

# China's Use of Power and Implications for the United States Military

A Monograph

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## Abstract

China's Use of Power and Implications for the United States Military, by MAJ Donald A. Schmidt II, US Army, 47 pages.

Over the last two decades, with US military forces primarily focused on conflict in the Middle East, China's power projection proliferated from the Indo-Pacific region and spread Beijing's influence across all US geographic combatant command (COCOM) areas of responsibility (AORs). China's efforts put US national interests and security at risk and challenged the presence of US hard power resources in regions outside the sustainable operational reach of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). To fill the gap in the PLA's capabilities, China fostered relationships outside its immediate borders and challenged the Western-dominated status quo across the globe.

An operational framework (operational close, operational deep, and strategic deep) serves to understand the proliferation of China's influence across three US COCOMs: USINDOPACOM, USCENTCOM, and USAFRICOM. Differences in Eastern and Western thought underpin the difficulty faced by US planners developing operational and strategic plans to address competition. Theoretical definitions of power resources and behaviors across a geographically board arena, coupled with an understanding of organizational culture, provide clarity to China's regionally-focused objectives to achieving a "China Dream" of national rejuvenation. US COCOMs, therefore, plan against the threat China's rising competition provokes. Encouragement of synergy amongst COCOMs, flexible and dynamic doctrinal changes, and a whole-of-government approach address challenges relevant to the US military.

## Contents

Abstract .....	iii
Acknowledgements .....	v
Acronyms .....	vi
Illustrations .....	vii
Introduction .....	1
Literature Review .....	7
Methodology .....	20
Operational Close: China’s Nine-Dash Line and the Spratly Islands.....	24
Operational Deep: Iran .....	30
Strategic Deep: The Democratic Republic of the Congo .....	36
Conclusion and Recommendations .....	42
Bibliography .....	48

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## Acronyms

A2/AD	Anti-Access/Anti Denial
AOR	Area of Responsibility
BRI	Bridge and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
COCOM	Combatant Command
CJCSI	Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FON	Freedom of Navigation
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
LOC	Line of Communication
MONUSCO	United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC
NDS	National Defense Strategy
NSS	National Security Strategy
PKO	Peacekeeping Operations
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China
SCS	South China Sea
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention of the Law of the Sea
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNTSO	United Nations Truce Supervision Operations
USAFRICOM	United States Africa Command
USCENTCOM	United States Central Command
USINDOPACOM	United States Indo-Pacific Command

## Illustrations

Figure 1. China's Nine-Dash Line Maritime Claims and the Spratly Islands.....	24
Figure 2. China's New Silk Road.....	31

# Introduction

## Background

The United States remains the world's dominant superpower. Over the last two decades, the United States projected all forms of national power through all domains, including across the range of military operations. The United States accomplished this militarily through established geographically and functionally aligned combatant command (COCOM) areas of responsibility (AOR), whose priorities aimed to achieve the objectives of the National Security Strategy (NSS). This military structure allowed the United States to ensure its national defense against near-peer, non-near-peer, state, and non-state competitors through outward projection of influence and force. The United States, therefore, maintained an offensive posture. As regional threats emerged, priorities and allocated resources of COCOMs shifted to counter the determined effects of perceived adversaries.

In an effort to stay ahead of emerging threats, including China, and remain the dominant superpower, US military planners must strive to understand problems across a broader spectrum, create opportunities for shared understanding across all COCOMs, and conceptualize solutions outside the limitations of current doctrine. In doing this successfully, acting in concert with all elements of national power, the US military can remain the world's premier fighting force, operating with available means to achieve politically driven national ends.

With US forces primarily focused on conflict in the Middle East, China's power projection spread Beijing's influence across all US geographic COCOMs, proliferating from the Indo-Pacific region and putting at risk US national interests and security. China challenged the presence of hard power in regions it was unable or unwilling to project its military. China fostered relationships outside its immediate borders due, in part, to a modernizing society in need of an increased supply of natural resources. This realization highlighted the necessity for cross-

COCOM communication and coordination to counter the potentially threatening effects of this proliferation.

To achieve these priorities and resource requirements, China incorporated the use of hard and soft power, or what political scientist, Joseph Nye, refers to as smart power, focused on key actors in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. As such, China's areas of interest resembled a operational framework, each with separate priorities and efforts, in operational close, operational deep, or strategic deep regions, closely aligning with US geographic COCOMs.<sup>1</sup>

In this operational framework, South Asia, within the US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) AOR, represents China's "operational close" fight. Within the operational reach of its military, China focuses primarily on border and internal security and disputed territorial claims using hard power, while gaining economic favor with the poorest and most isolated countries along its border.<sup>2</sup> While the main resource of control in this region remained

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of the Army, *Field Manual (FM) 3-0, Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Press, 2017), 1-25, 1-31, accessed October 22, 2018, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR\\_pubs/DR\\_a/pdf/web/ARN6687\\_FM%203-0%20C1%20Inc%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ARN6687_FM%203-0%20C1%20Inc%20FINAL%20WEB.pdf). An *operational framework* is a cognitive tool used to assist commanders and staffs in clearly visualizing and describing the application of combat power in time, space, purpose, and resources in the concept of operations. The operational framework provides an organized construct for visualizing and describing operations by echelon in time and space within the context of an [area of operations], area of influence, and area of interest. It provides a logical architecture for determining the responsibilities, permissions, and restrictions for subordinate echelons, and by doing so enables freedom of action and unity of effort. Commanders plan to conduct decisive operations using maneuver in the *close area*, and they position most of the maneuver force within it...A close operation requires speed and mobility to rapidly concentrate overwhelming combat power at the right time and place and to exploit success. Operations in the *deep area* involve efforts to prevent uncommitted or out of contact enemy maneuver forces from being committed in a coherent manner or preventing enemy enabling capabilities, such as fires and air defense, from creating effects in the close area...The purpose of operations in the deep area is to set the condition for success in the close area or to set the condition for future operations; US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, *Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Press, 2018), I-12, I-13, accessed October 22, 2018, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_0ch1.pdf?ver=2018-11-27-160457-910](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_0ch1.pdf?ver=2018-11-27-160457-910). There are no fixed limits or boundaries between the levels of warfare – strategic, operational, and tactical. Rather, these levels help commanders visualize a logical arrangement of operations, allocated resources, and assigned tasks to appropriate commands. Echelons of command, size of units, types of equipment, and types and location of forces or components may often be associated with a particular level, but the strategic, operational, or tactical purpose of their employment depends on the nature of their task, mission, or objective.

<sup>2</sup> US Joint Staff, *JP 3-0, Joint Operations* 2018, GL-14. Operational reach is defined as the distance and duration across which a force can successfully employ military capabilities.

hard power, especially off its coastline to enforce claims to the areas of the South China Sea (SCS) represented by the nine-dash line, China cultivated diplomatic and economic ties among its neighbors counter to the interests of the United States.<sup>3</sup> In this region, China considered the influences of the United States and other regional and non-regional actors when calculating its actions, counteractions, and inactions. This region served as key terrain in China's operational framework as it provided the required ground and sea lines of communications (LOC) into the Middle East and Africa. To secure these LOCs, China attempted to control the population within Chinese sovereign space, as well as external influences that threatened access into the Middle East.

The Middle East, or the US Central Command (USCENTCOM) AOR, occupies China's "operational deep" fight. This region remained important to China's operational framework due to its abundant resources, which supported its growing industrial base. Unlike in South Asia, the primary way to project power was through soft, versus hard means. Infrastructure development, trade deals, and gaining favor with Middle Eastern leaders were primary approaches China pursued to secure favor in the region, while simultaneously competing with US and Russian initiatives and actions.

Finally, Africa, or the US Africa Command (USAFRICOM) AOR, becomes China's "strategic deep" fight, focused on peacekeeping operations to enable politically and economically driven "win-win" situations.<sup>4</sup> This focus served multiple purposes, primarily aimed at gaining legitimacy with international organizations such as the United Nations, securing trade routes and natural resource reserves, and providing a theater for China's military, holistically known as the

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Hurst, "China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral (Finally) Meets Again," *The Diplomat*, May 12, 2018, accessed March 11, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/05/china-japan-south-korea-trilateral-finally-meets-again/>.

<sup>4</sup> Cindy Hurst, "The Changing Strategic Design of Chinese Peacekeepers: In Line with UN or Chinese Goals?" Foreign Military Studies Office, April 19, 2017, accessed November 1, 2018, <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/m/fmso-monographs/195103>.

People's Liberation Army (PLA), to conduct tactical and operational level military operations below the threshold of high-order war.<sup>5</sup> These operations did not enable China's immediate defense and security or its economic survival, but did allow China to gain favor beyond the PLA's military operational reach.

Globally, China provided influence with its soft power behavior using soft and hard power resources to set conditions to deliver hard power effects. By exercising all instruments of national power, China tested the limits of its operational and strategic reach and remained aligned with the goals set forth in the People's Republic of China (PRC) national defense policy. The imperatives of the Chinese defense policy rallied around modernization and fostered a common cause of its entire population from all ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup> China maintained a relatively peaceful presence, or expressed peaceful intent, in these regions. However, the overt projection of power outside of the Indo-Pacific region provided opportunities for China to mimic the actions of other great power states and resemble a nation concerned with the well-being of developing countries. This exercise in diplomacy and economic cooperation provided instances for China to test its power projection capabilities and pinpoint weaknesses in logistical reach needed to support sustained land operations.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ben Connable, Jason H. Campbell, and Dan Madden, *Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War: How Russia, China, and Iran Are Eroding American Influence Using Time-Tested Measures Short of War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), ix, accessed December 17, 2018, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1003.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1003.html). The terms outlined in this report are used throughout this paper and are common amongst friendly and adversarial employment of the instruments of national power as measures short of war. The terms used from this report include high-order war, threshold, threshold stretching and threshold exploitation.

<sup>6</sup> Information Office of the State Council, The People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in 2010*, accessed October 28, 2018, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/1353697/chinas-military-strategy-white-papers/>.

<sup>7</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, "Is China contributing to the United Nations' mission?" *China Power*, last modified August 3, 2018, accessed October 25, 2018, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-un-mission/>.

Every instance in which China exercised actions to fulfill the prescribed objectives of its national defense policy occurred across multiple US AORs and used all instruments of national power. As China inexhaustibly developed its military for regional dominance, cultivated diplomatic ties for regional access, and expanded its peacekeeping to exercise its projection capabilities, the United States labored through focused military presence in the Middle East. This gave China the space and time needed to grow.

In light of increased Chinese influence across the globe, the United States must recognize when, where, and how all forms of Chinese power projection subvert the effects of military hard power projection. As China continues to target long-standing and fragile alliances, increase its natural resource interests, and challenge the status-quo for great power basing, the United States must create a framework and posture appropriately for mutually supporting efforts. Furthermore, these efforts should transcend all COCOMs to ensure the security of US interests, always from a position of strength.<sup>8</sup>

The purpose of this study is to attempt an understanding of how China's use of power changed the US strategic environment over the last two decades. Following the 9/11 attacks, a sentiment of great power unity for peace echoed through the US security and defense strategies. In the face of tragedy, hope was given to this prospect, captured in the 2002 NSS as, "today, the international community has the best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the seventeenth century to build a world where great powers compete in peace instead of continually prepare for war."<sup>9</sup> This sentiment, echoed in the 2006 National Defense Strategy (NDS), heightens the need

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<sup>8</sup> James Mattis, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 2018), 1, accessed September 29, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Donald J. Trump, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, 2002), vi, accessed October 28, 2018, <http://nssarchive.us/NSSR/2002.pdf>.

for an investigation of China's actions, not in ensuring peace but exploiting opportunities to strengthen its global posture using various forms of power.

This is not a first look at China's attempt to strengthen its global standing, nor is the use of a combination of power resources and behaviors new when attempting to gain a relative advantage over global competitors. The results of this study may be useful to military strategic planners to achieve synergy across multiple COCOMs in response to a single great power competitor, like China. To do this effectively, it is important to understand the concept of power - its types, scopes, domains, and the intended and unintended effects of each. By doing so, the application of traditional realist views on power, and the application of power's effects on strategy, can inform strategic decisions when posturing military forces in response to China's presence or actions. The study of writings that categorize power, including those of early twentieth century British realist, E.H. Carr, and contemporary writer, Joseph Nye, provide insight on relevant planning considerations against perceived threats. Carr describes international power in three categories: 1) Military Power, 2) Economic Power, and 3) Power Over Opinion.<sup>10</sup> Nye describes power using a similar framework revolving around the terms hard power, soft power, and smart power. The United States must delineate and consider power effects in environments where the coercive use of hard power may be less suitable and feasible than the co-opted application of soft power to achieve desired end state conditions.<sup>11</sup>

This study is divided into seven sections. First, the introduction to the study includes the background, purpose, and significance of the study, statement of the problem, theoretical framework, hypothesis, research questions, limitations and delimitations, and assumptions. Second, a literature review focuses on the delineation between the types of power and how the interplay between Chinese and US power projection affects global affairs and respective interests.

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<sup>10</sup> Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introductory to the Study of International Relations* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 108.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 21.

Third is the description of the research methodology for the study and includes the procedure for case study selection and the analysis of three case studies. The fourth, fifth, and sixth sections contain the analysis of three case studies – the nine-dash line and Spratly Islands, Iran, and The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), respectively. Finally, the conclusion discusses the findings of the study, answering the research questions and proving the hypothesis, and provides recommendations for US military actions in respective AORs.

## Hypothesis

Over the last two decades, the United States' strategy to ensure homeland defense revolved around maintaining dominant military influence abroad. It is vital to recognize the potential threat to national interests, primarily focused on resources and diplomatic influence, China conveyed across a broad combination of hard and soft resources and behavior. The United States continued to maintain a hard power approach to national security while China continued to build its capabilities and expand its influence in space predominantly occupied by the United States as well as geographic locations of little interest to the United States.

## Literature Review

### Introduction

As China continues to grow as an economic power, its leaders recognize that effective power projection can actualize Chinese influence in global affairs. This section presents a summary of key points for analysis of China's power projection and the potential problems its proliferation poses for US force projection. Outlined in its 2015 Military Strategy white paper, China maintains that in a changing world, the Chinese people continue an endeavor to realize the "China Dream" of great national rejuvenation.<sup>12</sup> To achieve this rejuvenation, the strategy asserts

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<sup>12</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*, accessed October 28, 2018, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Admin/2015%20White%20Paper-Eng%20and%20Ch.pdf>, 1.

that maintained peace, pursued development, and shared prosperity is key.<sup>13</sup> While China also asserts that a modernized and powerful armed force is necessary, the military stance to achieve the China Dream is one of peaceful employment and defense-oriented actions. This employment takes many different forms and spans multiple regions, interconnected, in part, by the Belt Road Initiative's (BRI's) corridors and channels. Outwardly proclaimed as economic in nature, the BRI affords China the opportunity to project soft power, through diplomacy, information, and military forces, across US geographic COCOMs focused in this study – USINDOPACOM, USCENTCOM, and USAFRICOM.

First, conceptualizing a Chinese mindset reveals how China possibly developed its strategy. Accordingly, an exploration of China's actions across multiple US COCOMs will pinpoint what China sees as a threat to its "China Dream." Further, understanding the types of power gives clues to how China projects power. Finally, the analysis of actions asserts how Chinese power projection threatens US interests and security.

### How Chinese Thought Leads to the Development of Strategy

Recognizing Chinese strategy as ambiguous underpins its main difference from Western security strategy. A comparison of Chinese and US strategies' resemble the differences between the board games "Go" and "Chess." Go personifies the Eastern approach to strategy and world affairs, generally viewed as a humanist approach with the potential that a situation will play into one's favor.<sup>14</sup> Chess remains consistent with the traditional Western approach to war and order, predicated on conflict executed in accordance with a prescribed set of rules and order measured

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<sup>13</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> François Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 17.

by the balance of power amongst relevant state actors.<sup>15</sup> The definitions of the games provide insight on the differences in thought associated with each strategic approach. Merriam-Webster defines Go as a game played between two players who alternately place black and white stones on a board checkered by nineteen vertical lines and nineteen horizontal lines in an attempt to enclose the larger area on the board.<sup>16</sup> Merriam-Webster goes on to define Chess as a game for two players each of whom move sixteen pieces according to fixed rules across a checkerboard and tries to checkmate the opponent's king.<sup>17</sup>

The most evident difference in these definitions suggests that Go is terrain focused and Chess is enemy focused. Broad and abstract in its view of the board, or operational environment, Go illustrates an indirect approach to achieve goals. François Jullien, in his book, *A Treaties on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking*, provides an intellectual comparison of this understanding. Using the ideas of Sun Tzu, he suggests the Chinese approach to strategy allows an effect to come about. In other words, it does not aim at an objective directly but implicates it consequently. It does not seek an objective but welcomes it and allows it as a result.<sup>18</sup> As in Go, placing stones in space not occupied by your opponent allows for conditions setting to facilitate a desired consequence. This strategy does not view time as a constraint but as a resource used in analyzing the circumstances leading to past decisions and gathering information to reveal the opposing strategy. The strategy is also not bound by a set of uniformed rules or logic. Each player is free to manipulate an opponent into transformative effects leading to permanent and wide-

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<sup>15</sup> G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Resistance, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 11.

<sup>16</sup> Merriam-Webster, "Go," accessed December 13, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/go>.

<sup>17</sup> Merriam-Webster, "Chess," accessed December 13, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chess>.

<sup>18</sup> Jullien, *A Treaties on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking*, vii.

ranging goals.<sup>19</sup> The master strategist, therefore, plays to his own strengths while exploiting the known and unknown weaknesses of an opponent. Combining an ambiguous view of outcomes and the indirect method of arriving at eventualities makes actions less predictable to those viewing the problem from a different lens. Furthermore, while Go is constrained to its board, the Chinese strategic thought process accepts space as infinite, with any action within that space contributing to the “whole” abstraction of eventualities.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the most striking difference between Western and Chinese strategic thought is the notion of the ideal outcome.

Carl von Clausewitz viewed the ultimate military goal as the destruction of an adversarial army. Conversely, Chinese strategy places a premium on the deconstruction of an enemy. Driven by efficiencies, deconstruction, or bringing an enemy over to one’s side, takes much less energy to achieve than actions and resources required for the total destruction of an army.<sup>21</sup> This difference in the manifestation of an end elevates the difficulty of Western strategy to transpire against China. As in Chess, Western strategy starts with a baseline of known, or perceived, capabilities initiating action from a specified location. Modeling from this baseline and experiences from past events leads to the formation of a plan, or strategy, starting with the desired end state. This model-plan method, weighing means to achieve specified ends, facilitates the Western tradition of projecting onto the world that with which our will deliberately established.<sup>22</sup> The end state is then achieved through a sequence of relatively predictable direct action, massing effects to coerce a desired response from an adversary. While this may be highly effective in achieving a targeted focus, it is difficult to quantify the overall effect against the entirety of the

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<sup>19</sup> Jeremy E. Henkel, “A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking (review),” *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 2 (2006): 347-451, accessed December 11, 2018, <https://philpapers.org/archive/JERATO.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Jullien, *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking*, 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

Chinese visualization of a “whole” reality. Despite multiple divergent views, one consistency remains throughout each frame of thought – that *war is never final*.<sup>23</sup> However, considering differing views and scope of strategy, the perceived end of a conflict by a Western power may simply be the continuation of a Chinese eventuality. Moreover, a Chinese strategist may view a single conflict as part of a whole reality, rather than simply a time bracketed set of actions.

### What China Sees as a Threat to its “China Dream”

Chinese policy lacks, compared to US security strategy and policy, the specificity of its threats. Unlike current US national security, defense, and military strategies, that identify China as a threat, China’s state documents maintain a tone of intended peace, rather than conflict, with other global powers. The term “threat” is used throughout state security documents, but “who” is the threat remains unstated while “what” is the threat focuses mainly on the intangibles China views as potentially tarnishing its legitimacy to the world. In China’s 2015 Military Strategy, the United States is referenced twice: first, acknowledging the US “rebalancing” of military presence and alliances in the region and second, fostering a new model of military structure mirroring the US armed forces.<sup>24</sup> Actions suggest that China views the US rebalance as a threat to its regional interests. To counter this threat, fostering positive relations with the US armed forces and maintaining an appropriate level of opacity is prudent.

Arguably more important than military parity is China’s concentration on power diplomacy. Since taking office in 2012, President Xi Jinping proclaimed China would undergo a period of strategic opportunity, enabled by a powerful economy, to bolster civil and military

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<sup>23</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 80.

<sup>24</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Military Strategy*, 3, 19.

development.<sup>25</sup> China continues to make huge investments in these arenas, with economic expenditures projected to reach \$1.25 trillion annually by 2025, \$10 billion of which is currently invested into “external propaganda.”<sup>26</sup> Comparatively, the US State Departments invested \$666 million into programs aimed towards China’s “external propaganda” in 2014 while the total U.S. Department of Defense budget is projected at \$686 billion for fiscal year 2019.<sup>27</sup>

One of the most visible ways China has improved its diplomatic standing is through United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operations (PKO). Previously, China’s involvement in UN peacekeeping was nonexistent due to the UN’s recognition of the Republic of China (ROC), known today as Taiwan, and the ROC’s status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC). This changed in 1971, when the PRC, with international support, gained admission into the UN and replaced the ROC as a permanent member of the UNSC. This marked the beginning of China’s evolution from condemnation to full support of and participation in UN PKOs. At face value, China’s growing role as peacekeepers achieves the diplomatic goal of gaining favor with other influential nations. However, as asserted by Cindy Hurst, Research Analyst at the Foreign Military Studies Office, China’s involvement in PKOs is determined by a “return on investment” of a particular UN PKO. Other incentives for peacekeeping extend beyond natural recourses, monetary gain, or diplomatic influence and include protecting assets abroad. Militarily, PKOs afford the opportunity to gain real-life experience operating below the threshold of high-order war and the opportunity to gather intelligence. This is important considering the

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<sup>25</sup> Anthony Cordesman and Joseph Kendall, *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2017: A Comparative Analysis*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017, 34, accessed October 30, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/web-book-chinese-strategy-and-military-modernization>.

<sup>26</sup> David Shambaugh, “China’s Soft Power Push,” *Foreign Affairs*, last modified June 16, 2015, accessed October 30, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/china-s-soft-power-push>.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.; Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) Chief Financial Officer, *Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Request* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Press, 2018), 1-2, accessed December 13, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/FY2019-Budget-Request-Overview-Book.pdf>.

PLA's last combat experience occurred nearly 40 years ago and resulted in a demoralizing defeat by a seasoned Vietnamese military force.<sup>28</sup>

### Understanding the Types of Power and What Led to China's Ability to Project Power

Political scientist, Joseph Nye, introduced a new concept of power to the world in his essay *Soft Power*. Published in 1990, the essay discusses five trends that contribute to a diffusion of power amongst global actors – economic independence, transnational actors, nationalism in weak states, spread of technology, and changing political issues.<sup>29</sup> Power, Nye claims, is passing from the “capital rich” to the “information rich,” or the coercive application of tangible power to the persuasive proliferation of intangible power.<sup>30</sup> In his book, *The Future of Power*, published over 20 years after his initial essay introducing soft power, Nye further defines types of power, including military and economic power, and the types of resources associated with hard power (tangible) and soft power (intangible). He offers that the tangible resources of hard power typically include force and money while the intangible resources of soft power include institutions, ideas, values, culture, and the perceived legitimacy of policies.<sup>31</sup> Nye illustrates the maxim of hard power as “command” and the maxim of soft power as “co-opt.” The middle ground along this power spectrum depicts behaviors as opportunities for varying resources to create varying effects. While Nye remains relatively rigid in his delineation of resources between hard and soft power, he does concede that a hard power resource can have a soft power behavior, and vice versa.<sup>32</sup> From a military standpoint, projection of an army can produce the hard power

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<sup>28</sup> Timothy R. Heath, *China's Military Has No Combat Experience: Does It Matter?* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018), accessed March 23, 2019, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2018/11/chinas-military-has-no-combat-experience-does-it-matter.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph S. Nye, “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 80, (Autumn 1990): 160.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>31</sup> Nye, *The Future of Power*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 26.

effect of area denial and forceful restraint of one subject and the soft power effect of attraction and emulation of success by the same or other subjects. China continues to set conditions to perform such actions along the spectrum of behaviors with a strengthening pool of resources. China embraces diffusion of power by investing heavily in cultivating its peaceful image to the world.

To China, the proliferation of power takes many forms across the power spectrum, including economic driven initiatives through Asia and the Middle East and peacekeeping efforts in Africa. In any case, the underlying intent is rooted deep in the “China Dream” to emerge from the “century of humiliation” as a prosperous and proud people.<sup>33</sup> As the second largest global economy, China now has the ability to compete with its institutions by spreading ideas, values, and culture and reinforcing the legitimacy of policies through actions, as well as, words. Similar to other great economic powers, including the United States, militaries provide a source of hard power that can behave to improve soft power relations.<sup>34</sup> Peacekeeping in Africa, as an example, gains favor with those it assists as well as other peacekeepers whose burdens are eased through unity of effort. However, peacekeeping affords the PLA the ability to sharpen its proficiency to perform and sustain prolonged operations. This factor should remain at the forefront of US strategic planning, as China continues to develop opportunities to exercise the PLA, and other hard power resources, using soft power behavior.

### How China’s Method of Power Projection Threatens US Interests and Security

The biggest threat China’s methods of power projection pose to US interests and security is competition for access to the global commons. With China’s influence growing in Asia, the

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<sup>33</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Military Strategy*, 6.

<sup>34</sup> The World Bank, “The World Bank in China,” last modified September 26, 2018, accessed December 13, 2018, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/china/overview>.

Middle East, and Africa, US forces must counter China's regional activities to maintain a legitimate presence. Recalling China's strategic approach towards global threats, it is prudent to acknowledge indirect action likely aims to achieve direct results. Along this line of thinking, China's hardening of fortifications in the SCS and an increase in naval presence may welcome a predictable US response. Additionally, focused efforts by China in the SCS likely redirect US attention and resources away from China's interests in Africa. This allows, to some extent, China's actions in Africa to remain largely self-serving and exploitative.<sup>35</sup> Lastly, China's increased energy ties with Iran indirectly undermine and threaten US military operations in the Middle East. These actions indicate China does not follow traditional logic of Western warfare and continues to pose a threat to US interests and security.

A logical goal in the "China Dream" of national rejuvenation is regaining its status as the predominant regional hegemon. Critical to this goal are three overarching regional interests outlined in a 2018 RAND study on the BRI. First is the aim to protect Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity, including upholding claims to disputed territories and an increased naval presence. Considering China's disputed territorial claims, the SCS remains a geostrategic imperative in the effort to maintain control of this region. Second, China looks to promote and protect its trade, investment, and other linkages to the region to support its economic growth. Lastly, China seeks to promote and expand its influence over Southeast Asian cooperation while minimizing the influence of external actors, including the United States.<sup>36</sup> These aims are at odds

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<sup>35</sup> Panos Mourdoukoutas, "What Is China Doing In Africa?" *Forbes*, August 4, 2018, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/panosmourdoukoutas/2018/08/04/china-is-treating-africa-the-same-way-european-colonists-did/#11c0737b298b>.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Scobell, Bonny Lin, Howard J. Shatz, Michael Hohnson, Larry Hanauer, Michael S. Chase, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, Ivan W. Rasmussen, Arthur Chan, Aaron Strong, Eric Warner, and Logan Ma, *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Cooperation, 2018), xvi, accessed November 28, 2018, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2273.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2273.html).

with US interests in the USINDOPACOM AOR as they threaten access and aim to tarnish US alliances with key regional actors.

Implied in China's overarching regional interests is maintaining freedom of navigation (FON) on the SCS and unimpeded access through the Strait of Malacca. Paramount to the "road" portion of the BRI, China's westward expansion of influence helps circumvent eastern tensions while strengthening political and economic ties preventing strategic encirclement.<sup>37</sup> The most viable pathway towards this westward expansion remains the SCS and the Strait of Malacca.

As the world's largest oil importer in 2017, China receives up to eighty percent of its oil imports through the Strait of Malacca, primarily from the Middle East and Africa.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, China passes over sixty percent of its trade by sea, tying its economic security closely to the SCS.<sup>39</sup> Ensuring an unimpeded flow of natural resources through this waterway remains essential to the survival of the Chinese economy. To further mitigate the risks associated with relying on foreign oil imports, China intends to increase its accumulated reserves to 600 million barrels, or 90 days of supply.<sup>40</sup> These considerations warrant a predominant hard power presence in this region to enable lasting soft power endeavors outside of the PLA's sustainable reach.

In its effort to ensure security of its natural resource requirements, maintain a strong economy, and prevent strategic encirclement, China is becoming a major actor in the Middle

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<sup>37</sup> Scobell et al., *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, 28, 29, 36. China's BRI consists of a system of overland and maritime routes, linked by coastal, air, and rail nodes, allowing access to areas of interest. The "belt" portion of the BRI refers to the ground lines of communication and overland infrastructure projects facilitating transcontinental transport from Asia, through the Middle East, and into Europe. The "road" portion of the BRI refers to the Maritime Silk Road Continental Extension from China through the South China Sea into the Indian Ocean, providing access to South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe.

<sup>38</sup> China Power Team, "How is China's energy footprint changing?" *China Power*, February 15, 2016, updated August 13, 2018, accessed October 25, 2018, <https://chinapower.csis.org/energy-footprint/>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

East. The Middle East also acts as a crossroads for the BRI, providing both sea and land nodes.<sup>41</sup> With primary oil exports transiting the “road’s” maritime shipping lanes, increased cooperation also facilitates the development of the “belt’s” ground LOCs within and out of the Middle East. To maintain access, China retains cordial relations with every country or governing authority in the Middle East – something no other major power in the world possesses.<sup>42</sup> These relations facilitate cooperation across most instruments of national power. Despite its economic, political, and military interests, China does not seek to directly challenge or confront the United States within the region.<sup>43</sup> However, with an increasing global need for energy resources, China’s growing influence and presence compete with US interests in the region. Despite the possibility of direct confrontation and inevitable competition, China benefits from regional stability and has a clear preference for peace and order throughout the Middle East.<sup>44</sup>

A troubling relationship to US interests in the Middle East is China’s cooperation with Iran. Given the history of China and Iran – once great powers reduced to semi-colonial states by unjust and dominant western powers – a partnership that enables the achievement of individual objectives seems rational and prudent. Each nation strives to strengthen and defend its own regime’s legitimacy while weakening the Western institutions that aim to further stifle their once proud civilizations.<sup>45</sup> The China-Iran relationship spans the full range of power resources and behavior and includes long-term initiatives that could improve both nations’ military posture in

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<sup>41</sup> Scobell et al., *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, xx.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>45</sup> Scott Harold and Alireza Nader, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), 2.

the region.<sup>46</sup> Iran's strong economic, political, and military ties with China hinder US attempts to pressure Iran and complicate the development of successful strategies towards either nation.<sup>47</sup> As two of the dominant authoritarian powers in their respective regions, China and Iran benefit from their relationship, which allows for the subversion of Western ideals and improves their collective geostrategic posture. Iran supports China's increasing resource requirements while each enjoy mutually supporting, non-energy economic ties, arms sales and defense cooperation, and geostrategic balancing against the United States.<sup>48</sup> China enjoys its cordial relationship with Iran, however, China's reliance on energy resources from Western-backed Middle Eastern states threatens regional stability and China's ambitions for a contiguous BRI.

While benefiting from trade with Iran, as an importer of energy resources and an exporter to Iran's growing market, China also leverages this relationship against the United States' ability to project power globally.<sup>49</sup> Placing itself between the United States and Iran, China can simultaneously expand its influence into the Middle East and focus US military attention in the Middle East. Additionally, a sustained US military presence in the Middle East preserves FON through the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz for commercial goods vital to sustain China's and the global economy.<sup>50</sup> The United States, in effect, shoulders a burden China is unwilling to unilaterally sustain considering its available naval capabilities. This burden ultimately limits the amount of combat power available for the US pivot to the Pacific. While US presence in the

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<sup>46</sup> Joseph L. Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, Commander, U.S. Central Command, before the Senate Arms Services Committee," March 13, 2018, accessed December 4, 2018, [http://www.centcom.mil/Portals/6/Documents/Transcripts/Votel\\_03-13-18.pdf](http://www.centcom.mil/Portals/6/Documents/Transcripts/Votel_03-13-18.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> Harold and Nader, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations*, ix.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, Commander, U.S. Central Command, before the Senate Arms Services Committee."

Middle East may threaten China's regional interests, it relieves some pressure from China's naval assets operating in the SCS and facilitates China's sustained efforts in Africa.

China remains the principle external actor on the African continent. As of 2015, China maintained positive diplomatic relations with 51 of the 54 African nations. As such, China remains Africa's top trading partner and distributes roughly half of its total foreign aid throughout the African continent.<sup>51</sup> China achieved its access into Africa primarily through the BRI's Maritime Silk Road. As in all regions in which China has interests, any amount of instability creates unwanted risk to its investment. In an effort to quell instability within Africa, China has taken a leading role in UN PKOs. Participating since 1990, China utilizes UN missions as a way to create stability in areas it intends to import resources and services from or export consumer goods to.<sup>52</sup> China almost exclusively uses the PLA as a means to foster stability, which provides an environment to exercise and improve its military processes and extend its operational reach. Ultimately, China's activities in Africa ensure its resource security while gaining political legitimacy and global recognition and respect from other great power nations.<sup>53</sup>

China has much to gain, politically, economically, and militarily, in Africa. Africa's relatively underdeveloped infrastructure provides opportunity for unimpeded investment by China, considering the large amount of untapped resources and US companies' unwillingness to invest in areas of high risk and poor infrastructure. Conversely, China is willing and able to invest significantly into developing opportunities for economic investment supported by predominantly state-funded programs.<sup>54</sup> While Chinese and US interest show some resemblance, cooperative efforts are less feasible due to the use of military forces as a means to achieve ends on the

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<sup>51</sup> Scobell et al., *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, 171.

<sup>52</sup> Hurst, "The Changing Strategic Design of Chinese Peacekeepers: In Line with UN or Chinese Goals?"

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Scobell et al., *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, 211.

continent. Since each military doctrinally views the other as an adversary, any such cooperation is unlikely without high-level military or political influence. Until this occurs, Chinese and US initiatives on the continent will remain parallel as each mutually self-selects avoidance from one another.<sup>55</sup>

## Methodology

### Introduction

The primary goal of this study is to provide a structured, focused comparative case study analysis. The research objective is to test questions that related to China's use of power projection and implications to the US military, using a combination of heuristic and theory to test against case studies. The case study comparison aims to provide a structured reflection of the research objectives, regionally focusing in South Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The study compares three regionally focused case studies that address three research questions. This method provides structure and these questions provide focus aimed at relating China's use of power to possible US military responses. Gathering data from primary and secondary sources enables an analysis of comparative findings pertinent to measure the validity of the proposed hypothesis.

This section provides an overview of the case study comparison process, data collection, and regionally focused concepts addressing limitations and delimitations ubiquitous throughout the study. This section is divided into six sub-sections: introduction, research questions, case study comparison process, limitations and delimitations, assumptions, and summary.

### Research Questions

Three research questions guide this study. To provide qualitative results, each question is applied to each of the three case studies highlighting unique circumstances and characteristics of

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<sup>55</sup> Scobell et al., *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, 213.

each region. This study applies the US doctrinal concept operational framework as a lens to understand the Chinese strategic landscape within operational close, operational deep, and strategic deep areas. This framework remains geographically within the USINDOPACOM, USCENCOM, and USAFRICOM COCOMs, respectively. Comparison of case studies from each COCOM against the research questions determines the validity of the proposed hypothesis.

First, how does China's global power projection threaten US national interests and security? This question aims to determine the assertion that China's power projection will threaten US national interests and security. This is the starting point of the analysis because it creates a baseline understanding of China's capabilities, strengths, limitations, and constraints, and brings to light the general methodology for its growth as a great power. The researcher attempts to provide clarity regarding China's power resources and the expected behavior of each resource by region, focusing on the what, where, and when aspects of China's approach and use of each to regain its status as a great power.

Second, is China's power projection across all instruments of national power setting conditions to achieve national strategic goals? This question builds on assertions made from research question one. It addresses the "with what" aspects of China's power resources, which span all instruments of national power – diplomacy, information, military, and economy. Analysis of this question, by region, determines the feasibility, suitability, and acceptability of China's expected projection of power to create sustainable effects.

Finally, how can the US military posture itself to create synergy across multiple COCOMs and address China's power projection? Each of the case studies highlights unique, regional challenges for the US military, as a hard power resource delivering soft and hard power behavior, simultaneously. This allows the researcher to determine major successes and shortfalls in sustaining a global presence and measures regional effectiveness. From the first and second research questions, the researcher makes assertions regarding the rebalancing and improved integration of the joint force to provide a more effective, synergistic posture. This remains vitally

important to determine the validity of the hypothesis since the US primary power resource remains the military.

## Case Study Comparison

In an effort to provide structure and focus to this process, the study uses Alexander George's and Andrew Bennett's case study analysis method. This methodology provides structure to the study by guiding and standardizing data collection that results in a systemic comparison of the case studies' findings.<sup>56</sup> The method provides focus to certain aspects of the cases by limiting the scope of the analysis to China's power projection and the implications to the US military. This method proves effective in comparing three case studies and generating data by answering the same three research questions in each case. Through this process, context is established providing further focus to effectively address the research questions. Well-defined research objectives and a research strategy establish a guide for the selection and analysis of the case studies. To limit the scope of the study and enable explanation of findings, variables are established that remain standardized across all case studies.<sup>57</sup>

## Limitations and Delimitations

There were three limitations to this study. The first limitation is its classification level. All material is maintained at the unclassified level to ensure the widest possible distribution. The result is a limited depth of analysis, which, to the fullest extent, may include classified documents and correspondence. As such, the sample size of relevant and available documents to this topic is relatively small. The second limitation is the lack of access to and specificity from many Chinese state documents. This leads to inferences based on possible actions and motives within Chinese

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<sup>56</sup> Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 67.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

strategy. While adequate studies exist on China's plans for power projection across all instruments of national power, consensus on China's way forward, and the domestic and global impacts, remains divided amongst scholars. Finally, definitions of the types of power referenced throughout the study are derived from geopolitical and military-focused sources. As such, determining metrics that measure a comparison between varying types of power effects was inferred.

The study provides delimitations in two ways. First, the scope of the study is limited to the last two decades and is geographically focused. Second, the study limits the US view to that of military action, not a whole-of-government approach, when examining responses to China's power projection.

## Assumptions

The study assumes China's actions are of an adversarial nature. Dividing China's regional interests into an operational framework geographically resembling US COCOMs asserts the United States views, and develops strategic and operational plans against, China as an adversary. Therefore, the study assumes that China views the United States as an adversary and remains dynamically engaged against the United States across areas of interest.

The study also assumes the use of power was consistent across all strategies, and the use of varying types of power was overlapping to achieve a desired effect. As such, types of power are delineated based on key factors and the ways of employment of an instrument of national power. This assumption leads to the understanding that each instrument of national power could be used in a coercive or persuasive manner. This study also assumes nuclear weapons and their proliferation were generalized to military power and can be factored into a strategy as a hard or soft means of projecting power; using them as a hard power, coercive act to achieve an end or possessing them to encourage co-opted, attractive approaches to achieve common goals.

## Operational Close: China’s Nine-Dash Line and the Spratly Islands

Defining the nine-dash line and analyzing the geostrategic and military importance of the Spratly Islands to China’s national strategic objectives serves to provide logic to China’s actions in this region. As China’s “operational close” fight, geographically within the USINDOPACOM AOR, the SCS represents the PLA’s primary theater of operations where it conducts operations short of the threshold for high-order war including unilateral training exercises within all domains. US presence in the region threatens China’s prospects for regional hegemony as economic and political competition extends into military contention.

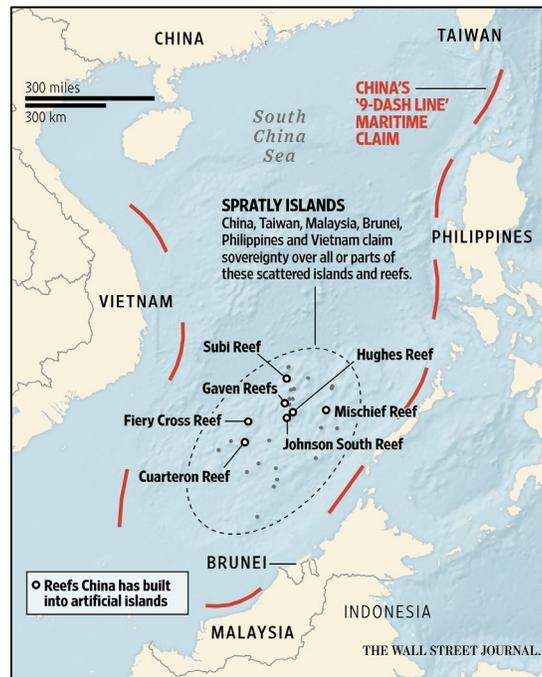


Figure 1. China’s Nine-Dash Line Maritime Claim and the Spratly Islands. *Source:* “Pentagon Says China Has Stepped Up Land Reclamation in South China Sea,” *The Wall Street Journal*, updated August 20, 2015, accessed February 24, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/pentagon-says-china-has-stepped-up-land-reclamation-in-south-china-sea-1440120837>.

The nine-dash line refers to territorial claims, primarily in the SCS, and remains the highly contested epicenter of China’s military efforts to become and remain a regional hegemon. The nine-dash line is China’s historical claim to the “traditional maritime boundary line” dating

back centuries and revived following the Chinese Civil War.<sup>58</sup> In 1947, Kuomintang's Chinese Nationalist Government officially drew a boundary, laying claim to key land features within the SCS. This claim is largely ignored by Eastern and Western powers alike, due to past European colonialism, Japanese expansion into China, and the aftermath of the Opium Wars. China refers to this period as the "century of humiliation," which shapes the Chinese image and psyche into a once, but no longer great power. With the rise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1953, the newly formed PRC redrew the nine-dash line boundary, which closely resembles the current depiction of the contested space within the SCS.<sup>59</sup> Operating below the threshold for high-order war, China continues to use the area within the nine-dash line to stretch the threshold of established international laws while exploiting the threshold of neighboring countries unable, or unwilling, to resist.

Modern day contention links to the nine-dash line's revival. The Kuomintang Nationalist Government, which fled to Taiwan due to the rise of the CCP, in effect bequeathed to the PRC the claim along with its regional disputes. Taiwan's own dispute extended to Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines, whose territorial and jurisdictional claims manifested as competition for natural resources increased.<sup>60</sup>

The recognition of these territorial claims determines the right to resources in accordance with the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Under UNCLOS, a 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone extends from a continental shoreline or around an island that can support habitation.<sup>61</sup> China largely argues that UNCLOS infringes on its self-proclaimed

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<sup>58</sup> Cordesman and Kendall, *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2017: A Comparative Analysis*, 166.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 588.

<sup>61</sup> Jeffrey A. Bader, "The U.S. and China's Nine-Dash Line: Ending the Ambiguity," Brookings, last modified February 6, 2014, accessed December 1, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-u-s-and-chinas-nine-dash-line-ending-the-ambiguity/>.

“historical claims” as it exploits the ambiguity of the UNCLOS definition of “historic title.” This, along with China’s vague and misleading strategic messaging, leaves opportunities to justify the creation of habitable islands within the nine-dash line in an attempt to extend the operational reach of its civil and military efforts.<sup>62</sup> The development of offshore reefs in the Spratly Island archipelago highlights a key method of projecting hard power resources without exceeding the threshold for high-order war.

The Spratly Islands archipelago consists of more than 100 small islands or reefs and covers an area of nearly 158,000 square miles within the SCS. These islands have no indigenous inhabitants but are occupied by Chinese military garrisons, and in limited capacity Malaysian, Filipino, Taiwanese, and Vietnamese military personnel and garrisons. Of the claimant nations, China, Taiwan, and Vietnam claim the archipelago in its entirety. China and Taiwan’s claims are predicated on historic precedence, which amplifies the contention among nations. Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines look to international law, specifically UNCLOS, for territorial claims.<sup>63</sup> At face value, the claimant dispute revolves around the archipelago’s rich commercial fishing ground, with the potential for subterranean gas and oil extraction. However, the buildup of habitable structures, particularly by China, suggests the geostrategic importance of the islands extends well beyond economic competition.

Underpinning China’s leadership, primarily President Xi Jinping, decision-making process is the proclaimed CCP long-term strategic goal of achieving great power status and fulfilling the “China Dream” of national rejuvenation.<sup>64</sup> The CCP asserts a reformed and robust defense strategy will enable this dream’s materialization. The cornerstone objective of this

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<sup>62</sup> Cordesman and Kendall, *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2017: A Comparative Analysis*, 167.

<sup>63</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “The World Factbook: Spratly Islands,” accessed January 17, 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/pg.html>.

<sup>64</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Military Strategy*, 3, 1.

strategy, particularly within Asia, is to “oppose hegemonism and power politics in all forms” and “deter or defeat adversary power projection and counter third-party, including US, intervention during a crisis or conflict.”<sup>65</sup> In the SCS, the road map to shaping the balance of power to favor China is becoming the regional hegemony it seeks to defeat. China’s increased defense spending, which saw annual growth at an average rate of 9.8 percent from 2006 to 2015, suggests military modernization constitutes an avenue for national rejuvenation.<sup>66</sup> Operating unilaterally against the United States and its allies in the SCS accentuates China’s urgency for deliberate and sustained growth in defense spending and modernization. The effects of this effort can be seen across all branches of the PLA.

China’s game of balancing its ambition of regional hegemony with regional stability remains calculated in an effort to maintain a level of perceived aggression below the threshold that would warrant kinetic action from the United States and its allies. In order for China to rise as the dominant power in Asia, it must be seen as a credible competitor to those projecting opposition. China must create an image of itself that attracts support and builds legitimacy in the eyes of those countries from which it aims to gain support.

In the SCS, China has ceased substantial land reclamation projects but continues to build infrastructure on three outposts and improve infrastructure on as many as seven artificial islands in the Spratly archipelago. While these larger islands are capable of supporting military operations, no permanent large-scale air or naval presence has been witnessed.<sup>67</sup> Claimant

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<sup>65</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, *China’s Military Strategy*, 1; Cordesman and Kendall, *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2017: A Comparative Analysis*, 11.

<sup>66</sup> Cordesman and Kendall, *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2017: A Comparative Analysis*, 11.

<sup>67</sup> US Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2018* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2018), 17, accessed January 17, 2019, <https://media.defense.gov/2018/Aug/16/2001955282/-1/-1/1/2018-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT.PDF>.

countries and third-party regional influencers, including the United States, view the buildup of these islands as posturing for future military use. However, China maintains the continued projects and robust infrastructure improves the living and working conditions of inhabitants present for safety of navigation and research. Despite this claim, construction of administrative buildings, weapons stations, and sensor emplacements continues on at least four of the small outposts on the Johnson, Gaven, Hughes, and Cuarteron Reefs. These construction efforts complement the aviation facilities, port facilities, fixed weapons positions, barracks, and communications facilities across all of the larger neighboring islands.<sup>68</sup> Collectively, China's actions in the SCS counter containment efforts by the United States aimed at rebalancing power dynamics within the region.

As Eliot Cohen asserts in his book, *The Big Stick*, “the point is not to impoverish or subjugate, much less absorb those countries; rather, to ensure that they become part of a hierarchical system at the top of which is the government of Beijing.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, China wishes to replace the United States as the predominate great power operating within Asia, with all other Asian countries subscribing to China's ideal hierarchical system. To accomplish this, China must show strength through hard power resources while maintaining a peaceful posture. As a result, China exerts indirect control and remains consistent with its strategic approach throughout history. China's build-up of military hardware and persistent claims on the Spratly Islands demonstrate notable hard power resources challenging the presence of the United States and allies in the SCS.

Competition within the SCS is particularly troubling to the United States as China's actions set conditions to degrade US influence, disrupt access, and assert control along key sea

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<sup>68</sup> US Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018*, 17.

<sup>69</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power & the Necessity of Military Force* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 110.

LOCs. This area is of great geostrategic importance to the United States as it provides a maritime bridge between the Pacific and Indian Oceans and provides direct access to the Strait of Malacca. Nearly one-third of global shipping passes through the SCS annually, with China, Taiwan, Japan, and South Korea accounting for the preponderance of that global market share.<sup>70</sup> The United States' 5.72% share of trade goods through the SCS is relatively low compared to China's 39.5% and Japan's 19.1%.<sup>71</sup> However, if the United States cedes control of the SCS, China, as the second largest global economy, could posture itself to disrupt the markets of other countries that rely on FON through the Strait of Malacca as leverage to achieve an end. This is unlikely to occur since China relies heavily on its exports reaching foreign markets, but in the event of circumstances nearing the threshold of high-order war, control of the SCS has the potential to disrupt the flow of energy resources vital to the United States and Asian allies. China's control of the SCS also ensures its energy security – over 80% of its maritime energy imports travel through the Strait of Malacca – and serves as the portion of the BRI's maritime “road” ostensibly influenced by the PLA.<sup>72</sup>

China's primary means of projecting power beyond its shores into the SCS is through the PLA. Messaging from President Xi echoes a military strategy aimed at a PLA capable of fighting and winning “informatized local wars” with an emphasis on “maritime military struggle.”<sup>73</sup> As Chinese military writings become more transparent, a description of “informatized” warfare is conflict conducted through the “use of information technology to create an operational system-of-systems allowing the PLA to acquire, transmit, process, and use information to conduct joint

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<sup>70</sup> China Power Team, “How much trade transits the South China Sea?” *China Power*, October 27, 2017, accessed December 11, 2018, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> “How is China's energy footprint changing?” *China Power*.

<sup>73</sup> US Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018*, 45.

military operations across the domains of land, sea, air, space, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum during a conflict.”<sup>74</sup> Modernization and development efforts weighted towards ground, air, naval, and missile forces allow for power projection during peacetime and a robust capability to contest US military presence approaching the threshold of high-order war.<sup>75</sup> Like the United States, which depends on land based infrastructure to augment the shortfalls of naval capabilities, China is setting conditions in the Spratly Islands to conduct regional offensive operations with its growing “blue water” navy outside of the defensive land-based anti-access / anti denial (A2/AD) systems on continental China.<sup>76</sup> Informatized warfare, honing in on the capabilities of and improving upon the proficiency of a joint force, will enable the success of China’s strategic objectives while undermining the US interest tied efforts in the region.

### Operational Deep: Iran

Iran also plays a role in the “China Dream” of national rejuvenation. As China’s “operational deep” fight, geographically within the USCENTCOM AOR, this region serves as a shaping theater that enables the CCP’s ability to build upon its political clout, strengthen its economic ties, and proliferate its military capabilities and influence.<sup>77</sup> Key to enabling these efforts in Iran is maintaining economic ties revolving around energy resources – Iran’s export lifeline. The China-Iran relationship provides China access to and within the Middle East as it continues to assess the operational environment, shaping the physical domains through interconnected economic and political influences, to expand its national objectives.

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<sup>74</sup> US Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2018*, 73.

<sup>75</sup> Cordesman and Kendall, *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2017: A Comparative Analysis*, 46.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>77</sup> US Joint Staff, *JP 3-0, Operations 2018*, V-9. In general, shaping activities help set conditions for successful theater operations. Shaping activities include long-term persistent and preventive military engagement, security cooperation, and deterrence actions to assure friends, build partner capacity and capability, and promote regional stability. They help identify, deter, counter, and/or mitigate competitor and adversary actions that challenge country and regional stability.



Figure 2. China's New Silk Road. *Source:* David Tweed, "China's New Silk Road," *Bloomberg*, updated August 23, 2018, accessed February 24, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/quicktake/china-s-silk-road>.

China and Iran possess many similarities that make their partnership in the Middle East prudent and predictable. They share an anti-Western narrative towards governance, a similar view of their standing in the world, and mutual political, economic, and military dependencies. These ties shift geostrategic balancing against the United States, as the global attitude towards China in the Middle East continues to improve.<sup>78</sup> History with Western influencers serves as a prelude to current China-Iran relations. Both descendants of ancient and no longer proud civilizations, China and Iran view themselves as victims of Western powers, unjustly ostracized and reduced to semi-colonial states through the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>79</sup> These conditions did not initially lead to open cooperation, but continue to materialize following China's support of Iran with military materiel during the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>80</sup> As their partnership grows, anchored by the anti-Western and authoritarian nature of the regimes, strong economic, military, and diplomatic ties

<sup>78</sup> Harold and Nader, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations*, ix; Scobell et al., *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, 167.

<sup>79</sup> Harold and Nader, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations*, 2.

<sup>80</sup> Scobell et al., *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, xxiv.

become more favorable to China. As Iran's international isolation grows, China becomes increasingly exploitative of energy resources and economic potential critical to its own growth.<sup>81</sup>

China retains cordial relations with every country or governing authority within the Middle East – something no other major power in the world possesses.<sup>82</sup> Maintaining these relations is not an attempt by China to serve as a regional hegemon, rather China intends to establish conditions to secure its energy requirements.<sup>83</sup> China continues to avoid a major role in ongoing conflicts within the Middle East but consistently serves as a moderator between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.<sup>84</sup> Coupled with energy resource requirements from the Middle East, current and planned BRI projects enable China's persistent economic and military access to the region.<sup>85</sup> Iran serves as a central node for potential land (belt) and sea (road) avenues linking Asia and Europe. This aspect of the China-Iran relationship is the cornerstone purpose for China's economic development and growing presence in the Middle East.

China receives a relatively low percentage of its overall energy requirements from Iran despite China being the top destination for Iranian oil. Iran routinely fulfills approximately eight percent of the Chinese demand, which pales in comparison to the ratio of oil exports from Iranian oil producers.<sup>86</sup> As seen in 2018, the share of Iranian oil exports to China fluctuates around

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<sup>81</sup> Harold and Nader, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations*, 14.

<sup>82</sup> Scobell et al., *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, 148.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>84</sup> Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, Commander, U.S. Central Command, before the Senate Arms Services Committee."

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> "How is China's energy footprint changing?" *China Power*.

twenty-three percent, illustrating Iran's reliance on China as a stable trade partner.<sup>87</sup> China also remains the second largest exporter of goods into Iran, followed closely by the UAE.<sup>88</sup> Comparatively, the GCC routinely supplies approximately one-third of China's oil demands, with the Middle East collectively supplying over half, highlighting China's oil resourcing lies primarily with Western-aligned energy producers.<sup>89</sup> This suggests China, while enjoying a secure source of oil from Iran, does not solely rely on Iran for its energy resources. However, China does rely on Iran for geographic access.

Despite the perceived strength of the China-Iran alliance, divergent interests provide opportunity for the United States to remain a key actor in the Middle East, since US actions have the potential to provoke Iranian actions or verbal threats. Iran's naval forces are inferior to US naval forces, however, any attempt by the Iranian Navy to block the Strait of Hormuz, perhaps in response to US imposed sanctions, will disrupt the flow of oil from the GCC producers.<sup>90</sup> In this case, a US military response to ensure FON through the Strait of Hormuz is in China's best interest. Above all, the threat of regional instability is most significant to Chinese interests, as a fight for access persists. If such an event occurs between the United States and Iran, and China remains neutral, China has the potential of benefiting threefold, even with a temporary suspension of oil access: a heightened focus on regional security by internal and external actors, increased

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<sup>87</sup> US Energy Information Administration, "Iran has produced and exported less crude oil since sanctions announcement," last modified October 23, 2018, accessed January 20, 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=37352>.

<sup>88</sup> Guy Taylor and Dan Boylan, "China moves to cash in after Trump exits Iran nuclear deal," *The Washington Times*, June 7, 2018, accessed January 24, 2019, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/jun/7/china-steps-business-iran-after-trump-exits-nuclea/>.

<sup>89</sup> Votel, "Statement of General Joseph L. Votel, Commander, U.S. Central Command, before the Senate Arms Services Committee," 8; Scobell et al., *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, xix.

<sup>90</sup> Ariel Cohen, "Can Iran Crash Oil Markets By Blockading The Strait Of Hormuz?" *Forbes*, July 26, 2018, accessed March 25, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2018/07/26/can-iran-crash-oil-markets-by-blockading-the-strait-of-hormuz/#7636a11e9694>.

allocation and potential loss of US naval assets in the Middle East, and a sovereign Iran less capable of challenging China in the event the China-Iran relationship deteriorates.

Lessons from the past show China the importance of geography and geopolitics to the emergence and survival of a great power. As Jakub Grygiel stated in *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change*, ancient civilizations, including Ming China, “became great powers and maintained their position by exercising control over key centers of resources and the routes linking them.”<sup>91</sup> This period of Chinese greatness ultimately succumb to a shift in geostrategic priorities, focusing more on internal, domestic disputes and border security concerns. This shift, primarily because of a Mongol threat along China’s northern border, resulted in a withdrawal of military resources and political attention allocated to control Asian maritime routes in the SCS. In an attempt to barricade themselves behind an “imposing but ineffective wall,” China could no longer maintain the naval power projection required to control sea lanes and stifle European influence on Asian trade.<sup>92</sup> China’s actions within the Middle East aim to avoid the same mistakes taken by the Ming dynasty, and Iran provides both a valuable resource and a vital node for access through the Middle East into Europe.

Fortunately for President Xi Jinping, the issue of border security is largely an issue of the past. In 1996, with the development of a cooperative security arrangement referred to as the “Shanghai Five,” China came together with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to negotiate a series of treaties to demilitarize nearly 4,300 miles of border.<sup>93</sup> In 2001, the partnership became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, with Uzbekistan becoming a full member and Iran joining as an observer.<sup>94</sup> This cooperation, and China’s emerging capability to

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<sup>91</sup> Jakub J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2006), 164.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>93</sup> Mark Leonard, *What Does China Think?* (Philadelphia: Public Affairs, 2008), 100.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

project power outside of Asia, provides added leverage with the Iranian regime to ensure a geographic foothold within the Middle East. As seen throughout the region, China accomplishes this primarily through economic and political means, with only modest involvement from the PLA.<sup>95</sup> While China benefits most in the Middle East from stable internal and external relations, top Chinese officials acknowledge that elevated tensions between the United States and Iran, below the threshold of high-order war, makes a deliberate pivot by the United States into the USINDOPACOM AOR, or anywhere outside of the USCENTCOM AOR, less tenable.<sup>96</sup>

China continues to improve its posture within the Middle East by understanding the interworking relationships between political leaders and economic systems and exploiting regional tensions in a manner that benefits its national interests. Due to its economic prosperity growing state sponsored civilian and military presence, China continues to illustrate for developing countries a successful model of economic reforms followed by political reforms. Among this cohort of disparate states, China intends to break the post-Cold war paradigm that Western liberal democracy is the prominent form of governance.<sup>97</sup> This is particularly enticing to Middle Eastern countries, whose collective energy reserves satisfy global requirements, since China has taken a generally non-judgmental stance towards hot-button Western issues, including human rights.<sup>98</sup> This has the potential to become problematic for the United States in its endeavor to improve diplomatic ties, ensure economic security, and maintain regional stability through military power projection. While China and the United States have an equal proportion of potential loss, China arguably has much more to gain from this region towards fulfilling the “China Dream” of national rejuvenation.

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<sup>95</sup> Scobell et al., *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, xx.

<sup>96</sup> Harold and Nader, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations*, 2.

<sup>97</sup> Leonard, *What Does China Think?* 96.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

## Strategic Deep: The Democratic Republic of the Congo

China's growing presence in Africa validates the persistent desire to project power and expand its operational reach outside of Asia. As China's "strategic deep" fight, geographically within the USAFRICOM AOR, Africa serves as a theater of operations focused on peacekeeping to enable politically and economically driven "win-win" situations. This focus serves multiple purposes, primarily aiming to gain legitimacy with international organizations through participating in UN PKOs, securing trade routes and natural resource reserves, and providing a theater for the PLA to conduct tactical and operational level operations below the threshold of high-order war. The PLA's ability to conduct such operations allows units to exercise specialty skills, stress test sustainment support capabilities, and increase flexibility through secured basing. These shaping operations do not ensure China's immediate defense and security, or its economic survival, but does allow China to gain political favor and economic opportunity far outside of its sustainable military operational reach.

China's actions in Africa deserve examination, especially as its economic, political, and military influence continuous to grow. By strengthening ties with African nations, China continues to strengthen its position among African leaders and the international community. These efforts facilitate increasingly exploitative operations in support of national rejuvenation. Chinese attention towards African coastal countries, such as Djibouti, Sudan, and South Africa, are prudent and consistent with a broad view of the BRI objectives. However, China's focus on inland African countries, what author, Jeffrey Herbst, refers to as "hinterlands," does not follow the logic of achieving an effective occupation near littoral nodes linking the Maritime Silk Road to a Chinese controlled land bridge.<sup>99</sup> Despite this physical geography oriented logic, an inland focus is consistent with China's approach to strategy of occupying space not predominantly

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<sup>99</sup> Jeffrey Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 73.

occupied by an adversary. Hereby, Chinese presence within the DRC seems logical. Conversely, the necessity to ensure BRI portage creates a need for open competition, versus a strategy of avoidance, along the African coastline. In Djibouti, as an example, China must compete for physical space and influence with the United States, France, Japan, and Italy.<sup>100</sup>

China's expansion in Africa mirrors a form of European colonialism projected across the continent into the early 1900s. Through this form of colonialism, predominantly focused towards coastal capitols, conquering nations remained unwilling to serve as administrators to subjugated nations and maintained a disinterest in ruling. Conquering nations simply wished to extract natural resources required to ensure a high level of reward.<sup>101</sup> China maintains a similar stance towards governance and authority within occupied countries. However, unlike European colonialism, China's legitimacy towards claims for influence and resources cannot be seen or perceived as overtly coercive. China expertly mitigates this perception through its increased role in UN PKOs.

China's participation in UN PKOs began with the 1990 deployment of five military observers to the UN Truce Supervision Operation (UNTSO). This operation aimed at maintaining a ceasefire following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.<sup>102</sup> In 2003, China began its commitment to UN PKOs in Africa, deploying five police officers to Liberia.<sup>103</sup> Since then, China has contributed over 36,000 personnel to UN missions, and in 2016 became the second-largest financial

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<sup>100</sup> Tyler Headley, "China's Djibouti Base: One Year Update," *The Diplomat*, December 4, 2018, accessed January 31, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/12/chinas-djibouti-base-a-one-year-update/>.

<sup>101</sup> Herbst, *States and Power in Africa: Comparative Lessons in Authority and Control*, 67.

<sup>102</sup> Hurst, "The Changing Strategic Design of Chinese Peacekeepers: In Line with UN or Chinese Goals?"

<sup>103</sup> Kossi Ayenagdo, Tommie Njobyn, James V. Sossou, and Biossey K. Tozoun, "Review: China's peacekeeping operations in Africa: From unwilling participation to responsible contribution," University of Montreal, January 27, 2017, accessed February 1, 2019, [http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/7538~v~Chinas\\_Peacekeeping\\_Operations\\_in\\_Africa\\_From\\_Unwilling\\_Participation\\_to\\_Responsible\\_Contribution.pdf](http://www.operationspaix.net/DATA/DOCUMENT/7538~v~Chinas_Peacekeeping_Operations_in_Africa_From_Unwilling_Participation_to_Responsible_Contribution.pdf).

contributor, after the United States, to the UN PKO budget.<sup>104</sup> Following the September 2017 registration of 8,000 personnel as part of the UN Peacekeeping Capability Readiness System, China's commitment to peacekeeping shows signs of substantial growth. These personnel will serve as China's standby peacekeeping force, comprised of infantry, aviation, logistics, and intelligence personnel.<sup>105</sup> Ready to deploy at a moment's notice if properly trained, equipped, and sustained, this peacekeeping force increases China's flexibility to globally project formidable land forces.

Currently, China has 2,515 personnel deployed in support of eight UN missions, five of which are in African countries. China's commitment to the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO) consists of 231 military personnel specially trained in engineering and medical fields.<sup>106</sup> This seems practical considering China's interest in natural resource exploitation and humanitarian assistance efforts aimed at gaining international legitimacy.<sup>107</sup>

The DRC serves as China's largest inland peacekeeping effort, geographically isolated from littoral infrastructure linking military and civilian capabilities to China's Indo-Pacific Maritime Silk Road. However, the DRC's Atlantic ports, linked to hinterlands by the Congo River, provide opportunity for Chinese expansion of trade and projection of military capabilities into Europe and the Americas. Frustrating the issue of sustainable access into and within the DRC is a fragile infrastructure system, which China invests heavily in for economic gain. In 2007,

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<sup>104</sup> Marc Lanteigne, "The Role of U.N. Peacekeeping in China's Expanding Strategic Interests," United States Institute of Peace, September 18, 2018, accessed January 31, 2019, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/09/role-un-peacekeeping-chinas-expanding-strategic-interests>.

<sup>105</sup> US Department of Defense, *Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2018*, 21.

<sup>106</sup> United Nations, "Troop and Police Contributors," United Nations Peacekeeping, accessed January 31, 2019, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*; Hurst, "The Changing Strategic Design of China Peacekeepers: In Line with UN or Chinese Goals?"

China's investment of \$8 billion addressed concerns with the DRC's infrastructure, in exchange for beneficial terms specific to natural resource extraction and export.<sup>108</sup> For China, this investment served as a conduit to an estimated \$24 trillion worth of raw materials below the Congolese surface.<sup>109</sup>

At face value, the relationship between China and the DRC is mutually supporting – what China refers to as a “win-win” arrangement. For China, the DRC provides access to a large share of global mineral reserves, a market for manufactured goods, and a theater to exercise specialized military capabilities. For the DRC, China provides expertise in mining, substantial financial support for infrastructure development, and required manufactured goods. However, similar to the China-Iran relationship, China enjoys a more advantageous position of strength in relation to the DRC, which arguably has more to lose from a Chinese withdraw from the region than China has to gain from its efforts. Further strengthening its position in the DRC, and consistent with the idea of global pragmatism, China does not care to overtly coerce political alignment from the DRC, which has long been a criticism of Western involvement – linking economic support to the promotion of democratic principles and values – and a trigger for past instability.<sup>110</sup> This insight further fits with the Chinese strategic posture of indirect pressure and conflict avoidance.

For the DRC, increased Chinese investment has the potential to thrust the Congolese government into the Chinese “debt trap.” This transpiring condition is emboldening China's political clout within Africa's developing and impoverished countries, including the DRC. As

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<sup>108</sup> Nick DeMarco, “State of Infrastructure in the Democratic Republic of the Congo,” The Borgen Project, January 14, 2018, accessed January 29, 2019, <https://borgenproject.org/infrastructure-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo/>.

<sup>109</sup> Jacob Kushner, “China's Congo Plan: What the Next World Power Sees in the World's Poorest Nation,” Pulitzer Center, August 28, 2013, accessed January 28, 2019, <https://pulitzercenter.org/projects/congo-china-economy-development-investments-rich-minerals>.

<sup>110</sup> Claude Kabemba, “China-Democratic Republic of Congo Relations: From a Beneficial to a Developmental Cooperation,” *University of Florida African Studies Quarterly* (January 14, 2017), accessed January 28, 2019, [https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/kabemba\\_dec2016/](https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/kabemba_dec2016/).

Robert Feldman, Africa analyst for the Foreign Military Studies Office, expresses, “in Africa, loans are collateralized with long-term high value assets, such as ports or,” in the case of the DRC, “mineral resources.”<sup>111</sup> Acting as a loan shark to disparate countries, China seizes the opportunity to exploit economic and political weakness, taking resources as collateral, as governments, inevitably, default on loans and fall further into a deliberately manufactured “debt trap.”

This dynamic in the DRC highlights the potentially coercive nature of the Chinese-Congolese relationship. It is clear China embraces the idea of global pragmatism, which Peter Schwartz states in *The Art of the Long View*, is a new political ideology of “whatever works.”<sup>112</sup> For China, heavy investment into impoverished countries, overburdening local governments to the point of loan default, and exploitation of economic and political weakness is “what works” to enable the “China Dream” of national rejuvenation in Africa. Schwartz goes on to describe rising energy demands among countries with growing populations, including China. He asserts that increased demand is fostering environments of resource competition and technological innovation to diversify the means of a growing energy market.<sup>113</sup> Operating within a resource driven environment, the DRC, home to the world’s largest cobalt reserves, is the node linking required natural resources to emerging “green energy,” aerospace, and military technology markets.<sup>114</sup>

China’s interest and claim to the DRC’s abundant mineral reserves should raise awareness within US national security arenas. In his 2018 NSS, President Donald Trump asserts

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<sup>111</sup> Robert Feldman, “Is China Practicing ‘Debt-Trap Diplomacy’ in Africa?” Foreign Military Studies Office, April 4, 2018, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://community.afmso.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/w/o-e-watch-mobile-edition-v1/22527/is-china-practicing-debt-trap-diplomacy-in-africa/>.

<sup>112</sup> Peter Schwartz, *The Art of the Long View: Planning for the Future in an Uncertain World* (New York: Crown Business, 1996), 167.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>114</sup> Hurst, “The Changing Strategic Design of China Peacekeepers: In Line with UN or Chinese Goals?”

that the US's energy dominance – in production, consumption, and innovation – underpins national security and interests.<sup>115</sup> While this may be true in the current environment, a global economy weaning itself off fossil fuel – the United States' top energy production resource – dependencies continues to strive for renewable alternatives.<sup>116</sup> Chinese investment in emerging energy markets, particularly those consisting of a large global share of a single mineral resource, threatens to undermine the United States' energy driven national security and interests.

The primary concern regarding China's cornering of the market is the absence of US domestic mine or refinery production for cobalt. The United States remains the world's largest consumer of cobalt, relying on 85% import and 15% reclamation of recyclable materials to meet demands. This realization has the potential to give China substantial leverage over the United States when controlling the distribution of this mineral, especially if regulating flow into the global market threatens US interests.<sup>117</sup>

Cobalt is important to renewable energy technology due to its energy storage properties, primarily used in rechargeable batteries of varying sizes.<sup>118</sup> The Cobalt Institute refers to this mineral as a "technology enabling element" used in applications to provide a "greater quality of life and a sustainable planet."<sup>119</sup> While the current global concern with China's increased control of the cobalt market revolves around the electric-vehicle revolution, equal concern should be placed towards cobalt's uses in military applications. In a military capacity, cobalt is used to

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<sup>115</sup> Trump, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 22.

<sup>116</sup> Andrew Barron, "The Countries Poised To Become 'Renewable Superpowers'," *Smithsonian*, February 20, 2018, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/countries-poised-to-become-renewable-superpowers-180968209/>.

<sup>117</sup> US Geological Survey, "Cobalt Statistical Compendium," last modified January 11, 2013, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/commodity/cobalt/stat/>.

<sup>118</sup> Cobalt Institute, "Cobalt Uses," accessed February 5, 2019, <https://www.cobaltinstitute.org/cobalt-uses.html>.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

develop super alloys found in jet engine parts and has the properties to support future systems development.<sup>120</sup> To facilitate the transition of legacy equipment operating from aging technology to more adaptive systems mirroring off-the-shelf products, militaries, including the US military, should consider what raw materials are required for production. Furthermore, strategic planners should pay special attention to countries controlling raw materials, especially if the preponderance of a raw material or resource is located within a single sovereign space.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Analysis of China's use of power indicates Chinese activities threaten US interests. Case studies highlight instances, by region, where varied but deliberate methods of Chinese power projection counters US activities.

Visible in named efforts, including the BRI, China continues with its aim to achieve a "China Dream" of national rejuvenation. President Xi proclaims China will accomplish this transformation through a period of strategic opportunity focused on civil and military development utilizing increased economic power. China continues to maneuver through all domains, across the full spectrum of power resources and behaviors, primarily using an enhanced PLA bolstered by increased spending, organizational reform, and modernization programs.<sup>121</sup> China continues to engage the PLA in operations below the threshold of high-order war, including UN PKOs, and pushes a narrative of persistent peace and shared prosperity.<sup>122</sup> Despite a sense of overtly harmonious intentions, China's actions suggest a true desire to regain its status as the regional hegemon in Asia. China uses its efforts abroad as shaping operations to enable this

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<sup>120</sup> Jack Farhy and Hayley Warren, "China Has a Secret Weapon in the Race to Dominate Electric Cars," *Bloomberg*, December 2, 2018, accessed February 5, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2018-china-cobalt/>.

<sup>121</sup> Cordesman and Kendall, *Chinese Strategy and Military Modernization in 2017: A Comparative Analysis*, 34.

<sup>122</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*, 1.

eventuality. In an effort to control the proliferation of China's power projection and, if needed, defeat the PLA, Eliot Cohen highlights three assets the United States possesses that challenge China's strategic aims. These assets are the US alliance relationships, the quality of its armed forces, and its way of war – all of which must adapt to meet future challenges.<sup>123</sup>

In each of the three regional case studies, respective US COCOMs acknowledge China's actions as threats to their NSS and NDS linked efforts. General Waldhauser, commander of USAFRICOM, in his 2019 testimony to the Senate Committee on Armed Service, stated that in order to counter external actors, including China, the United States must remain the “preferred security partner in Africa.”<sup>124</sup> This statement should transcend all COCOMs as China continuously challenges preexisting alliances and partnerships by inserting itself into international affairs.

Brokerage of strong and lasting alliances and partnerships remains a theme throughout US strategic correspondence, including the NSS, NDS, and COCOM posture statements. The commodity ostensibly linked to alliances and partnership, and continuously competed for, is access. Access is what underpins US efforts to maintain its global presence. The backbone of persistent access is the combined force cultivated by enduring partnerships and alliances. To maintain this access, the United States must focus its policies towards challenging China's strategic flexibility.<sup>125</sup> Under a holistic approach, the US military's joint force, along with multinational allies and partners, should continue to focus its efforts to face China below the threshold of high order war while building capacity to posture for large-scale combat operations. These efforts must aim to challenge China within all domains to stress their capabilities and

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<sup>123</sup> Cohen, *The Big Stick: The Limits of Soft Power & the Necessity of Military Force*, 113.

<sup>124</sup> Thomas D. Waldhauser, “Statement of General Thomas D. Waldhauser, United States Marine Corps, Commander, United States Africa Command, before the Senate Committee on Armed Services,” February 7, 2019, accessed February 7, 2019, 14, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Waldhauser\\_02-07-19.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Waldhauser_02-07-19.pdf).

<sup>125</sup> Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change*, 171.

restrict their sustainable operational reach. By doing this effectively, the joint force sets conditions to encourage co-opting behavior from current and potential allies, strengthening the combined force and delegitimizing Chinese claims and access to key strategic nodes across shared domains.

Due to China's increasing ability to compete across the strategic landscape, the United States must develop creative ways to attract new and maintain current security partners. The US military approach, nested with the NDS and NSS, must communicate a narrative reflecting moral strength and democratic values to set conditions for mutually supporting efforts. Whether in training or when conducting operations by, with, and through a host nation, the US military must remain the partner of choice within highly competitive and emerging theaters. Professor and organizational theorist, Jamshid Gharajedaghi, brings to light a profound realization about winning a war of narratives within his discussion of systems principles, stating "the world is not run by those who are right," rather, it is "run by those who can convince other they are right."<sup>126</sup> The challenge for the US military is winning over allies and partners with action-backed narratives superior to the effects of China's cognitive and physical actions. This prospect becomes increasingly difficult in light of China's large financial offerings and incentives that provide, at face value, an improved standard of living for disparate nations. The US narrative must inform those nations of the coercive and self-beneficial nature of China's actions, acknowledging the enticing short-term economic gains while highlighting the probability of long-term struggle nested within China's "debt trap" tactics. The United States must, across all domains using all instruments of national power, advise and defend those who could fall victim to coercive Chinese actions.

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<sup>126</sup> Jamshid Gharajedaghi, *Systems Thinking: Managing Chaos and Complexity*, 3rd ed. (New York: Elsevier Inc, 2011), 37.

The US military must continuously reallocate its limited resources to present multiple dilemmas to China across all COCOMs. Hand-in-hand with partners and allies, the US military must maintain flexibility to use simultaneous direct and indirect approaches that challenge and exploit China's strengths and weaknesses. Using the concept of globally integrated operations – remaining dynamically flexible to quickly reallocate forces across the globe – enables the joint force's ability to remain strategically predictable but operationally unpredictable.<sup>127</sup> As stated in Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 3100.01D, and evident in China's collective actions, “competitors and adversaries will exploit the seams created by purely regional and functional approaches.”<sup>128</sup> Synergy across the geographic and functional COCOMs can harness the joint efforts of a cooperative force and create a combined effect greater than any one achieved through an individual effort.

Much is learned viewing current and future problems we face with China through the lens of history, theory, and doctrine. History informs our understanding of the purpose behind China's actions – a once strong and proud civilization subjugated by European colonialism seeking emergence of the “China Dream” of national rejuvenation.<sup>129</sup> Iran shares this sentiment with China, posing a threat to Western institutions by strengthening the legitimacy of their respective regimes. To understand these historically significant events helps to clarify the cultural reasons why nations, including China, act as they do in relation to US interests. Theory helps establish an understanding of what the future may hold. As such, it is worth analyzing the interplay and interdependency of nations, including the United States, as a complex system through an

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<sup>127</sup> Mattis, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, 5.

<sup>128</sup> Director, Joint Staff, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction 3100.01D, *Joint Planning System* (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 20, 2018), assessed February 9, 2019, <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Library/Instructions/CJCSI%203100.01D.pdf?ver=2018-08-10-143143-823>.

<sup>129</sup> The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*, 6.

organizational culture lens.<sup>130</sup> Recognition of the factors associated with organizational culture can enable thinking for creative solutions to the world's most challenging anthropologic problems. Considering China's strategy of indirect pressure and conflict avoidance, a viable and effective approach to keeping the balance of power in the United States' favor is to face China directly, within all domains. This approach, combined with persistent indirect influences, can set conditions to encourage China's participation in mutually supporting activities under US terms, limiting the PLA's unilateral efforts while sharing security responsibilities within unstable regions.

Joint doctrine, as the set of fundamental principles that guides military action in support of national objectives, is based on current force structures and materiel and provides insight on how, not what, to think about operations.<sup>131</sup> The employment of theoretical tools can provide a more holistic view of problems when using service specific frameworks, such as the Army Design Methodology. Conducting a thorough analysis of current and future conditions, creating synergy between theoretical and doctrinal frameworks, can give planners a clearer understanding of the threats to national interests synonymous with China's power projection. As the operational environment continues to evolve, the incorporation of non-military theoretical frameworks into planning can manifest into an equally important evolution of doctrine. The US military, to nurture the evolution of doctrine, should continue its programs, such as the Chief of Staff of the Army's Strategic Studies Groups, and the employment of non-governmental incubators, such as the

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<sup>130</sup> Mary Jo Hatch, *Organization Theory: Modern, Symbolic, and Postmodern Perspectives*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 202, 205. In general, professor Edgar Schein visualizes three levels of culture and defines organizational culture as a basic set of *assumptions* forming the core of a group, which manifests into *values* and cultural norms, that produces *artifacts* through the group's choices and actions. These assumptions, values, and artifacts are reinforced by symbols, such as China's self-proclaimed nine-dash line, and strengthen internal cohesiveness. Cohesiveness, especially in authoritarian regimes, enables self-preservation in societies that value and/or demand a low degree of individualism, or a collectivist view.

<sup>131</sup> US Department of Defense, Joint Staff, *Joint Publication 1, Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), VI-3, accessed October 22, 2018, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp1\\_ch1.pdf?ver=2019-02-11-174350-967](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp1_ch1.pdf?ver=2019-02-11-174350-967).

RAND Cooperation, to investigate the changes needed to face future problems. Seven updates made to US Army *Field Manual 3-0, Operations* since the end of the Vietnam War serves as an example of informed and aggressive change synonymous with doctrine keeping pace with, or outpacing, emerging large-scale threats.<sup>132</sup>

There is no singular solution to the threats posed by China's power projection. However, this monograph serves as a springboard to encourage deeper thought into the strategic problems facing the US military's ability to stem emerging threats. Current strategic messaging communicates problems as seen in a current frame and overlays guidance to drive action towards desired future conditions. In an effort to stay ahead of emerging threats and remain the dominant global superpower, US military planners must strive to understand problems across a broader spectrum, create opportunities for shared understanding across all COCOMs, and conceptualize solutions outside the limitations of current doctrine. In doing this successfully, acting in concert with the other elements of national power, the US military can remain the world's premier fighting force, operating with available means to achieve politically driven national ends.

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<sup>132</sup> Luke O'Brien, "The Doctrine of Military Change: How the US Army Evolves," *War on the Rocks*, July 25, 2016, accessed February 15, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/the-doctrine-of-military-change-how-the-us-army-evolves/>.

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