ieodo Rock, respectively (Swaine, 2014). ADIZ gained strong opposition from the regional countries. Japan demanded evacuation while the US ignored PRC's ADIZ and continued its air operations over the East China Sea. South Korea expressed "formal regrets". Australia summoned the Chinese ambassador to voice its "opposition," and the Philippines criticised the Chinese threat to safety and national security as well as future control over the South China Sea while Germany and the European Union voiced similar concerns over the armed conflict in the region (Michael, 2014). PRC's response claimed that establishing an ADIZ over the East China Sea is legal, not a threat to any neighbouring countries, safeguards state sovereignty, territorial land, and air security, maintains flight order and has always respected the freedom of over-flight with respect to international law (Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union, 2013).

There are various rationales behind the declaration of the Air Defence Identification Zone over the East China Sea by the Chinese People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) in 2013. First and foremost, the reason behind the declaration of ADIZ is an effort to push US and allied forces away from PRCs near seas and areas of core interest by consolidating air and naval operation areas in the South and East China Sea. Secondly, by establishing an ADIZ over the East China Sea, PRC aims to strictly integrate its air and sea commands under Northern Theatre and thwart any possible adversary challenge to the PRC's growing anti-access/area-denial capabilities (A2/AD). Another crucial reason behind the declaration of ADIZ over the East China Sea is the Japanese Government's nationalisation of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in Okinawa. The ADIZ provides a legal framework for PRC's complaints about US- and Japanese-led intelligence-gathering flights near the Northern Theatre borders of the PRC and for radar tracking and harassment of adversary aircrafts that fail to report flight plans to PRC authorities. Although the US and its allied countries declare that they did not recognise ADIZ declared by the PRC, ADIZ's framework will allow PRC to better monitor and restrict foreign military activity in what it defines as its immediate seas.

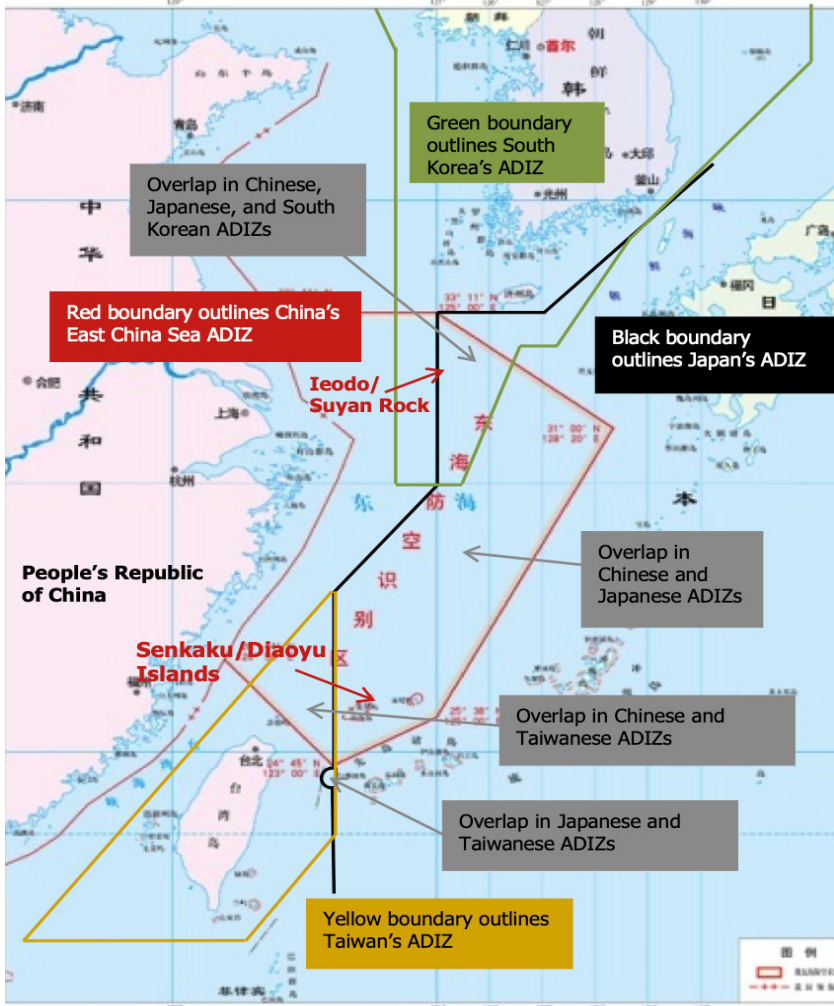


Figure 1.2. Map of country ADIZs around the East China Sea, showing overlapping areas and disputed territories. Modified from “Statement by the Government of the People’s Republic of China on Establishing the East China Sea Air Defense Identification Zone,” Xinhua, November 23, 2013. Zone illustrations and English annotations by Audrye Wong.

PRC’s ADIZ, established in 2013, includes the Senkaku Islands within its scope, and its intention seems to be to strengthen control in the East China Sea and China’s position regarding the Senkaku Islands. From a legal point of view, the ADIZ is set up over international

airspace and thus allows “freedom of overflight,” which does not give the setting country grounds to take coercive action against foreign aircrafts. However, PRC has stated that it can take “defensive and emergency measures” within the ADIZ, which is understood to include the implementation of military measures, which may not be consistent with the principles of international law concerning freedom of flight over the high seas. Concerning Japan’s security, it is believed that by setting up this ADIZ, China intends to scramble its fighter jets against aircraft approaching the Senkaku Islands, which may result in an accidental conflict (Yoshihiro, 2021).

Although the PRC could not effectively employ the ADIZ, which it has established over the East China Sea since 2013, it provides a significant opportunity for the PLAN to track aircraft and submarines belonging to the US, Japan and partially Taiwan and ensure the integration of naval and air domains. The combination of the East China Sea ADIZ with a similar one to be established over the South China Sea will doubly increase the manoeuvring capability of the PLA and PLAAF in controlling, tracking and denying enemy incursions from the East China coast to the first island chain.

Reunification Of Taiwan

The Taiwan dilemma is a centrepiece of all the other four strategies of the PRC identified here. Due to its close relationship with the United States, the Taiwan issue plays a primary and complementary role in the success of other related PRC strategies. The geostrategic location of Taiwan, which is only at 100 miles distance from the east coast of mainland China, can upset all the strategic calculations of the PRC. First and foremost, Taiwan gives a platform for all kinds of military activities to the US in a war scenario. By using the military bases on the independent island, the US will be able to strike the PLA’s most strategic commands on the mainland, which maintains its mobile, ground-based and all other kinds of hypersonic, ballistic and nuclear silos. Furthermore, even in peacetime, Taiwan’s significant geostrategic and technological advancement to track the PLA, PLAN and PLARF’s activities in all military theatres and share the intelligence outcomes with the US and allied countries leave the PRC’s ambitions in the East and South China Sea in significant uncertainty. Since the 1980s, the decision-makers in Beijing have been busy devising strategies and

military plans to counterbalance and counterattack the adversaries' attack on PRC. However, under Xi Jinping's decisive leadership, the capabilities of the PRC match for the first time in its history with its strategies and military-economic capacity to invade Taiwan and unite the independent island with the mainland PRC. Apart from being an obstacle to the PRC's power projection into the region, Taiwan still stands as a diplomatic burden and political hindrance before the PRC due to its democratic structure and relations with other like-minded democratic countries around the world. For the first time in PRC's history, Beijing's capabilities have reached a level that aligns with its long-standing intentions to 'reunify' Taiwan during Xi Jinping's reign. Xi Jinping has demonstrated little patience for the vague cross-strait status quo and sees Taiwan's question as a dangerous threat to the PRC's national security and territorial integrity.

Jin Canrong argued that if China successfully takes over Taiwan, it will replace the US as the world's 'Big Boss'. According to Canrong, the first gain is that if PRC takes over Taiwan, PRC will face the Pacific Ocean directly, and therefore their geopolitical position will instantly improve. Second, if the Taiwan issue is settled, the PRC's century-old national humiliation will be entirely overturned. Taiwan is the last chapter in PRC's century-old national humiliation. Turning this page will be like turning over a century of humiliation. Third, the resolution of the Taiwan issue will cement the definition of Xi Jinping's Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a new era.

Fourth, since all previous battles of the PLA in the past 72 years since the founding of the PRC are self-defence counterattacks when the enemies are at the gate, the reunification of Taiwan by resisting US supremacy will raise the status of the PLA to a higher level. Canrong further argued that Taiwan is the source of all kinds of colour revolutions in mainland China. Moreover, Taiwan pays democratic activists and separatists in Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet behind the door. Therefore, resolving the Taiwan issue will bring political and domestic stability to the PRC. According to Canrong, several other economic, geopolitical and geostrategic issues relate to the Taiwan issue. Therefore, the Taiwan issue is PRC's top military priority. PRC has invested many resources in solving the Taiwan issue; many military bases are deployed, starting from Shandong, then Jiangsu, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong

and Hainan Island. All these military facilities between Taiwan and mainland can be significantly reduced when the Taiwan issue is resolved.

Moreover, related to the military friction between PRC and the US in the East and South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, military reasons cause 70% of civil flight delays. As soon as the planes from Taiwan, Japan, the US and Australia take off, Chinese jets are scrambled, affecting civilian flight schedules. The country's flight on-time rate will significantly improve by resolving the Taiwan issue. The last point of Canrong is that the Taiwan issue is a diplomatic burden for PRC. According to the statistics from Tsinghua University, they spend about 30 billion RMB on maintaining this pledge yearly. With the Taiwan problem resolved through unification with the mainland, no country or country leader can bully and demand extortion from the PRC over the democratic island anymore (Jin, 2021).

In PRC's Military Strategy documents, the Taiwan question has always been evaluated under the National Security title with PRC's other domestic issues, such as the separatist movements in Tibet and Xinjiang. The 2015 China's Military Strategy document identified the "Taiwan independence" separatist forces and their activities as the biggest threat to the peaceful development of cross-strait relations. Additionally, the document mentioned that the PRC faces the difficult task of maintaining political security and social stability, and the root cause of instability has not been eliminated yet because of the de facto situation on the democratic island (The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2015).

The current geostrategic dilemma of Taiwan turned into a blind knot and has numerous drawbacks and vulnerabilities against PRC. Although geographical positioning has advantages, such as its mountainous terrain and practicality for implementing multi-layered defensive strategies that make it difficult to conquer Taiwan, this does not mean that the PRC lacks the military capability to invade and reunite the Island. The PRC has numerous superiorities over Taiwan. In economic aspects, Taiwan has been bearing the brunt of being exposed to the PRC's economic coercion. Moreover, such coercions have led Taiwan to find alternatives for many years, such as diversifying its relations and going to other countries and the Go South policy (Simona, 2022). Another domestic issue to be mentioned in Taiwan is

the political divisions. Taiwan is politically divided between the DPP (Democratic Progress Party) and The Kuomintang (KMT). The KMT is the second largest party on the Island, and it is known for its close ties with the PRC. However, recently there is a significant decrease seen in the popularity of the KMT, especially among the new generation, primarily because of the suppression of the protests in Hong Kong by the PRC, the implementation of National Security Law in Hong Kong, PRC's attitudes towards Taiwan and the party's close stance to the PRC. Moreover, the intricacies and impediments of Taiwan make the democratic island a weak link in the US competition with the PRC in East Asia and the Pacific (Ellis, 2016)

The democratic island has always been in crisis with the mainland over time. The anti-secession law in 2005, and before that, PRC fired missiles towards the Taiwan Strait in 1995 (Ross, 2000, pp. 87–123). However, since Xi Jinping came to power, present crises have become almost routine, and Taiwan's military airspaces began to be violated by PLAARF unprecedentedly in provocative and persistent ways (Trent, 2020). Since January 2019, there has been an increase in speeches and rhetoric about Taiwan under Xi Jinping's administration, equating Taiwan with the Chinese dream and national rejuvenation. Although the history of accusations against Taiwan dates to the discourses in PRC's communication and political documents in 1979, the allegations against Taiwan turned into a much harsher tone in 2019. For the first time, the independent island has been accused of preventing the PRC from achieving its national goal and national rejuvenation. The US entered a strategic competition with the PRC and the simultaneous western countries raising their voices on Taiwan brought the PRC under Xi Jinping to a much more nervous level about Taiwan. Therefore, the PRC hardened its actions against Taiwan at an unprecedented level in PRC history because it perceived the developments in Taiwan had the potential to lead to a temporary separation and become a permanent divorce of Taiwan from the PRC (Simona, 2022).

The successful reunification of Taiwan with the mainland will turn the strategic game totally in favour of the PRC. Especially in its strategic competition with the US, it will further expand its military capability to target the US military assets in the East China Sea, South China Sea, and military bases in the Pacific. The negotiations are complex with Democratic Progressive Party President Tsai Ing-Wen in

power. Cross-strait relations can improve if the opposition candidate of Kuomintang wins the election in 2024, but Kuomintang has not had enough support and popularity to resist DPP. Since the PRC believes that the ways to unify Taiwan with the mainland peacefully are entirely over, all its strategies focus on removing the US and its allies' military assets from the South and East China Sea as much as possible. Canrong said that once the National Congress of the Communist Party of China is over in the fall of 2022, the scenario of armed unification will move towards becoming a reality. The leadership will likely move towards armed unification by 2027, the 100th anniversary of the PLA's founding (Tsukasa, 2022).

Aims To Breach the First Island Chain

In its broadest definition, the first island chain, starting from the Japanese archipelago and ending southward in Borneo and Natuna Besar, are island chains with strategic and geographical definitions. Chinese scholars trace the origins of the first island chain concept to US strategic thought during the early years of the Cold War. To them, the archipelagic framework was the most concrete indication of American belligerence towards the newly founded PRC. Chinese commentators also quote Dean Acheson, US Secretary of State under President Harry Truman, who in 1950 sketched a "defence perimeter of the Pacific" that ran along the Aleutians, Japan, Okinawa, and the Philippines. MacArthur argued that control of "a chain of islands extending in an arc from the Aleutians to the Marianas" would enable the United States to dominate with sea and air power every Asiatic port from Vladivostok to Singapore and prevent any hostile movement into the Pacific (Yoshihara, 2012).

Chinese sources offer various perspectives on the island chains' operational and strategic significance. In particular, various Chinese scholars maintain that the island chains are

1. Barriers that the PRC must penetrate to achieve freedom of manoeuvre in the maritime domain,
2. Springboards for power projection by whoever controls a given island chain, and
3. Benchmarks for advancing PRC's maritime and air force projection in the Asia-Pacific.

The Chinese military sources differentiated the geographical definition of the first island chain. Some dwell on the overall geographic descriptions of island chains while others deal with the strategic value of critical links in island chains. In this regard, while some Chinese sources define Taiwan as a Strategic Puncture Point, others see Japan as a critical position due to its close relations with the US, and some see the Philippines as the most vulnerable position on the island chains. The waterways and straits within the first island chain are other strategic points in PLAN activities. There are almost 140 waterways within the first island chain, but only 20 or more passages frequently are used by PRC's vessels or warships to access beyond the first island chain (Erickson & Wuthnow, 2016). The geographical and strategic definition of the first island chain leads to determining the tactical and operational capability level of PLAN and PLAAF over the first island chain in historical and ideological rivalry perspectives.



Figure 1.3: Island Chains in PLA Navy Handbook (PLAN, 2012)

The first island chain, which can be defined as a line drawn in front of the rise of communism in Asia during the Cold War, has become visible again in the academic field, with the US-PRC rivalry reaching the global level. These two superpowers are putting forward various strategies to control these island chains. Gaining one of the military build-ups and competition accumulated on these island chains will be one step closer to global domination. The PRC, which thinks it is surrounded by the US and its allies and incarcerated in the first island chain, carries out a sum of all other designs to break the first island chain.

The strategy of breaking the first island chain is the conclusive step of all other component strategies of the PRC to upend the US dominance in East Asia completely, turn the status quo entirely in its favour in the near seas and move towards the second island chains and the western Pacific without facing any threat (Tkacik, 2018, pp. 321–344). The first island chain simultaneously is a two-way street in the US-PRC engagements. The PRC pushed the US and its allies beyond the first island chain while the US and its allies worked hard to keep PRC's military assets behind the island chains. To sail towards the Pacific, become a global naval power, and push the US from the region, the first island chain is mainly defined as the destiny line for China. Countries such as the US, Japan, Australia, and even India constantly hold exercises in this region. In this respect, Japan recently announced that it would deploy missile defence systems on the first island chain, which is seen as absolutely will prevent China from crossing the first island chain and opening to the Pacific. The first island chain is a baseline for Japan to contain China's power in the East China Sea and prevent it from expanding into the Pacific Ocean. For this reason, Japan plans to deploy its Self-Defense Forces' surface-to-air and surface-to-ship missile units to islands in the first island chain (Louise, 2021). This case is considered an essential element of the A2/AD against China. Even today, China frequently sends many warships and military aircraft beyond the first island line into the Pacific Ocean, but this is a peacetime event and not much of a problem. However, in wartime, such actions by the Chinese side would be very problematic because they could lead to attacks on Japan's military facilities on the Pacific side of the ocean or even on US military bases such as Guam. Therefore, Japan could probably practically blockade the first island chain in wartime. For example, it might deploy mines and submarines in

the major straits, including the Miyako Strait, and control the sea and air space with surface-to-ship and surface-to-air missiles in coordination with US forces (Yoshihiro, 2021).

The strategic importance of the first island chain has an exceptionally complex map. The geolocation of the island chains consists of the adjacent waters of the East and South China Sea. The maritime lifeline that Japan depends upon for its imports and exports is also the only waterway for PRC's eastward entry into the Pacific, the United States' westward entry into East Asia, and Russia's southward movement (Yoshihara, 2012, pp. 293–314). Moreover, PRC's strategies face the technological advancement of the island country Japan. In a war case, the Japanese MSDF's advanced submarine capabilities still have enough power and technological advancement to block the chokepoints along the Miyako Strait and Ryukyus through which PLAN warships and submarines try to pass to break out of the first island chain. In this respect, Japan played a critical role in pushing PLAN behind the first island chain barrier through offensive mine warfare, electromagnetic warfare technology, and missile units deployed across the Ryukyu Islands chain with ballistic and cruise missile strikes, among some other significant challenges that the PLA/N faces in its way to breach the first island chain and open the western Pacific. With the agreement of the US to transfer nuclear submarine technology to Australia under the AUKUS agreement, another US ally in the region will be able to deploy a nuclear-powered submarine fleet to the East and South China Sea (Peter, 2022). However, despite the military and technological superiority of the US and its allies, pushing the PRC, which has reached a high military and technological capacity, behind the first island chain with military approaches would bring the possibility of a hot war breaking out with high costs.

Those four military strategies mentioned above and implemented in the South and East China Sea are planned under the Northern, Eastern, Southern, and Central Theatre Commands, which were established under the chairmanship of Xi Jinping

in 2016. The PLA formally abandoned the seven decades-old military regions in 2016 and replaced them with five operational commands (North, South, East, West, and Central regions) responsible for regional defence. The PLA, PLAAF, PLARF, and the PLA Strategic Support Force (SSF)'s power projection capability has grown tremendously (Ziyu, 2021). The PRC's overall strategy aims to achieve "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" by 2049 to match or surpass US global influence and power, replace US alliances and security partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region, and alter the international order to be more advantageous to Beijing and PRC's national interests. Achievement of these goals and replacing the US as a global superpower depends entirely on neutralising the presence of the US and its allies in the East and South China Sea, pushing them beyond the first island chain, and opening to the Pacific Ocean. In this context, since Xi Jinping came to power, significant successes have been achieved in military modernisation, navy, air force, rocket forces, and strategic support forces, which are ways to achieve these successes. An enormous economic boom also supports these achievements of the PRC. Furthermore, these four strategies are tightly interconnected and intertwined with each other. Unification of Taiwan with the mainland is impossible unless the status quo in the South and East China Seas changes entirely in favour of the PRC through militarisation methods and strategies. The PLA cannot set up military platforms and break the island chains without unifying Taiwan with the mainland. Taiwan is the cornerstone target among these strategies. Because air, sea, and submarine fleets of the PRC on their way to the Pacific Ocean must pass under surveillance and track by the Taiwanese military. Although ADIZ, which was established on the East China Sea in 2013, seems like the weakest link among strategies, it was activated against Japan, which played the most critical role in the US's containment and deterrence strategies against PRC, and since Japan is the most powerful country in East Asia after PRC. Threats from Japan can be eliminated much more quickly through the established ADIZ over the East China Sea and

disputed areas such as Senaku/Diaoyu Islands. ADIZ will give much more comfortable manoeuvring space for PLAN's Aircraft Carriers and submarines around Miyako Strait and Ryuku Islands through island chains. The latest "Indo-Pacific Strategy Report" published by the US claimed that the Indo-Pacific region is facing increasing challenges, especially from China, which is seeking a sphere of influence in the region by combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power. The United States encourages Japan to strengthen cooperation with allies and partners to meet these challenges and compete with China. The report also mentioned that the United States would strive to maintain peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, including by supporting Taiwan's self-defence capabilities (The White House, 2022).

In response to the PRC's rapid militarisation of the East and South China Sea through various ways and strategies, the United States is strengthening and deepening its presence in the region with a much broader perspective. Forward deployment of strategic bombers, nuclear-armed aircraft carriers, nuclear-armed ballistic submarines, air defence systems, and intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance among the main strategic components of the warfare capabilities has been almost fully activated throughout the region to contain PRC's activities. In addition to the technical stuff, the US is in a great deal to re-strengthen the US's military bilateral, trilateral and multilateral alliance network across the Indo-Pacific region (Colby, 2021), establish Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with Australia, India, and Japan, and establish the AUKUS, a trilateral security pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States for nuclear-powered submarine and nuclear technology sharing with Australia established to target the PRC directly. China has described the military grouping led by the US as closed and exclusive "cliques" targeting other countries, (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, 2021). Furthermore, the United States has increased its support for Taiwan, both for sophisticated military

equipment and for the modernisation of Taiwan's military to the highest level in history (Defense News, 2022). In addition to the technical support, the visit of Nancy Pelosi, the third most senior government official of the US, to Taipei, despite all the objections of Beijing, was a formidable commitment of the US to support Taiwan against any attempts of invasion from the PRC, (Arms Control Today, 2022).

PRC equated the Taiwanese-related sections in the Biden administration's newly published 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy with the playing with fire and stated that these contents constitute a significant intervention in the PRC's internal affairs and a violation of the one-China principle and the basic norms regulating international relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China, 2022). Relatedly, PRC is also strictly angry with military activity between US-Japan and Taiwan in the South China Sea. Such activities are perceived by the PRC as a direct intervention in Beijing's internal affairs, seriously threatening peace, and stability across the straits, violating international rules, violating the sovereignty of other countries, and causing regional turmoil (General of the Information Office of the Ministry of National Defence, 2022).

The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine has created some golden opportunities for Beijing in its struggle with the US and allied countries in Asia and the Pacific region. The crisis has demonstrated in several ways that the US-led liberal international order is in a much weaker position vis-à-vis the PRC for several reasons. First and foremost, the similarities between Ukraine and Taiwan and the inability of the US, EU, and NATO to physically intervene in war vis a vis Russia and the fact that the pressures against Russia were limited to sanctions only further strengthened the desire of the PRC to reunify Taiwan with the mainland. Decision-makers in Beijing follow and observe the Ukraine crisis, which unleashes all the military, diplomatic and economic potentials of its previous rival very closely to learn lessons for their Taiwan question. The Ukraine crisis, which has emerged

as a new front, distraction area, and financial burden for PRC's rivals, simultaneously offers Beijing an opportunity to combine its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to create a more robust sphere of influence in the East and South China Sea, where its similar issue with Taiwan is located. From the first days of the invasion, Beijing blamed the US and NATO for the Ukraine crisis since Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a front opened against the US global hegemony where the PRC was fighting to destroy from another side. In China's Five-Point Position on the current Ukraine issue, State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the reasons behind Russia's invasion of Ukraine were that NATO followed five consecutive eastward expansion tours and Russia's legitimate security demands were not taken seriously. Beijing further claims that NATO's involvement in Ukraine is a Cold War mentality instead of serving peace and stability in the region and fuelling the tension between parties (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022).

Secondly, another situation that emerged with the Ukraine crisis is that the US and the EU need Beijing to solve the Ukraine crisis (South China Morning Post, 2022). The US and EU leaders called on Beijing due to its close relations with Russia in the ongoing war and asked Beijing to pressure Russia to withdraw its forces from Ukraine (Gabriel, et al., 2022). Such weak demands from NATO allies provide more alternative platforms for the PRC to further increase its negotiating power with the United States over Ukraine. CIA's director William Burns in his appearance at the annual House of Representatives Intelligence Committee claimed that although PRC has been unsettled by the difficulties Russia has faced since it invaded Ukraine, Chinese leader Xi Jinping's determination regarding Taiwan should not be underestimated. Burns believed that Ukraine's resistance vis a vis Russia's invasion impacted the PRC's calculus regarding Taiwan (David & Michael, 2022). Though there are significant differences between Ukraine and Taiwan, existing military relations between PRC

and Russia can further strengthen when Russia is under massive sanctions from more than 140 countries worldwide. NATO's long-term preoccupation with Russia's expansion in Europe can turn the PRC's invasion of Taiwan into a *fait accompli*. Such a case will lead to the PRC breaching the first island chains much more quickly and ending the US hegemony in East Asia and the Pacific and Pacific Region.

Although some analysts claim that the Ukrainian War will have severe consequences for the PRC, Peking has not made any restrictions on its activities in the East and South China Sea, the main front of the encounter with its main rivals. Moreover, it has surrounded Taiwan more violently than in previous years, especially after Pelosi's visit. Furthermore, it conducted critical military training and patrols with Russia surrounding Japan, the biggest ally of the US in the region, (USNI NEWS, 2022). Meanwhile, at the initial of the Ukraine War, several analysts predicted that the Ukraine War would have harsh consequences on the PRC's market, energy, and economic development, (Scott, 2022; Alicia, 2022; Yimei, 2022). However, the latest Statistics released by the National Bureau of Statistics show that PRC's GDP expanded 3.0% YoY in the first three quarters of 2022 to top 87.02 trillion yuan (about \$12.01 trillion), Total imports and exports expanded 9.9% YoY to 31.11 tln yuan (about \$4.29 tln) per capita, and disposable income stood at 27,650 yuan (about \$3,812.06), up 5.3% YoY in nominal terms (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2022).

Conclusion

Compared to the past two decades, the PRC's efforts to challenge and overthrow the global hegemon US and attain a position of international supremacy has evolved in a more realistic direction. The article highlighted that the PRC's growing power projection capability in the East and South China Sea and beyond the first island chain bring serious security challenges to the established power and its allies' circle in East Asia and the Pacific region. Moreover, the assertive military expansionism of the rising power in the East and South China Sea and

the establishment of military blocs and alliances by the established hegemon to contain the PRC make the scenarios of peaceful power transition even more impossible. On the other hand, the full politico-military authority of Xi Jinping in Beijing, the diminished power of the mainland-friendly KMT among the new generation, and the strengthened popularity of the pro-independence DPP has left almost zero room for agreement in cross-strait relations. Contrary to early claims that the Ukrainian War would negatively affect Beijing, the PLA's strategic applications in the East and South China Sea versus its main competitor potentially reached a more advanced level. This article aims to help illuminate the possible consequences of the current military confrontation between the two superpowers in the East and South China Sea in the context of power transition, although some data are limited and inaccessible. Nevertheless, the context was enriched through original Chinese sources and interviews with experts of China and Taiwan from different parts of the world. The finding suggested that the US-PRC competition that has started in the South and East China Sea, and considering the modern warfare capabilities, will become more chronic and spread over the years. As friction between the two opposite superpowers gets worse, the region's countries will be forced to choose sides more drastically. Thus, since this competition bears an existential threat and turns into a matter of life and death for both sides, it can only result in the complete defeat and subordination of one of the parties.

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