



Title: Dual use of Chinese Military Development. Balancing between the String of Pearls and the Belt and Road Initiative¹

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Summary

Recently, China has been increasing its military development with the aim of protecting its core interest, which include national security, economic development, and stability, as well as to actively participate in protecting Sea Lines of Communication in the Indo-Pacific region. However, some countries consider this military development has other goals such as to exert regional control by military power projection overseas. This article argues that Chinese military development has a dual use component which can be applied to the protection of projects in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that connects China, Central Asia, Russia, Europe, and the Indo-Pacific Region, but also can be used for power projection as part of what scholars define as the Chinese String of Pearls. We conclude arguing that although

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Chinese military development in the Indo-Pacific region focuses on protecting Chinese BRI projects, however, its dual use component may pose a threat to countries in the region if China does not show real commitment to cooperate in freedom of navigation and determination to peacefully managing maritime disputes with other countries in the region.

Keywords: Chinese military development, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), String of Pearls, Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD), Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

Article

In the last decades Chinese economic growth has accelerated the development and expansion of its military capabilities with People Liberation Navy (PLN) playing a crucial role in the protection of near seas, Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and territories under dispute such as the Senkaku/Diaoyu(tai) islands. According to Chinese 10th Defense White Paper (DWP), “China’s Military Strategy”, from May 26, 2015, China will progressively change its navy development from “offshore waters defense” to a defense that also includes “open seas protection” that can defend national security and protect its global interests (THE STATE COUNCIL OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, 2015). Since the late 1970s China has been developing the concept of “offshore waters defense” (the region between Chinese coast and the first island chain) or “near seas (active) defense” to protect near seas, a concept that became more important in 1993. Later, in 2015, Chinese government presented the “open seas protection” for its naval strategy, a concept that can be interpreted as the protection of waters between the first and second island chain in Western Pacific, and in the Indian Ocean (WU, Zhengyu, 2019, 668; LI, Nan, 2011, 109-140). This new naval strategy focus on Chinese main national interests: national security, (homeland defense, recovering Taiwan, and defending its interest and rights in the near seas including disputed islands and reefs), economic development, and stability, which requires protecting SLOCs for resources import and access to global markets (WU, Zhengyu, 2019, 668; SHARMAN, Christopher H, 2015, 6).

Chinese double strategy requires focusing on sea-denial for “offshore water defense”, but also on a mix between sea-denial, sea control and power projection for “open seas

protection”, which at the same time contradicts Chinese position towards US since it is its natural adversary in offshore waters but a country to cooperate with for “open seas protection” (Wu, Z., 2019, 669. Kaplan, Robert D., 2010, 37-38). In order to achieve these aims, Chinese development can be carried out in two ways, symmetrically by building a blue water navy and a wide network of overseas military bases, or asymmetrically, by developing an anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities and improving its geostrategic position to avoid US navy (USN) superiority (WU, Z., 2019, 669-670). However, since China must protect its land and coastal frontiers as primary objective, thus it cannot afford to concentrate its resources on developing and maintaining a blue water navy and overseas bases in a symmetric approach (LORD, Carnes, 2009, quoted in WU, Z., 2019, 671). In addition, a blue water navy also needs the support of costly space, air and cyber capabilities, which suppose a huge expending for Chinese economy, therefore, according to some analysts the best option for China is to develop an asymmetric strategy to compete with USN (WU, Z., 2019, 671; LEI, David, 2008, 154). Thus, since 1993 near seas (offshore waters) defense has been Chinese main strategy in maritime regions (LI, Nan, 2009, quoted in WU, Z., 2019, 672), this strategy has focused on maritime sovereignty disputes such as East China Sea (ECS), South China Sea (SCS), the reunification with Taiwan, defense of prosperous coastal regions, and it is related to two concepts: “offshore defense” to make Chinese navy able to obtain control of the seas from its coast to beyond the first island chain, and “limited area denial” firstly to restrict foreign navies access to these waters, and secondly to restrict access to near seas, especially the ECS and the SCS (HORTA, Loro, 2012, quoted in WU, Z., 2019, 672-673). These two concepts, ‘offshore defense’ and ‘limited area denial’, are the main characteristics of the A2/AD strategy (Anti Access/Area Denial (A2/AD), a strategy to avoid hostile navies to enter maritime regions and to deny them freedom of action (McDEVITT, Michael, 34-35). To achieve these objectives, People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) has focused on sea denial over power projection capabilities and sea control (WU, Z., 2019, 673; LIM, Yves-Heng, 114). A clear example of the focus on denial strategy is the development of Chinese submarine fleets in recent years (KOSTECKA, Daniel J., 2012, 111-112; LIM, Y.H., 113; WU, Z., 2019, 673). In addition, China has tried to obtain a better geostrategic position against other nations such as the US, for instance in the SCS where China can operate effectively and create a corridor to open seas (BUSZYNSKI, Leszek, 2012, 147, 151).

If China can control the SCS it will be able to protect its ships crossing SLOCs in the region by denying other navies from blocking Chinese ships, which will improve Chinese near seas defense strategy. Moreover, SCS control will allow China to project more power in the straits that lead to the Indian Ocean, thus increasing the protection of its economic interests (WU, Z., 2019, 674; SAITO, Yusuke, 2017, 7-8). This sea denial strategy development will make more difficult to foreign navies to approach Chinese near seas, to disrupt Chinese maneuvers in ECS, and it will restrict foreign navies to interfere in a possible conflict for the Senkaku/Diaoyu(tai) islands with China as main actor.

Although China have been prioritizing near seas defense and sea denial capabilities over power projection (WU, Z., 2019, 674; HOLMES, James H., YOSHIHARA, Toshi, 2010, 26-28), at present China faces a dilemma developing and maintaining this sea denial strategy for crisis and time of conflict, while at the same time its navy cannot effectively protect important SLOCs for its economic interest in far seas (WU, Z., 2019, 675; KAPLAN, Robert. D., 2010, 37-38). In response to this challenge the 2019 Chinese white paper on National Defense highlighted the importance of PLAN for China's national security and development, announcing that PLAN is accelerating the transition from defense of near seas to missions on the far seas (THE STATE COUNCIL OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, 2019). This indicates that China will pay more attention in the near future to the development of PLAN for its deployment in open seas, which may bring concerns in the international community for the real intentions about the deployment of its capabilities abroad. The justification of Chinese navy for open seas strategy is motivated by its economic development and the importance of sea routes in the Belt Road Initiative (BRI). The belt, which represents the Silk Road Economic Belt, is an economic link that will unite China, Central Asia, Russia, and Europe, and will connect China through central Asia with the Indian Ocean, the Persian Gulf, and the Mediterranean Sea, using a network of land routes, railways, pipelines, and power grids. The road represents the new millennium Maritime Silk Road (MSR), and will run from China, through SCS to the Indian Ocean and the South Pacific forming a network of ports and other facilities (NORDIN, Astrid H.M. and Weissmann, Mikael, 2018, 1). The aim of the open seas strategy is to focus on securing MSR initiative projects for its success (WU, Z., 2019, 676; LI. N., 2011). In the development and protection of the MSR initiative the

concept of the String of Pearls plays an important role, and it is related to PLAN development and acceleration of its transition to missions on the far seas for SLOCs protection. Pehrson defines the String of Pearls as a group of ports, airfields, diplomatic contacts, and military modernization (each of them is a *pearl*) that extends from South China Sea through the Strait of Malacca, the Indian Ocean, and the Arabian Gulf, a concept that shows the expansion of Chinese geopolitical influence. These installations, relationships and capabilities allow Chinese presence in the SLOCs that connect China with Middle East (PEHRSON, Christopher J., 2006, 3). The main issue is that the Chinese String of Pearls although is supposed to be part of Chinese peaceful development, it can be used to modify the existing world order (PEHRSON, C. J., 2006, 8-23). In fact, China has worked to protect its imports transported through the Indian Ocean, where its navy plays a vital role to achieve this aim. To maintain this protection China needs installations to support its submarines and ships in the region. Although individually each *pearl* (i.e. port, airfields, diplomatic contacts, and military developments) do not shows signs of Chinese military projection in the Indian Ocean, all together indicate Chinese military intentions in the region (KHURANA, Gurpreet S., 2008, 22), which are primarily deter states to block its strategic imports, protect its energy investments, improve its position against other economic competitors, strengthen its nuclear deterrence and strike capability against India, and to achieve military leverage and superiority during crisis or conflicts (KHURANA, G. S., 2008, 16). Kostecka, on the other hand, points out that China is not pursuing the development of a chain of naval bases from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean, but a chain of “places”, friendly foreign ports where Chinese Navy can replenish fuel and provisions, rest or repair its ships to conduct non-traditional security missions. However, he also agrees that it is still possible that China will seek more presence in the region to implement its policies and strategic objectives (KOSTECKA, D. J., 2012, 105-121). Dixon has a perspective in the middle ground, where China is following a “Bow and arrow” strategy, which consists of strengthening nears seas capabilities, and extending them through the ECS and SCS, passing the first island chain, and reaching the second island chain in case it decides to project capabilities in the far seas, giving less importance to Indian Ocean except for occasional missions. The main aim of PLAN is to protect Chinese coastline, which is critical for its national defense and to manage primary issues like avoiding Taiwan independence or obtaining sovereignty over Senkaku islands and SCS islands

and reefs, while preparing itself in case power projection is necessary to protect its core interests overseas. The arrow implies PLAN acting in Indian Ocean for counter piracy missions and to protect Chinese economic interests and SLOCs, missions that do not need military bases but ports for replenish fuel, supplies and rest for Chinese personnel. Thus, ports in the Indian Ocean are mainly focused on spreading Chinese influence over the region for its navy logistics than on military projection of its capabilities (DIXON, Jonathan, 2014, 389-400). These perspectives present different approach to Chinese defense strategy and power projection, some of them implies Chinese pacific military development and projection overseas, however the possibility of dual use is still there, thus, it is not possible to determine if China will use overseas facilities for military projection and area denial, an idea shared by actors like Japan, US, and Taiwan.

In addition, these *Pearls* or *Places* can be seen as part of the BRI, through which China plans to protect its interests and extend its influence into the Eurasian region. The BRI plans to develop both terrestrial and maritime routes, but due to low costs and efficiencies of scale in cargo shipping the maritime route will be preferable since terrestrial route require maintenance and more protection (FALLON, Theresa, 2015, 143). Brewster, conversely, argues that although strategic interests in the Indian Ocean are important for China, more important are the new overland routes promoted by the projects included in this initiative, which connect Eurasia with the Indian Ocean, and seeks the economic integration of the region. Its development will increase Chinese influence in the region and eventually will stabilize Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean and its littoral as a permanent power in the region (BREWSTER, David, 2017, 269-291). In fact, the BRI's security components can change the geopolitical and geo-economic order not only in the Indian Ocean region but also in Eurasian countries, since it creates an unbalanced economic dependency between countries in the region, such as Pakistan and Burma, and China that are related with its interests in deepening defense and security cooperation with them and the presence of People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the region, which are essential to secure projects related to the BRI (WU, Xiangning; JI, You, 2020, 238-239). In fact, Feng Liang considers that PLA presence in the BRI is mainly related to secure Chinese economic and commercial interest in the region rather than a plan to project military capabilities in the Indian Ocean region (FENG, Liang quoted in WU, X and

Ji, Y., 2020, 228). However, the military component of BRI's initiative projects still have a dual use, civilian and military, such as railways and highways that will improve transport efficiency between China and Pakistan, which can be used for troop transportation in case of necessity. The problem with the Chinese initiative is that it is not easy to predict if new installations such as ports will be transformed in military bases in the future (WU, X and Ji, Y., 2020, 223).

In conclusion, China will continue projecting its capabilities through the Indian Ocean and central Asia to exert influence in the region and to secure its interest related to BRI projects. Chinese capabilities, ports, railroads, and installations developed in the Indo-Pacific, although focused on protecting and facilitating interconnection and economic development in the region, still has a dual use component that can be redirected to deter other navies from interfering in Chinese economic activities overseas, from blocking Chinese ships transportation along the SLOCs, or from putting into practice an anti-access and area-denial strategy in regions where China has disputes with other countries. Moreover, China may use these assets to assert its presence overseas, as well as to strengthen its leverage in maritime disputes such as in SCS and ECS regions, which will increase tensions and may lead to regional instability and undesirable conflicts with other disputants if China does not guarantee its military development is for cooperation in freedom of navigation, and if it does not show commitment for the peaceful managing of disputes with other countries in the Indo-Pacific region.

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