



## Too Important to Be Left to the Admirals: The Need to Study Maritime Great-Power Competition

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### ABSTRACT

For the first time since World War II the most likely friction points between a rising, potentially revisionist power and a declining, largely status-quo power are located at sea. This special issue accordingly seeks to set an appropriate agenda for security studies research. It presents six interconnected articles exploring different dimensions of maritime competition, largely between China and the United States. Between them, the articles employ three important approaches to security studies: quantitative analysis, pairing classic international relations theory with qualitative evidence, and operational-level research. Together, they consider different geographies—competition and conflict in the Western Pacific versus in the greater Middle East; different issue areas such as contending legal claims and control over sea lines of communication; and, finally, different uses of naval power—including blockades, naval diplomacy, fleet engagements, and nuclear escalation. Combined, the issue encourages applying the many classic approaches of security studies to this high-stakes relationship while considering maritime conflict as distinct from other forms, such as land and nuclear, that have traditionally occupied the field.

When does maritime competition between great powers become dangerous? How does it differ from other types of security competition in peacetime, crises, and ultimately war? What different strategic courses can and do great powers take when engaged in maritime competition? And how can the field of security studies contribute to our understanding of these compelling contemporary questions?

Finding answers to these questions has grown increasingly relevant to current international politics. Most trade in our still-globalized era is sea-borne (as is most communication, if one considers undersea cables). Forty percent of the world's population lives within 100 km of a coast, and recent migration patterns suggest this figure will grow (much of this population

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will cluster in coastal megacities).<sup>1</sup> This movement is occurring despite enormous changes to the world's littorals from rising sea levels and other effects of climate change.<sup>2</sup>

More specifically for security studies, we are entering a rare moment in international politics where the most likely friction points between a rising, potentially revisionist power and a relatively declining, largely status-quo power are located at sea. With the possible exception of pre-World War II Japan and the United States, modern great-power competitions have generally pitted a continental power—such as Wilhelmine Germany, Nazi Germany, and the USSR—against maritime powers such as Great Britain and the United States. The current competition between China and the United States, relative to previous great-power dyads, takes place between two continent-sized trading states with global interests that are comparably maritime-oriented, largely secure in terms of land-based threats, and nuclear-armed.<sup>3</sup>

Although there seem to be few reasons for the United States and China to fight a war, if one occurs it will almost certainly take place between navies and air forces rather than armies. The most pressing issue between the two countries remains the status of Taiwan, an inherently maritime problem. Several ongoing island disputes plague Chinese relations with US allies such as Japan and the Philippines. Chinese and US operations in the South China Sea—development of artificial islands, aggressive use of maritime militia and state-controlled fishing fleets, brinkmanship over oil platforms, freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs)—risk escalation between fleets.<sup>4</sup> Both the United States and China depend on maritime commerce for a significant portion of their prosperity (and thus their political stability). As then Defense Secretary James Mattis testified to Congress to justify a 2018 increase in the United States' naval shipbuilding budget, "I believe we are moving toward a more maritime strategy in terms of our military strategy to defend the country. It is the nature of our time."<sup>5</sup>

Given this development, this special issue seeks to set an agenda for security studies research. It presents six interconnected articles exploring different dimensions of maritime competition, motivated by, if not directly addressing, China and the United States. Using a variety of common approaches in security studies, the articles consider different geographies—

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<sup>1</sup>Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN) of Columbia University, "CSD Coastal Population Indicator: Data and Methodology Page," 2006, <http://sedac.ciesin.columbia.edu/es/csdcoastal.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Mathew E. Hauer et al., "Sea-Level Rise and Human Migration," *Nature Reviews Earth & Environment* 1, no. 28–39 (2020): 28–39. Mark Pelling and Sophie Blackburn, eds., *Megacities and the Coast: Risk, Resilience and Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>3</sup>It remains true that, compared to China, the United States is relatively more secure from territorial threats, more heavily nuclear armed, and less reliant on trade for the health of its economy.

<sup>4</sup>Robert D. Kaplan, "The South China Sea Is the Future of Conflict," *Foreign Policy* 188 (September/October 2011): 78–85.

<sup>5</sup>Office of Senator Wicker, "Wicker Asks Mattis About Shipbuilding Schedule, Russian Threat," 26 April 2018.

that is, Western Pacific versus the greater Middle East; different issue areas—such as contending legal claims and control over sea lines of communication; and different instruments and operations—blockades, naval diplomacy, fleet engagements, and nuclear escalation.

We hope this will spur a renaissance in a venerable research tradition. After all, in the twentieth century alone, events on the world's oceans and seas shaped the campaigns and results of three hegemonic wars—two hot and one cold. Arguably the Anglo-German naval rivalry was one of the underlying causes of World War I. Similarly, the Japan–America contest for supremacy in the Pacific contributed to the decision to attack Pearl Harbor and the course of the Pacific campaign. Two of the Cold War's near misses—the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Mediterranean standoff during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War—involved tense interactions at sea. Many navalists—a term we use to describe the often overlapping sets of proponents of naval power and scholars of maritime issues—and some international historians credit the US Navy (USN)'s prominent role in the Reagan-era defense buildup as one of the contributors to the USSR's collapse.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the stakes, security studies and naval-oriented research, with important exceptions noted below, have rarely engaged with each other in recent years. This is partly the fault of naval services and their intellectual cohort. Throughout the issue, we cite much important work in the research program we term “navalism,” but note that this work does not engage with the larger security studies subfield and tends to be sympathetic to pro-navy policy cases. In the United States, for example, there is no maritime equivalent of West Point's Modern War Institute or its famous “SOSH Mafia”—which provided, for better or worse, the intellectual underpinnings of the counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq.<sup>7</sup> But this is also due to contemporary security studies' understandable focus on territorial conflict, nuclear weapons, and intrastate conflict. When security scholars do address maritime issues, it is largely as a case among many in support of a larger theoretical approach.

In this introduction and special issue, we argue for revising this equilibrium for three reasons. The first and most obvious reason is the increased salience of Sino-American maritime competition. Second, we believe the unique aspects of a navy intersect in interesting ways with important theoretical questions in our field on international law, globalization, military innovation, and the political economy of conflict. Naval forces, and sea-

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<sup>6</sup>Peter D. Haynes, *Toward a New Maritime Strategy: American Naval Thinking in the Post-Cold War Era* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2015), 31–33; Sebastian Bruns, *US Naval Strategy and National Security: The Evolution of American Maritime Power* (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>7</sup>Fred Kaplan, *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

based activities more generally, should be the primary case for many of these questions, rather than an additional supporting case. Finally, we believe security studies theory based on territorial- or nuclear-oriented research does not always apply comfortably to conflicts at sea. This is especially true given that maritime forces' activities during peacetime play a much more important role than other forms of military power in international politics. It is this final starting assumption that motivates this special issue.

This introduction first briefly lays out the state of maritime forces, again focusing on China and the United States. It then describes the contemporary roles that maritime capability plays in Sino-American relations. We then review the literatures at the intersection of maritime affairs and international security, which we argue occur only at rare points in these sub-fields' development. Scholars in earlier eras thought deeply about these issues out of necessity, and we cover the few bright spots in contemporary security studies and how maritime security intersects with several ongoing research programs. Finally, we introduce the special issue's contributions, and conclude by reviewing avenues for future research.

### **The Current State of Maritime Competition**

The US government's primary statement of its national security policy explicitly identifies how "after being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition [has] returned."<sup>8</sup> Whereas this document gives Russia and China roughly equal billing as potential adversaries, this is largely misleading, especially in the maritime domain. American defense planners describe China as the "pacing threat."<sup>9</sup> Russia, on the other hand, remains a militarily powerful state, largely because of its large nuclear force and geographic breadth, but has limits as a great-power competitor because of its fading economy, unfavorable demographics, and inadequate technological base.<sup>10</sup>

Whereas we do not suggest a bipolar distribution of international power, or that smaller players do not have an impact on international politics, we do argue that, as a first-order approximation, only two states matter in maritime competition.<sup>11</sup> The number of international players at sea is

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<sup>8</sup>The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2017), 27.

<sup>9</sup>Vivienne Machi, "Reagan Forum Panelists View China as Main 'Pacing Threat' to U.S. Security," *Defense Daily*, 1 December 2018.

<sup>10</sup>Celine Marange, "Russia," in *Comparative Grand Strategy: A Framework and Cases*, ed. Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski, and Simon Reich (London: Oxford University Press, 2019); Bettina Renz, *Russia's Military Revival* (London: Polity Press 2018).

<sup>11</sup>For a state-of-the-art approach to assessing maritime power in its broadest sense, especially applied to China, see Sarah Kirchberger, *Assessing China's Naval Power: Technological Innovation, Economic Constraints, and Strategic Implications* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag GmbH, 2018).

much smaller than that of states with mutually threatening land forces.<sup>12</sup> Conversely, however, given the nature of sea power, we argue that the range of militarized behaviors available to these maritime powers is much larger. Furthermore, a serious great-power conflict at sea could wreak havoc on global maritime security, seaborne commerce, and the global trading system.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Protagonists**

This special issue treats maritime competition largely as a dyadic relationship between China and the United States. As a consequence, all the contributions address in part these two states through the lenses of various security studies concepts (for example, deterrence) and theories (for example, offense-defense).<sup>14</sup> By doing so, we not only keep this issue focused but also directly touch on the larger issues of great-power politics that have traditionally preoccupied our subfield.<sup>15</sup>

Although Russia certainly plays a major role in contemporary militarized international politics and is specifically given equal billing in the US National Security Strategy, it remains a continental power.<sup>16</sup> Its military operations in Syria represent a significant deployment abroad, eclipsing anything China has done in centuries, but this operation remains largely confined to ground and air forces. In the early post-Cold War era, the Russian Federation Navy (RFN) suffered terribly from both strategic neglect and disproportionate budget cuts following the Soviet collapse.<sup>17</sup> After a relatively brief period of hope for Russian navalists with the promulgation of a long-term State Armaments Program in 2010, its budget, defense industrial effort, and strategic priorities have returned to nuclear, air, and

<sup>12</sup>Increases in naval activity and possible maritime conflict locations do appear in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. Deborah Sanders, *Maritime Power in the Black Sea* (Oxford: Routledge, 2016); Aviad Rubin and Ehud Eiran, "Regional Maritime Security in the Eastern Mediterranean: Expectations and Reality," *International Affairs* 95, no. 5 (September 2019): 979–97.

<sup>13</sup>Ronald Umali Mendoza, Charles Siriban, and Tea Jalin Ty, "Survey of Economic Implications of Maritime and Territorial Disputes," *Journal of Economic Surveys* 33, no. 3 (July 2019): 1028–49.

<sup>14</sup>Our biggest lacuna might be other Asian states rather than Russia and Europe. India operates an aircraft carrier, has a seaborne nuclear deterrent, and codeveloped with Russia the effective BrahMos ship-launched cruise missile. South Korea has a powerful, largely indigenously built navy. Most importantly, Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force, its Coast Guard, and its coastal defenses are already large and capable, undergoing serious changes, and constantly engaging in brinkmanship with Chinese aircraft and ships over the disputed Senkaku/Diayou Islands. On Japan, see especially Richard J. Samuels, "New Fighting Power! Japan's Growing Maritime Capabilities and East Asian Security," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter 2007/2008): 84–112; Eric Heginbotham and Richard J. Samuels, "Active Denial: Redesigning Japan's Response to China's Military Challenge," *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 128–69.

<sup>15</sup>For significant research on smaller states' maritime competition, see David Blagden, "Sea Power Is Benign Power: The International Case for a Maritime Posture," *RUSI Journal* 159, no. 3 (2014): 54–61; Ehud Eiran, "Between Land and Sea: Spaces and Conflict Intensity," *Territory, Politics, Governance* 5, no. 2 (2017): 190–206.

<sup>16</sup>Russia's submarine-based nuclear deterrent is an important exception.

<sup>17</sup>Mikhail Tsypkin, "Rudderless in the Storm: The Russian Navy, 1992–2002," in *Russian Military Reform 1992–2002*, ed. Anne C. Aldis and Roger N. McDermott (London: Routledge, 2003), 162–86.

ground forces. In terms of missions, “the Russian Navy has resigned itself to focus on strategic deterrence and coastal defense missions.”<sup>18</sup> Norman Polmar and Michael Kofman describe the RFN as a “status projection” service, “showing the flag to demonstrate Russia as a great power outside its land boundaries.” Beset by poor maintenance, Russia habitually deploys a tugboat in its deployed flotillas given its ships’ frequent breakdowns.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in terms of the naval threat it presents, as well as the application of naval power required to coerce it, Russia more closely resembles Iran than China. Evan Braden Montgomery’s contribution to this special issue gives an interesting, if indirect, perspective on this.<sup>20</sup>

Partly as a consequence, fleets of traditional European sea powers have also declined precipitously.<sup>21</sup> The most important European naval powers remain Great Britain and France. Despite budget and force structure cuts in recent years, especially for the Royal Navy,<sup>22</sup> each retains independent power-projection capabilities in amphibious ships and aircraft carriers.<sup>23</sup> Both continue substantial and periodic global deployments, including to the Western Pacific, at substantial cost. Like Russia, the French and British navies devote much of their resources to deploying a nuclear deterrent. Britain has commissioned two new, large aircraft carriers, but they can be escorted by a mere nineteen destroyers and frigates. In 2017, none of Germany’s six submarines could go to sea.<sup>24</sup> Plans to capture some economies of scale by jointly procuring naval vessels within the European Union have not gone far, given domestic pressures to buy ships from inefficient local builders.<sup>25</sup>

Russian and European stasis contrasts strongly with the growth of China’s People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and related elements of maritime power: civilian shipbuilding, management of international ports, and its coast guard and “maritime militia.” Indeed, since 2014, the PLAN has launched more tonnage than all of Europe’s navies combined.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Dmitry Gorenburg, “Here Are Russia’s Grandiose Plans for Upgrading Its Navy,” *Business Insider*, 23 January 2015.

<sup>19</sup>Norman Polmar and Michael Kofman, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back?” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 143, no. 1 (January 2017), <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2017/january/one-step-forward-two-steps-back>.

<sup>20</sup>Evan Braden Montgomery, “Primacy and Punishment: US Grand Strategy, Maritime Power, and Military Options to Manage Decline,” *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (October–December 2020).

<sup>21</sup>Jeremy Stöhs, *The Decline of European Naval Forces: Challenges to Sea Power in an Age of Fiscal Austerity and Political Uncertainty* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018); Thomas-Durell Young, “NATO’s Selective Sea Blindness: Assessing the Alliance’s New Navies,” *Naval War College Review* 72, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 13–39.

<sup>22</sup>Nick Childs, “The Measure of Britain’s New Maritime Ambitions,” *Survival* 58, no. 1 (2016): 131–50.

<sup>23</sup>Bruno Tertrais, *French Nuclear Deterrence, Policy, Forces and Future* (Paris: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique 2019), esp. chap. 4.

<sup>24</sup>Sebastien Roblin, “Germany Does Not Have One Working Submarine,” *National Interest*, December 16, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/germany-does-not-have-one-working-submarine-23688>.

<sup>25</sup>Renaud Bellais, “Against the Odds: The Evolution of the European Naval Shipbuilding Industry,” *Economics of Peace and Security Journal* 12, no. 1 (2017): 5–11.

<sup>26</sup>International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), “Country Comparisons: Force Levels and Economics,” *Military Balance* 116 (2016): 481–92.

The PLAN approach has evolved at least twice from near-coastal defense to active near-seas defense on to far-seas operations beginning in the mid-2000s.<sup>27</sup> Although, as one American naval analyst concludes, “There is no credible information to suggest that the growing importance of ‘far seas’ operations is the first step in constructing a navy that could slug it out with the US Navy in a battle for sea control,” the “capabilities that China is fielding in no way foreclose that option, and could be the first steps toward such a capability.”<sup>28</sup>

China’s 2015 defense white paper, according to the Department of Defense, “elevated the maritime domain within the PLA’s formal strategic guidance and shifted the focus of its modernization from ‘winning local wars under conditions of informationization’ to ‘winning informationized local wars, highlighting maritime military struggle.’”<sup>29</sup> Jane’s predicts total Chinese military outlays to jump 55% from \$167.9 billion to \$260.8 billion between 2015 and 2021. Over the same period, the navy’s share of this budget is expected to increase 82%, from \$31.4 billion (18.7% of the budget) to \$57.1 billion (21.8%).<sup>30</sup> In comparison, at its peak of funding relative to the larger USSR budget, the Soviet Navy received 17%.<sup>31</sup>

One Chinese source posited a Beijing plan for four aircraft carrier battle groups by 2030.<sup>32</sup> The Pentagon’s annual report on Chinese military power predicted in 2019 that the PLAN Marine Corps will have expanded to seven brigades (about 30,000 personnel) by 2020.<sup>33</sup> Chinese naval journals have recommended developing overseas bases, logistic networks, and doctrinal ideas, such as “small battle groups,” which could enable more ambitious operations.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Nan Li, ‘The Evolution of China’s Naval Strategy and Capabilities: from ‘Near Coast’ to ‘Near Seas’ to ‘Far Seas,’” in *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, ed. Philip C. Saunders et al. (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2011), 109–40.

<sup>28</sup>Michael McDevitt, “China as a Maritime Power,” in *Maritime Power Building: New “Mantra” for China’s Rise*, ed. Kamlesh K. Agnitori and Gurpreet S. Khurana (New Delhi: National Maritime Foundation, 2015), 20. For the important claim that US military officers tend to conflate potential capability with intent, particularly when it comes to identifying a more aggressive PLAN, see James Johnson, “Washington’s Perceptions and Misperceptions of Beijing’s Anti-Access Area-Denial (A2-AD) ‘Strategy’: Implications for Military Escalation Control and Strategic Stability,” *Pacific Review* 30, no. 3 (2017): 271–88.

<sup>29</sup>Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2016* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2016), 4.

<sup>30</sup>Tate Nurkin et al., “China’s Advanced Weapons Systems,” (Jane’s by IHS Markit, 12 May 2018), [https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Jane's%20by%20IHS%20Markit\\_China's%20Advanced%20Weapons%20Systems.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Research/Jane's%20by%20IHS%20Markit_China's%20Advanced%20Weapons%20Systems.pdf). All spending reported in USD.

<sup>31</sup>Vladimir Kuzin and Sergei Chernyavskii, “Russian Reactions to Reagan’s ‘Maritime Strategy,’” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 2 (2005): 429–39.

<sup>32</sup>Minnie Chan, “China’s Navy Is Being Forced to Rethink Its Spending Plans as Cost of Trade War Rises,” *South China Morning Post*, May 26, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3011872/chinas-navy-being-forced-rethink-its-spending-plans-cost-trade>.

<sup>33</sup>Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2019* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2019), 35.

<sup>34</sup>Ryan Martinson and Katsuya Yamamoto, “How China’s Navy Is Preparing to Fight in the ‘Far Seas,’” *National Interest*, July 18, 2017, 1–4; Hu Dongying, Huang Rui, and Cai Guangyou, “Several Thoughts on Advancing the Submarine Force to Distant Oceans,” trans. China Maritime Studies Institute, *Ship Electronic Engineering* 1 (2017): 1–3.

The United States nonetheless remains the only global naval force. Its fleet still has twice as much tonnage as China, although its lead has shrunk from roughly four million tons in the late 1990s to three million today.<sup>35</sup> Any of the United States' eleven aircraft carriers outclasses any existing or planned Chinese one. More importantly, the United States has been steadily building and operating the types of planes that can deploy from such ships (China's J-31 remains in development).<sup>36</sup> The United States' fifth-generation F-35B strike fighter can also fly from the deck of its nine amphibious assault ships. Even setting aircraft ordnance aside, the United States still has more than twice the number of battle force missiles deployed on ships and submarines.<sup>37</sup> The US Marine Corps personnel strength more than quintuples any forecast for its Chinese counterpart. And of course, given a US surface ship is at sea roughly a quarter of the year, routinely deploying on the other side of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, this fleet is both stressed and highly experienced in "blue water" operations relative to any other navy.

Comparing gross measures such as ship counts and fleet tonnages does not capture the complex and rich mission set of both peacetime and wartime sea power. Not surprisingly, given these disparities in fleets, China has looked for asymmetric responses to counter US strengths. China does not yet have the global interests supported by the USN, and potential conflict zones are much closer to the Chinese coastline. Moreover, China can deploy large numbers of land-based missiles and aircraft to project power at relatively long distances, perhaps the most important military development of the post-Cold War era, known to the US military as "anti-access/area denial" (A2/AD). In this sense, the most important Chinese maritime capability is not its navy, but its air force and strategic rocket force. If, as Nelson observed, a ship is a fool to fight a fort, how much more foolish is a fleet to fight a nuclear-armed continental landmass?<sup>38</sup> This ability is likely to have large effects on international politics; the traditional definition of territorial waters as three nautical miles from the coast was based on the

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<sup>35</sup>Ian Livingston and Michael E. O'Hanlon, "Why China Isn't Ahead of the US Navy, Even with More Ships," *Brookings* (blog), September 10, 2018, 10–12, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/09/10/why-china-isnt-ahead-of-the-us-navy-even-with-more-ships/>.

<sup>36</sup>Andrea Gilli and Mauro Gilli, "Why China Has Not Caught Up Yet: Military-Technological Superiority and the Limits of Imitation, Reverse Engineering, and Cyber Espionage," *International Security* 43, no. 3 (Winter 2018/19): 141–89.

<sup>37</sup>Battle force missiles "contribute to battle force missions such as area and local air defense, anti-surface warfare, and anti-submarine warfare." Keith Patton, "Battle Force Missiles: The Measure of a Naval Fleet," *CIMSEC*, April 24, 2019.

<sup>38</sup>It is worth noting that developments in undersea warfare, especially related to the relative survivability of nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs), may shift the calculus regarding land attacks from the sea with nuclear weapons, especially if China develops more robust submarine and long-range missile capabilities. Keir A. Leiber and Daryl G. Press note in passing that "SSBNs have never been as invulnerable as analysts typically assume, and advances in remote sensing appear to be reducing the survivability of both submarines and mobile missiles." Lieber and Press, "The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence," *International Security* 41, no. 4 (Spring 2017): 9–49.



range of cannon shot and the curvature of the earth.<sup>39</sup> What happens when the range of a land-based, conventional reconnaissance strike complex is measured in thousands of miles?

### **Gray Zone in Blue Water: Maritime Competition in Peacetime**

Comparing the two states' militaries' firepower does not present the full suite of international political effects of maritime power. Maritime competition comes in many forms. One of the central messages of this issue, and a tireless message of navalists, is that navies play several roles in peacetime. Nor does one need naval vessels to have coercive effects at sea. One pair of US policy analysts claim that without firing a shot in the South China Sea, "Beijing has been salami slicing its way to a position of primacy in that critical international waterway, while eroding the norms and interests Washington long has sought to defend."<sup>40</sup>

While largely associated with the maxim that "the proper main objective of the navy is the enemy's navy," Alfred Thayer Mahan took a broad view of sea power to include geographical position, a country's terrain and extent of territory, size of population, character of the people, and type of government.<sup>41</sup> By many of these standards, the United States is no longer a traditional sea power, whereas China has become increasingly so, expanding beyond its traditional role as a continental power.<sup>42</sup> A small US commercial shipbuilding industry is largely kept alive by the Jones Act's protectionism. China's has grown to account for a third of the global shipbuilding market.<sup>43</sup> America's ports infrastructure is smaller and less technologically advanced than China's; moreover, often this US infrastructure is owned and operated by foreign firms, including, of course, those based in the People's Republic.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup>H. S. K. Kent, "The Historical Origins of the Three-Mile Limit," *American Journal of International Law* 48, no. 4 (October 1954): 537–53.

<sup>40</sup>Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, "Getting Serious About Strategy in the South China Sea," *Naval War College Review* 71, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 13.

<sup>41</sup>Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (New York: Dover Publications, 1988 [1890]). Mahan is considered the preeminent naval theorist. He is often contrasted with the work of the other essential naval thinker, Julian Stafford Corbett. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (New York: Dover Publications, 2004 [1911]). Whereas Corbett focused more on the ability of a navy to project ground forces against enemies, both theorists largely agreed on concentrating on defeating the opposition's fleet. For more current reviews of the theories and roles of sea power, see Paul Kennedy, "The Influence and the Limitations of Sea Power," *International History Review* 10, no. 1 (February 1988): 2–17; Norman Friedman, *Seapower as Strategy: Navies and National Interests* (Annapolis, MD: US Naval Institute Press, 2001); Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009); Colin S. Gray, *The Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Ken Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy* (London: Croom Helm, 1977).

<sup>42</sup>For the counterargument, see Andrew Lambert, *Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict that Made the Modern World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), esp. 312–13.

<sup>43</sup>Then again, South Korea accounts for 31% and Japan 20%. Christian Steidl, Laurent Daniel, and Cenk Yildiran, *Shipbuilding Market Developments: Q2 2018* (Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018), 17.

<sup>44</sup>Simon Reich and Peter Dombrowski, *The End of Grand Strategy: US Maritime Operations in the Twenty-First Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

Even in traditional naval operation terms associated with a hegemonic navy, the United States has self-consciously shifted counterpiracy and even counterproliferation operations to other states, including potential adversaries such as China.<sup>45</sup> The USN does provide a unique level of global disaster relief and humanitarian assistance, if grudgingly. This capability to provide such peacetime services, and to “show the flag,” directly conflicts with the USN’s desire to build as much high-end capability as possible to fight a high-end fight with (and thus deter) China. The USN Chief of Naval Operations actively complains of the burden of providing a significant portion of the destroyer fleet for a year-round ballistic-missile deterrence mission.<sup>46</sup>

The protection of international commerce has been a staple of US strategy documents for decades; the 2017 National Security Strategy states: “Free access to the seas remains a central principle of national security and economic prosperity.”<sup>47</sup> A strong navy is often taken for granted as a prerequisite for upholding a (liberal) international system, often justified by analogy to the Royal Navy’s role during Pax Britannica.<sup>48</sup> China asks, not unreasonably, why it would be expected to overturn a system from which it benefits so greatly.

Perhaps unique to great-power politics, much of the conflict rests on interpretations of international law. Despite its relative youth (only coming into force in 1982), the initial resistance of the United States, and its failure to ratify it, the United States and its navy consider the United Nations Convention for the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) a fundamental pillar of a “rules-based international order.”<sup>49</sup> The main USN response to challenges to the US UNCLOS interpretation is FONOPS.<sup>50</sup> It is not always appreciated that the primary Chinese objection to these FONOPS is based on rejecting military operations, such as surveillance and training, within a state’s exclusive economic zone (EEZ) as legal under international law. China is far from the only state that takes this approach.

It should be noted that states in the Indo-Pacific region complain about FONOPS as potentially destabilizing in the same breath as doing the same

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<sup>45</sup>Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, *Six Years at Sea... and Counting: Gulf of Aden Anti-Piracy and China's Maritime Commons Presence* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2015).

<sup>46</sup>David B. Larter, “The US Navy Is Fed up with Ballistic Missile Defense Patrols,” *Defense News*, June 16, 2019, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2018/06/16/the-us-navy-is-fed-up-with-ballistic-missile-defense-patrols/>.

<sup>47</sup>The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2006), 40.

<sup>48</sup>See, for example, Andrew Lambert, “Pax Britannica and the Advent of Globalization,” in *Maritime Strategy and Global Order: Markets, Resources, Security*, ed. Daniel Moran and James A. Russell (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 3–31.

<sup>49</sup>For a fascinating discussion of this phrase’s etymology, see Adam Breuer and Alastair Iain Johnston, “Memes, Narratives and the Emergent US–China Security Dilemma,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2019): 429–55.

<sup>50</sup>Although FONOPS “against” China are the most visible such operations, the United States conducts them in waters claimed by countries ranging from Cambodia to China and Saudi Arabia to Slovenia. Department of Defense, *Maritime Claims Reference Manual* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2020), [https://www.jag.navy.mil/organization/code\\_10\\_mcrm.htm](https://www.jag.navy.mil/organization/code_10_mcrm.htm).

about Chinese encroachment.<sup>51</sup> The transiting of US warships through disputed but ostensibly international waters has shaped international politics on several occasions. Most notably, many consider President Bill Clinton's ordering of a carrier battle group to sail through the Taiwan Strait (with another deployed nearby) in 1996 to be the founding impetus for Chinese naval modernization.<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, the PLAN has expanded its global reach to join in various maritime security missions, including operations at the entrances to the Arctic.<sup>53</sup> China's ability to maintain a faraway base in Djibouti is viewed as a proving ground for important lessons on extended deployments and resupply.<sup>54</sup> But this is, of course, not the primary or most visible use of China's peacetime maritime capability.

An expanding China has engaged in a host of activities near its coast described by unhappy international actors as "gray zone operations" and "hybrid warfare."<sup>55</sup> In May 2018 the People's Liberation Army Air Force flew H-6K bombers and Su-35 Flanker E combat aircraft in "training flights" around Taiwan as "an attempt to discourage Taipei from making any moves toward independence."<sup>56</sup> Since 2013, China has "reclaimed" roughly 3,200 acres of land in the Spratly Islands, compared with 120 acres by Vietnam and fewer (or none) by other claimants.<sup>57</sup> The seven disputed but Chinese-occupied Spratly Islands host long runways, combat aircraft hangers, bunkers and barracks, antiaircraft guns, and surveillance radars. Farther north, among the Paracel Islands, China has deployed an air-defense system, "probably" with YJ-62 anti-ship cruise missiles, and has operated fighters and bombers on Woody Island.<sup>58</sup> In the East China Sea, various elements of China's maritime capability—coast guard, fishing fleet, maritime militia—continuously encroach on what Japan claims as its territorial waters surrounding the Senkaku/Diayou Islands. Japan responds to as many as it can, severely taxing its operational capability, scrambling jets 22 times in 2008, and 644 in 2016.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>51</sup>Harsh V. Pant and Abhijnan Rej, "Is India Ready for the Indo-Pacific?" *Washington Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 47–61.

<sup>52</sup>Chas. W. Freeman Jr., "Preventing War in the Taiwan Strait: Restraining Taiwan—and Beijing," *Foreign Affairs* 77, no. 4 (July–August 1998): 7; David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 257.

<sup>53</sup>Elizabeth Wishnick, *China's Interests and Goals in the Arctic: Implications for the United States* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2017).

<sup>54</sup>Andrew Jacobs and Jane Perlez, "U.S. Wary of Its New Neighbor in Djibouti: A Chinese Naval Base," *New York Times*, February 25, 2017.

<sup>55</sup>Alessio Patalano, "When Strategy Is 'Hybrid' and Not 'Grey': Reviewing Chinese Military and Constabulary Coercion at Sea," *Pacific Review* 31, 6 (2018): 811–39.

<sup>56</sup>IJSS, "Asia," *Military Balance* 119, no. 1 (2019): 222–319.

<sup>57</sup>Peter Dutton, "Three Disputes and Three Objectives: China and the South China Sea," *Naval War College Review* 64, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 42–67, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1553&context=nwc-review>.

<sup>58</sup>IJSS, "Asia."

<sup>59</sup>Emma Graham-Harrison, "Islands on the Frontline of a New Global Flashpoint: China v Japan," *Guardian*, February 4, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/05/china-v-japan-new-global-flashpoint-senkaku-islands-ishigaki>.

The world's largest navy, with the daunting, and often self-appointed, task of protecting the "rules-based international order," faces incompatible missions. The USN faces the classic dilemma of any large navy: its ongoing peacetime role may be incompatible with what it considers its primary mission: maximizing its combat capability to deter great-power aggression and, if needed, win a war at sea. How does the USN actually provide stability in global commerce? How does salami slicing at sea work? Are the large naval budgets required for these varied tasks sustainable?

### ***Naval Crises, Escalation, and War***

With all this maritime interaction comes the risk of escalation. For the two remaining great powers the opportunities for direct contact on land are either nonexistent or limited to cases involving proxies. Indeed, China's systematic turn toward the sea has been predicated by a systematic resolution and de-escalation of many territorial disputes with its neighbors.<sup>60</sup> Remaining territorial disputes, such as that with India over the Line of Control, are serious but largely outside US military influence.<sup>61</sup> Only at sea and in the air of the "global commons" is there potential for the PLAN or other Chinese military forces to interact with US military forces.

Although much attention has been paid to China's gradual efforts to revise the status quo,<sup>62</sup> one should note that the United States' definition of the status quo contributes to frequent and uncomfortable interactions. More broadly than its occasional FONOP, the USN's primary strategic document of the post-Cold War era states that "operating forward enables familiarity with the environment, as well as the personalities and behavior patterns of regional actors," so that "should peacetime operations transition to war, maritime forces will have already developed the environmental and operational understanding and experience to quickly engage in combat operations."<sup>63</sup>

These more frequent interactions may lead to escalation. The potential interactions become numerous and more complex when we consider the increased maritime activity of formal US allies such as Japan and the Philippines. Moreover, middle powers such as Australia, Great Britain, and France conduct operations in this region despite the distance from their

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<sup>60</sup>M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>61</sup>M. Taylor Fravel, "Why Are China and India Skirmishing at Their Border? Here's 4 Things to Know," *Washington Post*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/06/02/why-are-china-india-skirmishing-their-border-heres-4-things-know/>.

<sup>62</sup>M. Taylor Fravel, "Power Shifts and Escalation: Explaining China's Use of Force in Territorial Disputes," *International Security* 32, no. 3 (Winter, 2007/2008): 44–83.

<sup>63</sup>James T. Conway, Gary Roughead, and Thad W. Allen, "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower," *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 8.

own territorial waters, in part due to American cajoling.<sup>64</sup> In an effort to stymie China's operations in the region, the USN Chief of Naval Operations recently announced that it would treat the Chinese Coast Guard and maritime militia as combatants.<sup>65</sup>

### **What Does Modern Naval Warfare Look like?**

Should a war occur at sea in the third decade of the twenty-first century, it will likely look very different from the last time great powers fought naval engagements (World War II) or more recent small-scale conflicts at sea such as the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars, the Falklands/Malvinas War, and occasional North and South Korean skirmishes. Security scholars should take an approach in keeping with Alain Enthoven's famous quip that he had fought just as many nuclear wars as any general.<sup>66</sup> As with the nuclear strategy debates, we are likely to find different answers than the admirals. For example, rather than the short, sharp conflict envisioned by many naval officers, Joshua Rovner argues that such a conflict would be a long and grueling one.<sup>67</sup> Social science has a responsibility to consider the future.

### **Anti-Access and Area Denial**

Almost two decades ago, largely in reaction to both the outcome and post-conflict analysis of the Persian Gulf War of 1991,<sup>68</sup> Western military strategists became increasingly concerned with what they termed China's A2/AD strategies.<sup>69</sup> In many respects, this strand of thinking fit with an earlier conceptual tradition of asymmetric warfare—"weaker opponents have sought to neutralize their enemy's technological or numerical superiority by fighting in ways or on battlefields that nullify it."<sup>70</sup> M. Taylor Fravel and Christopher P. Twomey observe that the US military's official definition of A2/AD "refers to an opponent's military operations either to slow

<sup>64</sup>Liu Zhen, "France, Britain to Sail Warships in Contested South China Sea to Challenge Beijing," *South China Morning Post*, June 4, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2149062/france-britain-sail-warships-contested-south-china-sea>.

<sup>65</sup>Demetri Sevastopoulou and Kathrin Hille, "US Warns China on Aggressive Acts by Fishing Boats and Coast Guard," *Financial Times*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/ab4b1602-696a-11e9-80c7-60ee53e6681d>.

<sup>66</sup>Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 254.

<sup>67</sup>Joshua Rovner, "A Long War in the East: Doctrine, Diplomacy, and the Prospects for a Protracted Sino-American Conflict," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 29, no. 1 (2018): 129–42.

<sup>68</sup>Roger Cliff et al., *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation 2007), 3–11. Andrew Krepinevich, Barry Watts, and Robert Work, *Meeting the Anti-Access and Area-Denial Challenge* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2003).

<sup>69</sup>For two accounts locating anti-access strategies in a broad historical context see, Sam J. Tangredi, *Anti-Access Warfare: Countering A2/AD Strategies* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013); Sam J. Tangredi, "Anti-Access Strategies in the Pacific: The United States and China," *Parameters* 49, nos. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 2019): 5–20.

<sup>70</sup>Vincent J. Goulding Jr. "Back to the Future with Asymmetric Warfare," *Parameters* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2000–01): 21; Tangredi, *Anti-Access Warfare*.

the deployment of forces to a theater of operations—anti-access—or to disrupt the ability to conduct operations within the theater if the forces arrive—area-denial.”<sup>71</sup> The authors point out that neither the Chinese military nor Chinese strategists actually use the term “A2/AD,” except when referring to American and Western writings.<sup>72</sup>

Nonetheless, the United States has a firm idea of how PLA capability can be employed against a US fleet, “using a combination of ballistic missiles and shore-based aircraft in conjunction with submarines and surface ships, to present the U.S. or other navy with a multidimensional threat that would be too hard to deal with.”<sup>73</sup> Although many Western analysts believe that China’s A2/AD strategy for its near seas, and perhaps beyond, is an operational fact, Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich conclude that “by 2040 China will not achieve military hegemony over the Western Pacific or anything close to it.”<sup>74</sup>

Just as China responded to the military effectiveness the United States displayed in the Persian Gulf War and the Taiwan Strait, the United States has also responded to quantitative and qualitative improvements in the PLA. In naval terms, much of this will be discussed by Jonathan D. Caverley and Peter Dombrowski in this special issue.

### ***Nuclear Escalation***

Early Cold War theorists, especially in the United States, assumed nuclear weapons would eventually make navies obsolete, with not the least of the arguments being that “certain attributes of ships at sea suggest not only that they make lucrative targets but also that constraints on the use of nuclear weapons against them could well be weaker than those that pertain to land-based targets.”<sup>75</sup> Between the explosion of the atomic weapons in 1945 and the early 1950s, the USN, for institutional and cultural reasons, fought back efforts to leave the American nuclear arsenal in the hands of other services.<sup>76</sup>

Today, however, the opposite seems true. China has only in the last decade acquired something approaching a sea-based nuclear strategic deterrent with four operational JIN-class SSBNs and intends to build “next-generation” SSBNs “armed with the follow-on JL-3 [submarine-launched ballistic

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<sup>71</sup>M. Taylor Fravel and Christopher P. Twomey, “Projecting Strategy: The Myth of Chinese Counter-Intervention,” *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 173.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid.

<sup>73</sup>Robert C. Rubel, “Talking about Sea Control,” *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 4 (Autumn 2010): 40.

<sup>74</sup>Stephen Biddle and Ivan Oelrich, “Future Warfare in the Western Pacific: Chinese Antiaccess/Area Denial, U.S. AirSea Battle, and Command of the Commons in East Asia,” *International Security* 41, no. 1 (Summer 2016): 7–48.

<sup>75</sup>Desmond Ball, “Nuclear War at Sea,” *International Security* 10, no. 3 (Winter 1985–1986): 8.

<sup>76</sup>George W. Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U.S. Navy, 1890–1990* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 275–313.

missile], ... likely [beginning] construction in the early-2020s.”<sup>77</sup> But because most of China’s deterrent force is land based, few look to antisubmarine warfare as a source of instability, in contrast to the late Cold War.

The interaction of nuclear weapons and navies looms large in several of this issue’s articles. Many plausible accounts of a Sino-American conflict envision strikes on the mainland, if for no other reason than to disable command and control of the PLAN. Such strikes on the Chinese mainland might hit dual-use or colocated command and control nodes, which leads Caitlin Talmadge to conclude: “A war at sea could thus quickly become a war on land, potentially even raising risks of nuclear escalation if the US starts to erode capabilities relevant to China’s nuclear arsenal.”<sup>78</sup>

### Security Studies Adrift?

In general, research on maritime competition and naval warfare has intersected only on rare occasions. The rise of modern thinking about navies and sea power emerged prior to modern international relations (IR) theory but eventually coevolved alongside the subdisciplines of strategic studies, security studies, and, more generally, international security studies.<sup>79</sup>

Mahan captured the attention of politicians and policymakers not just in the United States but across the globe, including, among many other nations, Great Britain, Germany,<sup>80</sup> and Japan.<sup>81</sup> In disciplinary terms, Mahan also became one of the first scholars of what would be known as international political economy, linking the acquisition of powerful navies with empires, global markets, and domestic economic prosperity.<sup>82</sup>

Although never at the center of security studies, a remarkable number of influential scholars cut their teeth on naval matters. Bernard Brodie was a naval strategist prior to World War II before becoming the “original nuclear strategist.”<sup>83</sup> Harold and Margaret Sprout examined American

<sup>77</sup>Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2019*, 66.

<sup>78</sup>Caitlin Talmadge, “Emerging Technology and Intra-War Escalation Risks: Evidence from the Cold War, Implications for Today,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 42, no. 6 (2019): 880–81. Also, among others, see Caitlin Talmadge, “Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States,” *International Security*, 41, no. 4 (Spring 2017): 50–92; Michael Beckley, “The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China’s Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion,” *International Security* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 78–119.

<sup>79</sup>Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen, “Beyond *The Evolution of International Security Studies?*” *Security Dialogue* 41, no. 6 (December 2010): 659–67.

<sup>80</sup>Dirk Bönker, *Militarism in a Global Age: Naval Ambitions in Germany and the United States before World War I* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

<sup>81</sup>David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887–1941* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997).

<sup>82</sup>Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), esp. chap. 2.

<sup>83</sup>Bernard Brodie, *Sea Power in the Machine Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1941); Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon*, 339.

naval power and navy strategy at the beginning of their celebrated career to include pioneering work on the politics of the environment.<sup>84</sup> Samuel P. Huntington published one of the most influential articles in the postwar USN canon three years before *The Soldier and the State*.<sup>85</sup> Colin S. Gray repeatedly returned to naval matters throughout a long and varied career.<sup>86</sup> Ken Booth wrote on the subject, especially on the implications of “territorialisation” of the sea, before becoming one of the founders of critical security theory.<sup>87</sup> Harvey M. Sapolsky saw the USN Polaris ballistic missile as the paradigmatic case through which to understand defense policy, military technology, and bureaucratic and organizational politics.<sup>88</sup>

At the height of the Cold War, in the later 1970s and early 1980s, the political significance, resourcing, and public profile of the so-called US Maritime Strategy resulted in a brief flurry of articles written by prominent security scholars.<sup>89</sup> Around this same time, George Modelski and William R. Thompson’s consideration of the relationship between naval power and global political change emerged in the middle of the behavioral revolution of political science and IR.<sup>90</sup>

Since the end of the Cold War, however, scholarship on navies, sea power, and their importance (or lack thereof) to understanding international security has been thin. The modest amount of research has been geographically limited to potential maritime flashpoints in the Western Pacific and, to some extent, the Indian Ocean. This body of work is largely the province of regional and country specialists or partisans of various countries’ naval services.

However, many security scholars have incorporated naval matters into their larger research programs. The expense and visibility of shipbuilding have led scholars of arms races to lean heavily on them for their empirical investigations.<sup>91</sup> For similar reasons, naval technology and doctrine loom

<sup>84</sup>Harold and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776–1918* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1939); Harold and Margaret Sprout, *Toward a New Order of Sea Power: American Naval Policy and the World Scene, 1918–1922* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940).

<sup>85</sup>Samuel P. Huntington, “National Policy and the Transoceanic Navy,” *Proceedings* 80, no. 5 (May 1954): 483–93.

<sup>86</sup>Colin S. Gray and Roger W. Barnett, eds., *Strategy and Seapower* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press 1989); Colin S. Gray, *Leverage of Sea Power: The Strategic Advantage of Navies in War* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Colin S. Gray, *The Navy in the Post–Cold War World: The Uses and Value of Strategic Sea Power* (College Station, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

<sup>87</sup>Booth, *Navies and Foreign Policy*.

<sup>88</sup>Harvey M. Sapolsky, *The Polaris System Development: Bureaucratic and Programmatic Success in Government* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1972).

<sup>89</sup>Many of these contributions are collected in Steven E. Miller and Stephen Van Evera, eds., *Naval Strategy and National Security: An International Security Reader* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>90</sup>See, for example, George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics, 1494–1993* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988). For a more comprehensive dataset, see Brian Benjamin Crisher and Mark Souva, “Power at Sea: A Naval Power Dataset, 1865–2011,” *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations* 40, no. 4 (2014): 602–29.

<sup>91</sup>Samuel P. Huntington, “Arms Races: Prerequisites and Results,” in *Public Policy: A Yearbook of the Graduate School of Public Administration, Harvard University*, ed. Carl J. Friedrich and Seymour E. Harris, vol. 8 (Cambridge, MA: Graduate School of Public Administration, Harvard University, 1958), 41–86; Paul Kennedy,



large in military innovation studies.<sup>92</sup> A fascinating study links the middle class to a large navy, concluding that countries with large fleets relative to its army are more prone to coups.<sup>93</sup> The role of economic sectors in supporting a large navy has been a long-standing aspect of IR.<sup>94</sup> Michelle Murray looks at fleets as status providers, arguing that Wilhelmine navalism was designed to ensure other states could “no longer ignore Germany’s claim to world power status,” and makes the parallels with China’s rise explicit.<sup>95</sup> In 2009, Robert S. Ross used a similar logic of “naval nationalism” to predict not only a large PLAN but one that focuses on aircraft carriers rather than A2/AD.<sup>96</sup> More broadly, there is a growing and promising empirical research program on power projection more generally—its costs, economic foundations, and relationship to geopolitical competition—that has implications for global maritime competition between the United States and China.<sup>97</sup>

On the other hand, few studies have looked at the systematic differences between territorial and sea power. John J. Mearsheimer’s work leans heavily on the “stopping power of water” in his argument for the primacy of armored division equivalents as a measure of state power.<sup>98</sup> Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson claim that global sea power encourages bandwagoning rather than balancing.<sup>99</sup> Barry R. Posen’s essential piece on the “command of the commons” distinguished between that task’s largely maritime capability versus the weaponry of the “close-in fight.”<sup>100</sup> Much more remains, and this issue suggests ways forward.

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“Arms-Races and the Causes of War, 1850–1945,” in *Strategy and Diplomacy, 1870–1945: Eight Studies* (Boston, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1983); Grant T. Hammond, *Plowshares into Swords: Arms Races in International Politics, 1840–1991* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); Charles L. Glaser, “When Are Arms Races Dangerous? Rational versus Suboptimal Arming,” *International Security* 28, no. 4 (Spring 2004): 44–84.

<sup>92</sup>Michael C. Horowitz, *The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1–17. Owen Reid Cote Jr., “The Politics of Innovative Military Doctrine: The U.S. Navy and Fleet Ballistic Missiles” (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996), 8–9. Robert G. Angevine, “Innovation and Experimentation in the US Navy: The UPTIDE Antisubmarine Warfare Experiments, 1969–72,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 77–105.

<sup>93</sup>Tobias Böhmelt, Ulrich Pilster, and Atsushi Tago, “Naval Forces and Civil-Military Relations,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 2, no. 4 (October 2017): 346–63.

<sup>94</sup>Benjamin O. Fordham, “The Domestic Politics of World Power: Explaining Debates over the United States Battleship Fleet, 1890–91,” *International Organization* 73, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 435–68.

<sup>95</sup>Michelle Murray, “Identity, Insecurity, and Great Power Politics: The Tragedy of German Naval Ambition before the First World War,” *Security Studies* 19, no. 4 (October–December 2010): 656–88.

<sup>96</sup>Robert S. Ross, “China’s Naval Nationalism: Sources, Prospects, and the U.S. Response,” *International Security* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 46–81.

<sup>97</sup>Jonathan N. Markowitz and Christopher J. Fariss, “Going the Distance: The Price of Projecting Power,” *International Interactions* 39, no. 2 (2013): 119–43; Jonathan N. Markowitz and Christopher J. Fariss, “Power, Proximity, and Democracy: Geopolitical Competition in the International System,” *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 1 (January 2018): 78–93; Jonathan Markowitz, Christopher Fariss, and R. Blake McMahon, “Producing Goods and Projecting Power: How What You Make Influences What You Take,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63, no. 6 (July 2019): 1368–1402.

<sup>98</sup>John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

<sup>99</sup>Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, “Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally against the Leading Global Power?” *International Security* 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 7–43.

<sup>100</sup>Barry R. Posen, “Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony,” *International Security* 28, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 5–46.

## Special Issue Contributions

The contributions to this special issue come from a diverse group of scholars taking a variety of approaches. They are united both by a solid grounding in security studies concepts and theories and by not assuming that conventional wisdom in security studies applies smoothly to maritime issues.<sup>101</sup> They also examine navies' roles across the spectrum of conflict, an important insight among naval theorists. Throughout the issue, the authors not only make their own independent research contributions but demonstrate the range of methods one can bring to bear on maritime competition. We also hope that, by drawing on resources outside of standard security studies—including both navalist research and novel datasets and cases—these articles point subsequent scholars to rich theoretical and empirical material.

Although the six articles speak to each other and the larger security studies research community, we organize them into pairs, mapping on major approaches within the subfield.<sup>102</sup> The first pair uses quantitative analysis to identify broad correlations of factors across many cases, suggesting how international politics and conflict behavior differ systematically at sea compared to on land. The second pair focus on classic security studies theory, paired with qualitative empirics and content analysis, to apply them to contemporary international politics between China and the United States. Each article shows how subfield consensuses need revisions based on the unique environment of competition at sea. Finally, the third pair employ operational-level research to explore a classic and specific aspect of naval warfare—blockade—as a tool for international politics in a bipolar maritime competition. Although all the articles examine the US-China maritime rivalry to greater or lesser degrees, each also has broader implications for the international economic and political system, individual states, maritime regions, and the development of theory as discussed above.

In “Clashes at Sea: Explaining the Onset, Militarization, and Resolution of Diplomatic Maritime Claims,” Sara McLaughlin Mitchell examines the sometimes-breathless accounts of highly visible contemporary militarized disputes in the South China Sea, the Black Sea, or the Arctic.<sup>103</sup> Competing maritime claims have long been a feature of international politics, and thus we can look at a much larger set of cases to determine when and how the

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<sup>101</sup>Five of the six articles in this special issue had their origins in the Bridging the Straits: A Research Agenda for a New Era of Maritime Competition Conference held at the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, in December 2018. The conference sought to connect naval thinking from within the USN with academic and think tank scholars not representing institutional positions, replicating a conference held at the college in 1986 to deliberate over “The Maritime Strategy” emerging in that decade.

<sup>102</sup>We subsume the many Balkan states of research in this field—peace sciences, security studies, strategic studies—within the umbrella term “security studies.”

<sup>103</sup>Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, “Clashes at Sea: Explaining the Onset, Militarization, and Resolution of Diplomatic Maritime Claims,” *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (October–December 2020).

roughly 100 contemporary dyadic diplomatic maritime claims might escalate or be resolved. Building on the larger Issue Correlates of War project,<sup>104</sup> Mitchell identifies 270 dyadic diplomatic claims over maritime issues from 1900 to 2010. She identifies the factors that lead to interstate disagreements over maritime zones (“claims”); militarization of some claims but not others; and the peaceful resolution of such claims.

Relative to terrestrial issue disputes, Mitchell finds maritime conflicts are more likely to occur between democratic, developed states, and they are more successfully settled through multilateral institutions. Whereas these findings may be cause for optimism for US-China competition, several others are more sobering, starting with the simple fact that since 1991 China has participated in over a dozen militarized clashes at sea. China’s maritime claims generally have high salience; even when it pursues bilateral and multilateral negotiations, it often fails to settle them. Moreover, she argues that, historically, the size of the US fleet had a dampening effect on the outbreak of maritime conflict. In short, in an era of more relative naval parity, peacetime maritime competition between China and its neighbors over economic and territorial issues are resistant to resolution and prone to militarization.

Whereas Mitchell looks at how a dispute’s maritime character shapes its escalation and resolution, Erik Gartzke and Jon R. Lindsay examine how a capability’s maritime character shapes the conduct of international politics. “The Influence of Sea Power on Politics: Domain- and Platform-Specific Attributes of Material Capabilities” disaggregates naval capability to conclude that the types of naval platforms built or acquired by states affects “projecting power, pursuing influence, and maintaining stability.”<sup>105</sup> Their findings apply to the two capital ships of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: battleships and aircraft carriers. The implications for the growing Sino-American maritime rivalry are once again sobering: US “forward presence at sea, therefore, does not translate into increased resolve,” especially in the face of a competitor challenged in its own backyard.<sup>106</sup>

Gartzke and Lindsay’s findings on the difficulty of extended deterrence at sea nicely frame the first of the two IR theoretical articles in the special issue. Paul van Hooft’s “All-In or All-Out: Why Insularity Pushes and Pulls American Grand Strategy to Extremes” takes the transoceanic nature of Sino-American competition seriously.<sup>107</sup> Conventional grand strategic

<sup>104</sup>Paul R. Hensel, “Contentious Issues and World Politics: The Management of Territorial Claims in the Americas, 1816–1992,” *International Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (March 2001): 81–109; “Project Description,” <https://www.paulhensel.org/icow.html>.

<sup>105</sup>Erik Gartzke and Jon R. Lindsay, “The Influence of Sea Power on Politics: Domain- and Platform-Specific Attributes of Material Capabilities,” *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (October–December 2020).

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup>Paul van Hooft, “All-In or All-Out: Why Insularity Pushes and Pulls American Grand Strategy to Extremes,” *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (October–December 2020).

wisdom in the United States assumes, given the existence of a watery global commons and secure sea lines of communication, that US involvement in a region can be ordered along a spectrum from primacy to isolationism, with intermediate steps such as deep engagement, selective engagement, and off-shore balancing.<sup>108</sup> Using classic IR theory, van Hooft turns this conventional wisdom on its head by arguing that the Pacific Ocean, rather than a smooth conveyor belt for subtly calibrated grand strategies, is a formidable barrier that takes most of these strategies off the table. The ocean makes it difficult to convince adversaries and allies that the United States is willing to spend blood and treasure, as well as to convince the domestic audience of the need to do so. US grand strategy must, therefore, settle on either significant forward deployment or isolationism. Indeed, van Hooft reviews the Cold War in Europe and finds a US pendulum vacillating between these two grand strategic extremes.

Van Hooft's finding may partially explain why the USN is relentlessly focused on forward deployment of forces. If he is correct, there is not much need for it otherwise. Caverley and Dombrowski examine USN and PLAN fleet designs—their combination of physical platforms and operational doctrine—in light of another piece of conventional wisdom in contemporary security studies: the defense dominance of conflict at sea.<sup>109</sup> Because of the relative cheapness and ready availability of targeting information and ground-based aircraft and missiles, relative to power-projection platforms like bombers, aircraft carriers, and amphibious assault craft, many security studies scholars employ classic offense–defense theory to shed an optimistic light on Sino-American competition. Caverley and Dombrowski accordingly turn to equally classic qualifiers of offense–defense theory such as distinguishability and the “cult of the offensive.” They then explore the interaction of existing Chinese and American naval capability and doctrine to identify several pathways toward crisis instability in the region.

Given van Hooft's and Caverley and Dombrowski's exposition of the limitations of US naval capability as a tool of deterrence in the Chinese littoral, the final pair of articles focus on an underappreciated operational strategy of maritime states: blockade.

Caverley and Dombrowski, and a host of preceding literature on civil-military relations, point out that uniformed services frequently do not build

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<sup>108</sup>Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross, “Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy,” *International Security* 21, no. 3 (Winter 1996/97): 48; Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for US Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don't Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012/13): 7–51.

<sup>109</sup>Jonathan D. Caverley and Peter Dombrowski, “Cruising for a Bruising: Maritime Competition in an Anti-Access Age,” *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (October–December 2020).

or train to perform the missions political leadership requires of them. In “The Maritime Rung on the Escalation Ladder: Naval Blockades in a US-China Conflict,” Fiona S. Cunningham analyzes three US options for maritime coercion of China—mainland strikes, fleet-on-fleet engagements, and distant blockades. USN and defense officials seldom explore the latter option, at least in publicly available documents. Yet, as Cunningham notes, IR scholars may assume that a naval blockade “could appeal to US decision makers as the option most likely to avoid a limited war either escalating into a nuclear war or causing extensive damage to US conventional war-fighting capabilities.”<sup>110</sup> Given the possibility that the USN could be called upon to provide this tool by political leaders, Cunningham considers how the United States would coerce China using a “distant blockade.” Moreover, drawing upon Chinese-language sources, she explores how Chinese strategists have thought about responding to such an eventuality. She argues that although China would be unlikely to escalate the conflict to include nuclear options, it might employ “conventional missile attacks, counterspace attacks, and strategic cyberattacks” to induce negotiations.<sup>111</sup> Cunningham concludes that if the United States imposed a distant blockade it could avoid the dangerous thresholds of nuclear and mainland strikes, thereby creating space for a negotiated political settlement. Nonetheless, this capability would be eye-wateringly costly for the United States, even if it were optimized for such a mission, which Cunningham shows it is clearly not.

The final article Montgomery’s “Primacy and Punishment: US Grand Strategy, Maritime Power, and Military Options to Manage Decline,” considers a less direct but more likely USN blockade operation, pointing out that the Navy is the natural “economy of force” option for the United States’ far-flung interests, even as it shifts its national security effort to the Pacific.<sup>112</sup> As with Cunningham, Montgomery lays out the incredibly demanding nature of a successful distant blockade, this time of Iran. This challenges the conventional wisdom that the Pacific is the Navy’s domain. Indeed, if the world is truly defense dominant as many in security studies suggest, and if, as Caverley and Dombrowski argue, naval forces can undermine this stability, then it is necessary to concentrate US ground efforts in the first island chain and beyond, while the Navy plays a traditional but (by its own estimation) less glamorous role as a tool of horizontal escalation and sea lines of communication protection. The United States’ exit from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and new

<sup>110</sup>Fiona S. Cunningham “The Maritime Rung on the Escalation Ladder: Naval Blockades in a US-China Conflict,” *Security Studies* 29, no. 4 (October–December 2020).

<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup>Montgomery, “Primacy and Punishment”.

commandant guidance for the US Marine Corps may point in this direction.<sup>113</sup>

This special issue proceeds from the assumption that great-power competition, conflict, and potentially war will largely take place at sea between the United States and China. It further assumes the large body of strategic studies literature has much to offer in understanding how this rivalry will evolve. But it is also confident that competition in the maritime domain between great powers, as well as their allies and partners, offers challenges to a subfield that has focused most closely on the territorial conflict over the past 75 years. Although this introduction reviews significant work addressing this issue, the subject deserves much more scholarly attention. Naval conflict in such an era is too important to be left to the admirals, or navalists for that matter.

The articles cover a great deal of ground, but we present this special issue primarily in hopes of encouraging more interaction between security studies and the emerging maritime challenges, ranging from the shifting balance of offensive and defensive weapons navies deploy to the intense legal disputes in the maritime realm. We believe maritime conflict has a newfound relevance to international politics. Moreover, security studies theory based on territorial or nuclear conflict cannot be applied uncritically to this distinct domain.

We conclude this introduction by suggesting that research based on maritime competition may be usefully applied to other emerging domains. It is no coincidence, we believe, that a sea power theorist spearheaded the first major analysis of the implications of the atomic bomb.<sup>114</sup> The puckish debate over whether the new US Space Force should have naval or air force ranks is revealing.<sup>115</sup> Security studies will inevitably turn more attention on such increasingly relevant topics as competing power-projection capabilities, the “global commons” of air and space as well as the seas, cyberconflict, and the security consequences of climate change. Research on these topics cannot rely wholly on naval strategic thinking, but we are confident that it can provide insight not found elsewhere.

## Acknowledgments

Most of the articles in this special edition emerged from the Bridging the Straits Conference at the US Naval War College, held in December 2018. The authors would like to thank the Strategic and Operational Research Department, the Naval War College Foundation, and, in particular, Tom Culora, Rachael Shaffer, Drew Winner, and Dex Wilson, for their support.

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<sup>113</sup>Lara Seligman, “A Rising China Is Driving the US Army’s New Game Plan in the Pacific,” *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2019, [https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/21/a-rising-china-is-driving-the-us-armys-new-game-plan-in-the-pacific-command-hawaii-beijing-military-pentagon-missiles-inf-treaty/?utm\\_source=PostUp&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=11868&utm\\_term=Flashpoints](https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/21/a-rising-china-is-driving-the-us-armys-new-game-plan-in-the-pacific-command-hawaii-beijing-military-pentagon-missiles-inf-treaty/?utm_source=PostUp&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=11868&utm_term=Flashpoints) OC.

<sup>114</sup>Bernard Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946).

<sup>115</sup>Brent D. Ziarnick, “Why the Space Corps Needs to Use Naval Rank,” *Space Review*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.thespacereview.com/article/3761/1>.